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The Conveyance of Climate Change

Contemporary society seemingly has an ongoing argument: is climate change real? However, it faces a far greater conundrum: is climate change accepted? For quite some time science has had difficulty in aptly addressing the issue of global warming -- or rather climate change, a nomenclature earned due to its deceptive uncertainty -- with the public. At the fault of the public, the media, and the scientists as well, psychological and communicative walls have been constructed when dealing with climate change; poor forms of communication and poor means of receiving (both consciously and subconsciously) that which is communicated are to blame. These barriers are so prominent that the science is often outright ignored! Our society puts more weight in pseudoscience preached from politicians and economists, and it has instilled such a strong sense of normativity that it affects the scientists arguing for action. The Pew Research Center, an organization dedicated to understanding social norms and perspectives, have found that a majority of first world countries view political disputes and relations to be more of a concern than climate change -- most notably ISIS (Pew Research). The United States holds climate change second to last as the most concerning issue plaguing the world, and efforts to change that are virtually unseen. It does not help that there is an easily misconstrued uncertainty about the matter.

Unfortunately, there is a malleable uncertainty when confirming climate change, and skeptics and opponents of climate change utilize this to their advantage when discoursing information to the public. That is to say, the information that should stabilize the notion that there is climate change is easily misconstrued to support that there is not. In their article, “Seepage: Climate change denial and its effect on the scientific community,” Stephan Lewandowsky and his research team analyze how this uncertainty is manipulated to “forestall” action against climate change and further support the notion that it is not to be a concern (Lewandowsky et al.). In fact, it is so effective that contrarian arguments have “‘seeped’ back into the relevant scientific community,” and it has affected how they view and act on their own research. The societal pressure is so overbearing that it is asphyxiating crucial information and instantiated a monster of “pluralistic ignorance” betwixt the public and scientists alike (Lewandowsky et al. 1). This issue of uncertainty has gained enough traction to earn arguments regarding it the title “SCAM” (or Scientific Certainty Argumentation Methods) amongst the scientific community; not the most pleasant of acronyms to be awarded but nonetheless fitting. People tend to undermine themselves with seeming similarities; if there are two claims that are not fully supported -- though one may have significantly more evidence than the other -- it is not farfetched to side with the one that yields more preferable results. A safer feeling assuages the issue, and is therefore picked over a claim that may be “consensual but uncertain.” The notion that people will take chances on what is “‘known’” because it feels safer is referred to as “ambiguity aversion” (Lewandowsky et al. 2). The scientific community is not immune to societal pressures, as much as they’d like to or should be.

Though scientific claims should be objective and have as minimal of an influence as possible from personal biases and judgements, scientists and researchers are human, and -- not unlike any other human being -- climate scientists are influenced by the emotions, opinions, and pressures of other members of society. As Lewandowsky presents it, it is nigh impossible to “present or discuss the science without out some kind of context or frame,” (Lewandowsky et al. 3). That goes for being influenced by these frames as well, as climate scientists are subjected to a higher standard due to the severity and public doubt in their claims. Climate scientists are forced to work around accusations and standards set by the skeptics if they want to be taken seriously, and if they fail to do so the ignominy againsts their claims is perpetuated; it’s a cycle that results in climate scientists doubting their own frames, or modifying them to comply with the opposition. Lewandowsky refers to the notion that pressures degenerate dignified frames as the “stereotype threat,” (Lewandowsky et al. 3).

In addition to being affected by the opposition, scientists subject themselves to “pluralistic ignorance” -- the assumption that others do not side with one’s conclusion, even though they very well may; ergo, one should not side with their self (or at least voice one’s opinion truly and explicitly) (Lewandowsky et al. 3 - 4). The true enemies of progressive action on climate change, it seems, are not the contrarians or skeptics, but rather the climate scientists themselves; it is the psychological effects that they are caught up in that affect how they present the information to the public as well as to themselves. Another example of this would be the “third-person effect,” meaning that people mistakenly expect and believe others to be influenced more by social manipulations and persuasive arguments than themselves; however,

Lewandowsky presents studies that demonstrate even those who “explicitly [dismiss]” certain messages were influenced far greater than they admitted (Lewandowsky et al. 5).

