From Climate Change Skeptics and Cynics to Advocates

One morning, as I was sitting in my English 1AH class, my professor Dr. Lankford mentioned something about the previous night’s assigned reading that really caught my attention.

At the time, we were reading George Marshall’s *Don’t Even Think about It: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Ignore Climate Change*, a book that explores the inherent human psychological mechanisms that have led to our historical inability to deal with climate change. In the previous night’s reading, Marshall was detailing his interview with Daniel Kahneman, a Nobel Prize winning psychologist who, from this interview, can only be described as a climate change cynic. Throughout the interview, he consistently shot down Marshall’s hopeful scenarios that could spur cooperation on climate change and went even as far as saying that his bottom line was that “there is not much hope” and that he was “thoroughly pessimistic.”

My intrigue about why Kahneman had such a definitively bleak outlook on the future of climate change was expanded on the following morning in class, when my professor mentioned that since the book was released, he had completely changed his perspective on the issue and had recently been spotted openly protesting at a climate change rally at UC Berkeley.

This new discovery led me to be exceedingly interested in why Kahneman changed his mind, and how a Nobel Prize winner on the psychology of decision making who had such a decisive perspective on an issue as considerable as climate change could do a complete 180.

While the rationale behind Kahneman's conversion remains elusive to me, I was able to explore other prominent scientists and public figures who had similar stories: transitioning from climate change skeptics and cynics to advocates.

Richard Muller, a physicist and professor at UC Berkeley stated in an op-ed he published in the New York Times in 2012, “Call me a converted skeptic. Three years ago I identified problems in previous climate studies that, in my mind, threw doubt on the very existence of global warming. Last year, following an intensive research effort involving a dozen scientists, I concluded that global warming was real and that the prior estimates of the rate of warming were correct.” He goes on to say that he’s “Now going a step further: Humans are almost entirely the cause.”

Muller’s transition can be attributed to the group he founded, Berkeley Earth, an independent non-profit focused on ascertaining an objective analysis about some major climate change skeptic concerns. The group is funded by educational grants through various donors such as, ironically, the Koch brothers who according to Greenpeace have sent over $100 million to groups denying climate science since 1997They utilize sophisticated statistical models that eliminated conventional issues with climate change studies such as biases with urban heating, data selection, poor station quality, and human intervention.

At the end of all this, a report was drawn up that found that the shape of their data best matched the curve of the calculated greenhouse effect from human caused greenhouse gas

emissions, convincing Muller of man-made climate change that led him to write the aforementioned op-ed.

Jerry Taylor is the founder and president of the Niskanen Center, a libertarian think tank. Taylor used to be the vice president of the Cato Institute (a right-wing think tank) and according to himself, “used to write skeptic talking points for a living.”

As he stated himself in an interview just last year, “from 1991 through 2000... I was absolutely convinced of the case for skepticism with regard to climate science and of the excessive costs of doing much about it even if it were a problem.” However, he then goes on to say that his perspective gradually began to change throughout the early 2000’s, with one significant event acting as a spark that caused him to doubt his stance.

This event was a televised debate with climate change advocate Joe Romm, in which Taylor unknowingly presented numerous false statements about the Earth’s warming that Romm asked him off-stage after the debate to double check. Upon doing so, Taylor realized that Romm was correct, and that after he “talked to the climate skeptics who had made this argument to [him], it [turned] out they had done so with full knowledge they were being misleading.” This interview led him to dig more into the narratives he was pushing, which he found that often times were “dodgy, sketchy, misleading, or the underlying science didn’t hold up.”

Ultimately, it was this due diligence into the arguments he was forwarding that led him to realize that the science behind climate change often contradicted them, leading to him slowly changing his beliefs, leaving the Cato Institute and creating his own think tank, and becoming more and more vocal as an advocate of bipartisan efforts to combat climate change.

This pattern of climate change skeptics converting to advocates is still not a common one, but it is becoming increasingly frequent. There are people like Bob Inglis, a former Republican congressman who lost his seat in the House of Representatives in 2010 after changing his mind on global warming, and has since gone on to create “RepublicEN”, a “nonprofit that strives to introduce conservative voices and solutions into the national discourse on climate change.” There are people like Bjorn Lomborg, a Danish academic and member of Time Magazine’s 100 most influential people of 2004, who published a book in 2002 arguing that global warming was overblown and unfit for attention. Since then, he has gone on to completely switch his stance on the issue, recently receiving attention for fighting for an increase in the carbon tax in his home country of Denmark. And finally, there are people like Michael Shermer, the publisher of Skeptic Magazine that used to believe climate change was greatly exaggerated but then reached a “flipping point” in 2006 when he acknowledged the “overwhelming evidence for anthropogenic global warming.”

Throughout all of these people, there are two specific takeaways. First, that the original trigger that made these skeptics or cynics begin to doubt their beliefs almost always originated through someone they trusted and believed shared their own

values. In Robert Muller’s case, he co-founded his Berkeley Earth group with his daughter, and filled his research team with people that he felt were reliable and knew were going to be able to provide objective results. In Taylor’s case, it was two of his trusted associates (Jonathan Adler of the Competitive Enterprise Institute and Bob Litterman who was head of risk management at Goldman Sachs) that got through to him about how the narratives he was promoting about the economic impacts of climate change were often misleading.

Second, instead of relying on data from climate change organizations such as Greenpeace or the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the majority of these individuals that switched on climate change dug into the science on their own terms. For example, both Richard Muller and Jerry Taylor ended up creating their own organizations (Berkeley Earth and the Niskanen Center respectively) where they were able to do their own research into the subject surrounded by their previously mentioned “trusted” people.

And on some level, both of these takeaways are true for the other aforementioned converts such as Inglis, Lomborg, and Shermer, and indicate a larger pattern of behavior. The conversion of every single one of these skeptics or cynics was initiated because they had a motive to look into the science. And the origins of that incentive came through people that they trusted and understood to share the same values, revealing one of the most significant issues plaguing cooperation on climate change today.

Now back to George Marshall and his book *Don’t Even Think about It*. In it, he claims that efforts in the past to convince people of the reality and significance of climate change have been far too focused on proving the science and attempting to create one central message on the issue. This tactic, Marshall concludes, has been far too exclusive to those who share the values set in the message, and tends to ostracize those who hold different values. This approach, however, eliminates the entire first step identified between these climate change converts; without their trusted family, friends, and peers substantiating their doubt or even planting the very seeds, the incentive for these individuals to move on to the second step and analyze the scientific data themselves to change their minds would be extremely rare.

Ultimately, through the stories of these various professional climate change skeptics and cynics converting to advocates, an important issue around climate change has been uncovered to me: going forward, it is imperative that in order to spur progress and change people’s minds on the issue, climate change cannot not limit itself to one specific message, messenger, or form of communication that aspires to create a “unity” that people must conform to. Instead, it needs to be opened to multiple interpretations that can inspire this foundational incentive -- as displayed through skeptics like Muller and Taylor -- in as many people as possible, causing them to eventually learn more about the science behind it and be more inclined to change their minds.

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