
Public Perception On Climate Change: Apathy In The Anthropocene

Introduction

It has been years since the alarm of the climate crisis has been ringing, a cascade of catastrophes following in its wake while civilization remains either aware and alert but also unaffected. There is a constant discussion in media about the alarming trends that speak for themselves; the rising global temperatures, warming of oceans, rising sea levels, shrinking of ice sheets, increase in extreme events, population growth and many other global phenomena, the prove evidence for climate change is overwhelming. It has been recognized and advocated since 1992 by scientists across the world that “a great change in our stewardship of the Earth and the life on it is required, if vast human misery is to be avoided”, a notion that has been echoed once more in 2017 (Ripple et al., 2017) by 15,000 scientists from 184 countries (Mortillaro, 2017). While there is an increase in public acknowledgment of this reality, it has led to general disengagement of public and inaction towards climate change. While both apathy and climate change denial are destructive attitudes that move the public away from our goal to mediate the climate crisis, public apathy only continues to grow along with the abundant evidence of climate change that comes to light. The aim of this paper is to understand the causes and effects of apathy towards climate change and potential methods to combat this attitude. Understanding these aspects of public perception towards global warming is important as it can become a critical step in turning public apathy into public action as a response to climate change.

Causes of Climate Change Apathy & Inaction

One of the main causes of public apathy stems from the lack of clarity in climate communication. The communication between climate specialists and political authorities often creates an understanding of the underlying sciences which is not sufficient to appropriately evaluate climate problems and face controversies. This results in the inability of political leaders to issue public support climate policies and for the public to take personal actions to mitigate emissions (Lorenzoni, Nicholson-Cole, & Whitmarsh, 2007). Contributing to issue is the disparity among media coverage on climate issues which have been proven to have a dramatic impact on public perception (Lewis & Boyce, 2009) and create uncertainty and skepticism within public (Lockwood, 2011). In addition, the media coverage on climate issues varies extensively based on geopolitical and economic contexts. A paper looking at the climate issue coverage in the media by major greenhouse gas emissions countries showed that coverage within developing countries was similar but large disparities consisted in developed regions (Pandey & Kurian, 2017). These barriers which cause a lack in understanding the issue in its entirety, which include aspects such as the sources of climate change, evidence of climate change, evaluating environmental impact on various individual and community level, and understanding climate policies and debate.

Another factor that can cause public apathy is the perception of the climate crisis as a psychological distant threat. The concept of psychological distance was developed by Liberman

and Trope, which states that multiple factors such as certainty, urgency, personal harm or implication of a threat create the perception of threat (2008). A study applied this of psychological distance in the context of climate change and found that environmental threats especially global warming was psychologically distant in all three of the dimensions of urgency, certainty and personal implications (Carmi & Kimhi, 2015). This study also concluded that psychological distance was a strong predictor of emotional response and motivation to act and make changes for the sake of the environment. As climate concerns are perceived to be a temporally and spatially distant threat, we prioritize and assume the responsibility of other concerns at an individual and governmental level as they are presumed to be a more urgent, likely and probable threat to our existence or well-being than global warming.

While this paper identifies communication disparity and viewing climate change as a distant threat to be the main contributors to public apathy in developed countries, other possible causes may still exist. These individual causes of public apathy can greatly contribute to public attitude, is it also possible that public apathy is a result of not one, but many of these causes working in conjunction and leading to unmotivated and unaffected attitudes towards climate change.

Combatting Climate Change Apathy and Inaction

The United Nations Paris Agreement aims to increase and accelerate action towards combating climate change by reducing global carbon emissions and limit global temperature increase (United Nations, General Assembly, 2016). To reach these ambiguous goals requires not only the contribution of government but also the awareness and participation of the public. Perception of climate change becomes a barrier of awareness and participation is leading to inaction and apathy of the public. A change in our behavior against the climate crisis first demands a change in our attitudes towards the issue.

The lack of clarity and understanding about the public on global warming drastically affects the way people perceive these issues and act accordingly. A study suggests that enhance education on climate change is required to reduce communication barriers but also to explore the pre-existing notion on global issues (Wibeck, 2014). To reduce the distortion of information created by media, the paper also suggests that it is crucial that improvements between science communication of complex information to the media (Wibeck, 2014). Another study highlights the importance of climate literacy as a necessary means to establish public trust of climate change experts and policymakers in democratic societies. This study claims that climate literacy must come in the form of empowering messages and delivered to the public through many forms of media eluding to the emphasis on media literacy education to create a better understanding of climate issues and reduce skepticism (Cooper, 2011).

The implementation of fear and urgency in the way information on climate change is conveyed to the public is often an attempt to promote motivation and action. Studies have shown that this is in no means an effective strategy and can have counter-productive effects on climate communication and engagement (Ruiter, Kessels & Kok, 2014, Reser & Bradley, 2017). As mentioned previously this tactic fails due to the perception of the climate threat as psychologically distant which reduces motivation to act. A study suggests that it would require a mental representation that would create an intense emotional reaction to the anthropogenic activities and its ecological consequences in order to make these aspects seem more relevant, likely and vivid and be detected as a severe threat (Böhm & Pfister, 2005). Another study

supports the claim that fear-inducing tactics can distance and disempower the public and move them toward apathy, however making public engagement more meaningful through visual imagery and icons to make climate change a personal issue for the public to empathize with (O'Neill & Nicholson-Cole, 2009).

Conclusion

Succeeding the industrial revolution in the early 19th century, the adverse effects on the environment as a result human activity came into the forefront which launched an environmental awareness known as the 'green revolution' (Mason, 2014). Since then there has been a consistently increasing concern growing in the public which acknowledges the reality of the rapid rates of global warming and the many implications it can have on our social, political, economic and ecological systems. Rather than driving people to respond to climate change, the constant news, reports, and alarms have resulted in an apathetic attitude of the public general towards the issue which has become a barrier toward responding and mediating the effects of climate change. For this reason, it is critical to understand the reasons for public apathy toward the issue and resulting effects of this attitude to be able to find ways to turn public apathy into public action. Only when we understand the barriers of public perception can we hope to find means of engagement, empowerment, and action in actions towards climate change.

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