Lewandowsky credits the lack of initiative to there being the “perceived uncertainty” about climate change, as seepage is only feasible provided this aspect is focused on the argument (Lewandowsky et al. 9). There is, however, the conveyance of the arguments about climate change from the media and their effect on the public’s view; it is the framing of the information that control what people think is acceptable to believe. The article “Coverage and framing of climate change adaptation in the media: A review of influential North American newspapers during 1993–2013 ” by James D. Ford and Diana King tackles how the media affects public perception of climate change, and how it is instrumental in what responses are perceived as acceptable and not. Ford and Kings’ main focus is about adaptation to climate change, and how though there has been an increase in coverage regarding the idea, nothing substantial has been discussed with respects to preparatory action; that which is covered is incredibly pragmatic, and a majority of articles discuss the “need to adapt” rather than preparation for adaptation (Ford and King). News coverage seems to be deliberately nonspecific in response to climate change, as with over half of the articles discussing adaptation “it was not possible to discern” what types of adaptation were being discussed. Those that were discernable tended to focus on “hard” means of adaptation, primarily discussed in cases of disasters such as Hurricane Katrina, emphasizing the difficulty in adjusting lifestyles to account for climate change (Ford and King 142). There is correlation in only speaking about need for change in dire straits, as well simply the difficulty it implies in changing, and the public’s skepticism of climate change. Relating back to Lewandowsky’s work, the media is key in how the public receives and interprets information,

directly affecting their opinion on the matter; it is this opinion that helps to perpetuate that aforementioned ignominy when looking at climate change as a serious threat.

Clearly, the media needs to tackle climate change with a different light. There is also the question of how scientists can not only overcome the psychological pressures from skeptics and contrarians, but also better convey the information they possess. Raul P. Lejano and his fellow researchers suggest that science has deviated from “traditional knowledge,” in their article “Climate and narrative: Environmental knowledge in everyday life.” That is to say, science has gained a sense of “modernity,” wherein it has become a language of experts for experts, as opposed to communal knowledge as a cultural thing (Lejano, Tavares-Reager, and Fikret 61). This is an issue, as it essentially alienates the public; it implies that the empirical evidence is not something that they should -- or are even allowed to -- be concerned with. It is normal to expect that anything in regards to scientific discovery will be digested by those capable and then transmitted to the public in the modern format (i.e. articles and reports). So, what can the scientific community do to rectify this situation where science and general knowledge are for some reason different? One method Lejano suggests is narratives.

Narratives help to “personal[ize] meanings” and information when discoursing it, and science is not an exception. They make the knowledge pragmatic and integrate “multiple types of knowing” into one medium (Lejano, Tavares-Reager, and Fikret 63 - 64). People have a greater sense of understanding when receiving information through narratives; the stories are more relatable, and can circumvent -- in a sense -- the main issue while still getting the point across. Lejano utilizes several instances of narratives on climate change, one of them being anecdotal evidence from an Inuit native on the effect of climate change in their local environment,

addressing the degradation of ice and such. It “put[s] a human face on climate change,” Lejano says, as the issue now has relatable, tangible evidence that can be viewed from multiple perspectives, be they emotional or scientific (Lejano, Tavares-Reager, and Fikret 64). There is no barrier between any of those storytelling or interpretive aspects; the information is spliced together in a way that is both practical and effective. The idea that the issue is above general understanding is eliminated through this medium, and the wall of expertise fades into the background. Narration also lends the emphasis of a “personal commitment,” and Lejano exemplifies this in a discussion between two individuals C and J (Lejano, Tavares-Reager, and Fikret 67). It engenders a sense of confidence and vindication in the discourse, encouraging action in a way that is persuasive to both the speaker and the audience; in theory, an effective way to undermine and take advantage of the third-person effect.

In essence, what a narrative is capable of doing is captivating the listener, and it has them critically think on the issue without force. Lejano argues that we need to get the the public more involved in the discussion to “reduce the gap” between public and climate science (Lejano, Tavares-Reager, and Fikret 68). However, there is the problem of potential loss in empirical information through this medium, something scientists need to take precaution when dealing with narratives. What it really amounts to is adjustments on all ends of the discussion.

Climate scientists are in need of a transformation with how they convey the data they possess, but it is not solely their duty. The media must recognize the obligation they have to the public, as they are partial to adhering information obtained through them rather than the clinical arguments of scientists. Narratives, though an effective means to mix and personalize the information, are simply a beginning; adaptation is required for more than just the action against

climate change, but society must adapt to find an understanding with the acceptance of climate change. Climate change is a matter of acceptance, not belief, and a societal shift must be taken if that is to be the normative notion on the issue. The best place to start is how that information is communicated and received.

Works Cited

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