WHEN THE CIRCUS COMES TO TOWN: Countering campus presentations on climate denial

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ABSTRACT

Presentations by climate deniers such as Christopher “Lord” Monckton are designed to misrepresent the current state of climate science and to sow doubt among the public. Students and faculty at Union College (NY) organized a series of events designed to counter one such presentation by Monckton. We successfully challenged key ways that he misrepresented climate science and presented information regarding the reality of climate change. These counter-presentations were described in a 2012 EOS Forum by Corbin and Katz.

A survey of students attitudes regarding climate change seven months later found that a large proportion heard about the discussions via a range of media – discussions with faculty and peers, our campus newspaper, and Social Media sites such as Facebook and Twitter. More significantly, students who reported that their opinions shifted were far more likely to have become more convinced of climate change’s reality and the role that humans are playing. In conclusion, organized counter-demonstrations are an effective response to campus visits by those who deny the reality of climate change.

INTRODUCTION

On March 5, 2012 Christopher Monckton, a self-promoted speaker who questions the reality of climate change and the veracity of climate science, presented his views of climate change science at Union College, NY. Monckton’s visit, funded by Collegians For a Conservative Tomorrow (CFACT), was one stop of a nationwide campus speaking series.

The approaches that Union College students and faculty took were to directly contrast Monckton’s statements with posters and reading material outside his speaking location, to engage him during the Q&A session that followed his remarks, and most significantly, to host a “Reality of Climate Science” discussion immediately following the CFACT event (Corbin and Katz 2012).

The “Reality” event was a question-and-answer session in which several faculty and one student fielded questions from the ~60 attendees. Monckton attended and sat in the front row. The “Reality” event allowed us to carry on a high-level discussion of climate change, the threats it poses, and possible solutions. It also allowed us to engage Monckton in extensive exchanges about his arguments.

Extensive discussions of the events followed, on Social Media sites such as Twitter and Facebook and in Comments on our campus newspaper website, the Concordiensis.

Here I present results of a survey designed to assess the effect of Mr. Monckton’s visit and the counter-presentations on student attitudes with respect to climate change seven months after the events.

EFFECTS ON STUDENT ATTITUDES

I was interested in the extent to which the events of March 2012 shifted student attitudes about the realities of climate change and the role that humans play in driving it. In October 2012 members of the sophomore, junior, and senior classes were invited to take an online poll. 125 students participated, from a potential population of approximately 1500 students.

Table 1: Among those who heard about the events, “Did the events and following discussions alter your opinions about climate change?” (n=66)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Changed my mind from being convinced of the reality that climate change is happening now or in the future</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changed my mind from being convinced of the reality that climate change is mostly natural or mostly caused by human activities</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Among those who heard about the events, “Did the events and following discussions alter your opinions about possible long-term effects of climate change?” (n=66)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Made me more worried about the long-term effects of climate change</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Made me somewhat more worried about the long-term effects of climate change</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Made me no more worried about the long-term effects of climate change</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Among those who heard about the events, “Did the events and following discussions alter your opinions about whether the causes of climate change are mostly natural or mostly caused by human activities?” (n=66)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Changed my mind from natural causes</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changed my mind from natural causes</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SURVEY RESULTS

- Approximately half of the respondents (66/125) reported having heard of the events of March 5, either by having attended one of the events, via discussions or email with faculty or peers, via Social Media sites such as Facebook or Twitter, or in the campus Concordiensis newspaper.
- Among those who had heard of the events, discussions with other students was the most-often mentioned source of information about the events (64%), followed by Social Media (54%). Approximately 40% heard about it from faculty, or read about it in the Concordiensis. 30% and 18% of the 66 respondents who had heard of the events reported attending Monckton’s talk and/or the counter-presentations, respectively. (Percentages add up to >100% because multiple responses were allowed).
- Among those who had heard of the events,
  - A majority (42/66) responded that their opinions with respect to climate change did not change. However, among those whose opinions did change, 88% (22/24) reported that they became more convinced of the reality of climate change (Table 1).
  - Half (34/66) responded that their concerns about the potential long-term effects of climate change did not change. Among those whose opinions did change, 94% (30/32) reported that they became more worried about the long-term effects of climate change (Table 2).
  - A majority (48/65) responded that their opinions with respect to the role of humans vs. natural causes did not change. Among those whose opinions did change, 94% (17/18) reported that they became more convinced that human activities are causing climate change (Table 3).
- Among all students who responded, 90% (113/125) were either “very sure” or “somewhat sure” that climate change is happening now or in the future. Those responses did not differ between those students who had heard of the events on March 5, 2012 and those who had not.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Stream of Monckton’s Presentation at Union College: http://union.campusforum.org/school/blog/?ID=1838
- Coverage of March 5, 2012 events in Union College Concordiensis: http://www.concordiensis.com/article/march-3-2012/
- Corbin, J.D. and M.E. Katz. 2012. Effective strategies to counter campus presentations on climate denial. EOS 93:252-253
- Pro-Monckton coverage of March 5, 2012 events: http://wattsupwiththat.com/2012/03/10/moncktons-schweevately-showdown/ and http://opinion.financialpost.com/2012/04/20/irantistics-climate/
- Dr. Miriam Katz, Dr. Donald Rodbell, and Erin Delman (’12) were instrumental in the organization of the events described here.

CONCLUSIONS

- The events of March 2012 did not alter the opinions of a large portion of the surveyed students.
- Among those who were swayed by one presentation or the other, many more were influenced by information in the climate science presentations than the climate denial presentation.
- Directly addressing presentations by climate deniers such as Christopher Monckton is an effective way of presenting climate science to an engaged audience.
- Surveyed students overwhelmingly acknowledged the reality of climate change.