Interviews with the MIT Community on Climate Change

6.S898 *Climate Change Seminar* – Final Project Report
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Introduction

Climate change is a very polarized topic nowadays, with passionate people on both sides of the spectrum. For a large part, there seems to be a great deal of shouting from both sides, and less listening, with each side more or less painting the other with a huge brush, and not really taking the time to understand where the other person is coming from.

Although there's substantial scientific evidence for the advent of climate change, there are still people who are skeptical of its occurrence, and it's worthwhile to understand why. A first step in that direction includes getting people to reflect on how they view the opposite perspective and engage with it.

This project involved conducting short semi-structured interviews with a few members of the MIT community (specifically the Media Lab community) to get a sense of their perspectives around climate change. Part of the intended impact of this undertaking was to encourage the interviewees to reflect on how they view and engage with the opposite perspective, as related to the topic of climate change.

This project grew out of my interest in the discourse around climate change, and specifically how people engage with a viewpoint that opposes theirs. I wanted to hear firsthand from people about how they framed this issue in their minds, and how they went

about framing the opposite opinion. In all, I would say that this project had at least two impacts (maybe more!).

First, listening to other people's perspectives and thought processes was a very valuable experience for me. As someone who had largely not thought about climate change often, and hadn't ranked it as urgent of a problem to address as others (e.g. poverty, lack of education, etc), these interviews gave me the chance to reflect on how people may think of this issue differently, even if they all fall on the same side of the spectrum.

Second, the semi-structured nature of the interviews gave participants space and time to express their thoughts and importantly, to reflect on how they engaged the perspective that opposes theirs. I hope that through these interviews, participants were able to go through a process of introspection. I believe this project is a small step towards creating a sense of understanding between both sides, since the first step to resolving any issue is usually to take a step back and try to understand it!

Worth noting is that this project was far from a rigorous study, and is more of an anecdotal study, sharing and reflecting on the perspectives of the few people that were interviewed. Given the setting of these interviews (i.e. MIT), it's worth recognizing that there is a heavy bias, since most of the MIT community is likely already convinced that climate change is occuring. This bias would result in getting only "one side of the story". Nonetheless, it's still a worthwhile endeavor to try to understand how these people frame the issue of climate change in their mind.

Setup

The interview consisted of the following five questions:

1. What are some words that come to mind when you hear "climate change"?

2. How do you view the problem of climate change? Are you convinced that climate change is occurring? Do you think it's an urgent or important problem?

3. Do you feel (particularly) impacted by climate change? Why do you think it's an important problem, and how do you think about it in relation to your daily life?

4. If you're comfortable sharing, do you have any family relatives or close friends that are **not** convinced climate change is happening? If so, what is usually their concern or point of contention?

5. How do you usually engage with the opposite viewpoint (if at all)?

The first three questions were included to get a sense of where the person stood on the issue of climate change, and their general understanding of it. Question 4 had a few purposes: first, since I anticipated that there would be some bias in where people stood on the issue, this question was included to get some "representation" for the viewpoint that said climate change wasn't occurring. Moreover, through this question, I was trying to get a sense of how the interviewee thought about that viewpoint and how they went about describing it. Lastly, the second part of the question, "If so, what is usually their concern or point of contention?" was included to nudge the interviewee into thinking about this opposite viewpoint at a little more depth, in that perhaps some other valid concerns were being conflated with climate change, or perhaps that (opposite) perspective has more to it than they'd imagined.

For the last question, I clarified that the term "engaging" was meant in a broad sense – one example of engaging the opposite viewpoint would be to have a conversation with someone you don't agree with, but there are several other ways of engaging: reading articles featuring that viewpoint, lurking in the comments section of Facebook, etc.

An important design choice of this project was to use the semi-structured interview style, featuring a few different questions, as opposed to focusing on one question and opting for a quicker interview. The different questions both helped guide the participants' thought process and allowed for getting a fuller picture of the person's perspective. It's worth noting as well that people likely ended up saying more in these in-person interviews than they would have if this was a written survey.

A tricky part of this process, however, was making sure that I didn't influence the participant's responses in any way. Although I began the interview session by assuring the participant that I was not looking for any specific answers, and that they can answer all questions as briefly or as lengthily as they wished, many times throughout the interviews it felt that they were looking to me to signal when their answer was sufficient. This is expected, since structured interviews can sometimes come with this expectation of "right" and "wrong" answers, and it was tricky to navigate that with the participants. I also made it a point to not debate anything with the participants, and only ask guiding or follow-up questions where appropriate. In all, there's no one perfect way, and I would say that the structured and somewhat lengthy nature of the interview was a good design choice.

