

TO REACH CONSENSUS, LET'S TALK LESS¹

Emily Badger[©]

When it comes to controversial political issues, we often seek out sources of information that confirm what we already believe — conservatives, in other words, watch Fox News, and liberals lean forward with MSNBC. Along the way, our opinions grow more entrenched — and sometimes more extreme — whether they're reinforced by like-minded groups or challenged by people with whom we disagree. This concept may also apply to how we process opinions about controversial science and technology issues, according to new research. And groups bracing for some tense national debate on this front — about the environment, stem cell research, climate change — would be wise to take note.

Sometimes the more we discuss the risks and benefits of controversial science, the harder it is to achieve consensus. This idea challenges the belief that we can talk through disagreement if we just keep at it. “There’s a consensus among many of my colleagues that we have to get away from this idea where if we just provide more information, or if you just discuss the issue more, then everybody will come to the same viewpoint,” said North Carolina State assistant professor of communication Andrew Binder, the lead author of the new study. “It’s almost this deterministic notion that if you build it, they will come; if you give them the information, their eyes will be open and they’ll see it for all its glory, which doesn’t seem to be the case.”

Binder and colleagues Dietram Scheufele, Dominique Brossard and Albert Gunther, at the University of Wisconsin, studied the public reaction in six communities across the country that were being considered to host a new federal research facility under the Department of Homeland Security. Some community members welcomed the jobs the facility would bring, while others feared potential danger from the National Bio- and Agro-Defense Facility, which will conduct research on “foreign animal, emerging and zoonotic (transmitted from animals to humans) diseases.”

The more people discussed the topic, the researchers found, the more wedded they became to their initial positions, either in support of or in opposition to the facility. The finding mirrors earlier research by Binder and some of the same co-authors around the topic of stem cell research. The more like-minded people in a homogenous group discussed the controversial science, the researchers found, the more extreme their positions became. All of this means that we may not be able to find an acceptable public consensus on dealing with climate change, for one, simply by continuing to talk it out. In fact, more public discussion could push us farther apart.

In the wake of last week’s U.S. elections, which will usher a new class of politicians skeptical of climate science into Congress, some scientists are strategizing a new outreach campaign to publicize the issue and counter political attacks. They’d be wise to recognize, though, that more — and louder — voices may not necessary improve the dialogue. “A lot of this research can inform how we might expect those debates to play out,” Binder said. “The global warming issue is an interesting example. Because it’s been around for so long, people seem very much entrenched in their viewpoint, and it’s hard to see how exactly we can continue having the same conversation but have the two sides come to a consensus.”

¹ The Idea Lobby, Miller-McCune, November 11, 2010

If it won't help us to keep having the same conversation, Binder suggests, perhaps we should reframe the discussion, creating a clean slate. He points as an example to geoengineering, the controversial concept of jiggering with the climate to reverse warming (as opposed to jiggering with our behavior to prevent climate change from occurring in the first place). Some people oppose geoengineering on moral or ethical grounds. But if we reframe the discussion — around, for example, economics — it might be easier to find consensus. Geoengineering, theoretically, could be more cost-effective than alternative solutions. The lesson for anyone with a stake in the coming science debates is that more talk won't necessarily help. Whatever they're planning, scientists and politicians may want to figure out how to discuss these issues in a completely different way.