In total, seven people were interviewed, and the interviews ranged between 7 to 20 minutes long. There were many interesting themes and ideas that came up during the interviews, and it would be hard to enumerate all of them in this writeup. In the following sections, I will attempt to highlight some of the interesting and recurring ideas that came

up.

Please note that I'm not presenting the following themes and ideas as right or wrong, but simply recounting what people had expressed during the interviews, and offering some of my own reflections.

Themes

Trust

The concept of trust came up a few times throughout the interviews. Many people spoke about how they didn't *know* a lot of the science behind climate change and thus couldn't really confirm that it was in fact happening, but they *trusted* well-respected leaders' and scientists' opinions on the matter.

One person talked about how he sees people on one side talking about the issue as an urgent and catastrophic matter, while others are completely dismissing the issue, and beyond the different arguments on both sides that need to be unpacked, his opinion was specifically built on trust. He mentioned that you almost have to take a "leap of faith" when it comes to this issue and compared the situation to choosing to trust a politician that you'll elect to steer the economy in one way or another over the next few years. In both situations, you're choosing who to trust, and in this case, he chooses to trust scientists and thought leaders.

A few people also talked about how they didn't trust the media and politicians' portrayal of climate change, and felt that they were generally overblowing and overemphasizing certain things. For example, one person recounted how she was confused

why politicians kept saying that "we only have 12 years left", and felt skeptical about their choice of the number twelve. It was only after she heard a scientist explain that it would be 12 years before some irreparable damage happens that the matter was clarified for her. Another person mentioned that the media tend to exaggerate some facts related to climate change, in an effort to deliver news that was "breaking", and that it was difficult for him to get a good grasp of what was really happening.

One person talked about how she grew up being taught that climate change is a fact, and that it never occurred to her to question it. I viewed this as a different kind of trust, which is important to acknowledge, for better or worse.

Work

Throughout the interviews, a few people shared the sentiment of "should I be working on that instead?"

One person mentioned that he thinks a great deal about whether he should be doing the work he currently does or if he should be working on solving climate change specifically, because the issue of climate change could be what "makes" or "breaks" humanity. In a similar vein, another person who works on learning research talked about how it's important for him to be able to justify to himself that his work is part of the solution to climate change. His view is that people won't start to view climate change as a big problem until it's too late, unless we as a society change how learning happens, by focusing on learning that is more community-oriented, that is focused around problems meaningful to the learner, where people work on projects instead of assignments, etc. Transforming learning in that way, he says, would both help put focus on the issue of climate change, and also prepare us a society to tackle such big challenges. Interestingly, he

mentioned that working towards tackling climate change wasn't a central motivation of why he pursues learning research and that he intrinsically enjoys the work that he does. However, he must be able to justify to himself that his work is contributing to the solution to climate change.

Another work-related sub-theme that emerged throughout the interviews was related to individuals personally "taking a hit" to ensure that they weren't contributing to climate change. One of the people I interviewed used to work for the oil and gas industry some time ago, and he talked about how back then, he held the perspective that climate change wasn't occurring due to human-related factors and that it wasn't a huge problem. After coming to Boston and getting introduced to the field of energy and, eventually, climate change (through a months-long project), he became interested in the topic and started to learn more about climate change. Worth noting is that, during the interview, he mentioned that he was currently looking for jobs in the area, and that it was slightly tempting to want to go back to the oil and gas industry, since there are many job opportunities in that field. However, he wants to work on problems that have an impact on the world, which is why he decided to focus on the area of climate change and energy. This was an example of someone who was choosing to deal with some job uncertainty, i.e. "taking a hit", in order to ensure that he wasn't contributing towards the issue of climate change.

Another work-related idea that came up was around how someone's "work" mindset was also prevalent in how they framed the issue of climate change. One of the participants, whose work focuses on supporting and providing educators and mentors with learning resources, talked about how she also tends to have this "resources" mindset when it comes to climate change. She gave the example of how the National Public Radio offers these

hour-long segments on cooking and news quiz shows, but doesn't offer similar resources around the topic of climate change, and how she kept thinking about it from a resources perspective. She also talked about how she didn't feel that she was necessarily great at engaging with people who didn't believe climate change was happening, but that she viewed her role as supporting others who are great at that (such as her best friend). Again, her general mindset of wanting to support others carried over when she thought of the issue of climate change as well.

On the other side, a different work-related idea came up when one person had the sentiment that although he believed climate change was occurring, he saw it as important a problem as many others, and admitted that it wasn't a problem he was particularly passionate about. Moreover, he talked about how all the fuss around climate change actually made him feel distant from the issue. It was interesting and important to hear this perspective, because it illustrated the diversity of views of those who are convinced that climate change is occurring.

Actions

Another important theme that came up throughout the interviews was related to actions, both at the individual and corporate level.

At the individual level, a couple of the interviewees recounted some of the changes in behaviour they had implemented, in order to stop contributing to climate change. Two of the interviewees mentioned that they recently made a deliberate decision to fly less often, even though they really enjoyed traveling. One person also described how she takes some deliberate actions, such as taking a cup with her everywhere, using public transport more and her car less, and using less plastic.

Along the theme of action, one person talked about how, in his view, the lack of action around climate change has less to do with disbelief of its occurrence, and more to do with people's priorities. He described that there tends to be a disconnect between what people think and feel, and what they do. He gave the analogy that if you poll the public around the issue of money in politics, many would agree that we need to get money out of politics, but their general sentiment would be that "it's not going to happen". Similarly here, many would agree that climate change is an urgent and important issue, but they wouldn't view it as a priority or otherwise act on the issue.

Another important action-related theme that arose was around the role of individuals vs. corporations in contributing to climate change. For example, one participant expressed her frustration about how much of the messaging surrounding climate change revolves around how individuals need to make better decisions and change their behavior, and less about holding large corporations accountable for their actions. A few participants also stressed the importance of policy in regulating these large corporations, and holding them to account.

Knowledge

Another theme that came up during the interviews revolved around the extent of the knowledge that people had of climate change.

A few of the participants expressed this notion that, although they were convinced that climate change was happening, they felt that they didn't have enough knowledge to carry a conversation and convince others of the issue. Moreover, this theme of having a surface level understanding of the issue also arose in a few different ways. One of the participants talked about how people in his home country tended to only have a

surface-level understanding of climate change, knowing about things like the Paris Agreement, the Amazon fires, etc. but not having a deep understanding of the issue. Another participant talked about how the average person doesn't fully understand the long timescale effects of climate change, or what the effects of rising average temperature really mean.

Interestingly, the theme of surface level understanding also arose in another, slightly different way. A few of the interviewees mentioned that some of the arguments from the opposite side involve surface level observations, such as: "it was a really cold day today, how can there be global warming?" It was interesting to see that both sides were characterized by having this surface level understanding of the issue, albeit in different ways.

Opposite View

Many of the participants recognized that climate change is a very polarized issue nowadays, and described it as a "left" vs. "right" issue (referring to the political left and political right). One participant mentioned that, many times, those not convinced that climate change is occurring tend to view climate change as part of some agenda from the political left, as opposed to a serious global issue. Similarly, another participant talked about how, although he doesn't talk to his family or friends about climate change often, he feels that he can anticipate which of them would be inclined to believe it's a real danger vs. those who would dismiss it, and that their position would be correlated with their political views. Another participant echoed this sentiment, and mentioned that opposing climate change seems to go with positions like being a Trump supporter and wanting to keep

business off of regulations. She described this correlation as being a packaged deal that people associate with their identity, and that it's present on both sides of the spectrum.

Related to the topic of engaging the opposite view, one participant admitted that she usually surrounds herself with people who have similar views to her. From the places she's chosen to live, such as San Francisco and Cambridge, to the environmentalist conferences where she volunteers, she's positioned herself around people who tend to have similar views on climate change. Although she expressed that she couldn't understand why people would believe one person's opinion, and dismiss many other people's opinions and science's stance on the matter, she acknowledged that she, too, was guilty of not wanting to change her views on climate change, and, more broadly, not wanting to engage with values that aren't focused on empowering people.

Another example in the context of engaging the opposite view came when one of the participants recounted his experience talking to his students in Rwanda about climate change. He described that, although they believed that climate change is occuring, they felt that there were many other problems they had to tackle first, such as poverty, health issues, building education systems, and so on. Although their view wasn't exactly opposed to his, since both he and his students were convinced that climate change was real, his students didn't necessarily see it as a priority compared to other problems. His approach to remedying this was to help them think about climate change differently, by asking them to imagine different, more sustainable ways of economic development. In that way, he says, the problem is no longer just about climate change, but also about what their vision for the future is. This was an insightful example of someone first listening to other people's views, and then, helping them broaden their perspective and demonstrating to them how the

issue at hand – i.e. climate change – was related to their concerns of growing and developing economically.

Interesting Ideas

Aside from the themes that came up, there were also many interesting "one-off" ideas that were brought up throughout the interviews that are worth sharing.

When asked whether he felt particularly impacted by climate change, one participant replied that he felt more impacted by the decline in biodiversity that is brought about as a result of climate change. He talked about how he didn't want to tell his future kids that certain species have gone extinct because of the actions of humans in harming their environment, which was an interesting perspective related to the impacts of climate change that I personally hadn't heard often.

One of the participants also talked about the tradeoff between economic development and prioritizing climate change for countries, and how that is the next big challenge for his home country of Venezuela, which has one of the largest oil reserves in the world. He identified that the conversation around limiting carbon emissions, while still aiming to develop economically and wanting to utilize these reserves, was going to be a difficult one. More broadly, this tradeoff is certainly a big open question around climate change.

Another interesting framing around human responsibility came from a participant who talked about how she believed in taking care of the Earth, and described that she had been brought up to have this perspective, from her school to her church, and by her mom, would take her to Earth Day, for example. This perspective is especially interesting to me,

because it's quite different from the general way that climate change is typically framed nowadays, where the discourse seems more around running out of time and self-preservation, rather than around a responsibility to take care of the Earth. This is not to say that talking about human preservation and the effects of climate change on future generations is negative in any way, but simply to point out that it's a different way to frame the issue.

On a separate note, one of the participants talked about how she used to attend an agricultural college, and many of her classmates viewed "environmentalist" to be a negative term. Although she didn't really understand why that was, she believed that it might be related to issues of class division, in that her classmates may have been viewing those who were fighting for policy changes as "elite liberals", and they themselves were people who were raised on farms and studying agriculture for their livelihood. This example in particular illustrated to me the complexity in how people may frame these issues, since I personally would have painted all people whose work depended on agriculture to be automatically supportive of fighting against climate change, but this example shows that this is not always the case.

Takeaways

Hearing firsthand from people on their perspectives around climate change has been a valuable experience for me. In this section, I enumerate some of the takeaways for me from this process.

First, and most importantly, I realized that the issue surrounding people's perceptions of climate change is not merely a question of belief vs. disbelief, but that there

are many other layers associated with it: whether people believe that climate change is real to begin with or not, whether they prioritize it as an issue, how they imagine and feel the effects of climate change (i.e. do they see these effects as distant and intangible or near and real?), to what extent they feel they understand the science behind climate change, how they think about climate change in relation to their other values (such as wanting the best for their children or seeing climate change action as a core value coupled with their identity), and so on. Each of these plays a role in how people frame the issue in their minds, and whether they go on to act on it or not.

Another key takeaway for me was realizing that people sometimes think of issues under the same general "framing". Especially for those of the interviewees that I personally knew, many times their responses would match how they generally framed issues in their minds. For instance, one person's framing of issues generally tended to be around justice, and in this case, her concerns about justice also came up when talking about climate change. Another person's mindset tended to be focused on supporting others and providing them with the right resources. Again, when talking about climate change, she was concerned with the ways in which we can provide resources for people to learn more about what they can do to tackle climate change. In all, I believe it's important to keep in mind that people frame issues in a particular way in their minds, and it's important to acknowledge that when thinking about why people hold certain opinions.

Lastly, a simple but key takeaway for me was that there is still a great deal of diversity in perspectives, even when examining one side of the spectrum. As someone who hadn't engaged in many conversations around climate change before this point, it was eye-opening for me to realize that perspectives on climate change are not just centered around of belief vs. disbelief, as can often be painted nowadays, but that there are many

sub-perspectives and concerns that find their way to be entangled with climate change in people's minds. To paint either side of the spectrum with a single overarching brush would be a grave misrepresentation and oversimplification of the matter.

Conclusion

Given the small sample size of these interviews, many of the themes and ideas recounted throughout this report are not intended to be generalizable conclusions. Moreover, much of what was discussed here was based on my reflections of what the participants expressed. Although the semi-structured interview style gave people some space to reflect on climate change and their positions, they likely would have benefited from having a longer interview or perhaps a follow-up interview. Given the seriousness and importance of the topic of climate change, it's hard to draw definitive conclusions or fully understand a person's perspective from just *one* interview. I invite the reader to take the observations and remarks in this report as anecdotal, but to use them as inspiration for some self-reflection. My hope is that this report helped illustrate some of the complexity and richness in how people frame the issue of climate change in their minds.

Appendix

Below is an illustrative figure containing a *selection* of the responses to the first question in the interview, "What are some words that come to mind when you hear "climate change"?" The responses were (roughly) color-coded by sentiment.

Figure 1: "Words of Climate Change"