

Open Reflection Week 7
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I realize that it's not usually considered appropriate to use internet slang to describe a class assignment, but in this case it's the first thing I can think of: OMG, I met a real life climate denier and somehow managed not to tell her she was a complete nutcase during the interview.

For this assignment, the results of what you get in the interviews depend heavily on where you go to do them. There's only three, so it's not scientific, but it is interesting. I wanted to get as close to ordinary everyday citizens as I could, so I decided not to interview people in my own social circle but to talk to people at a cafeteria where I often eat. MCL in Upper Arlington (nicknamed "MediCare Lounge") attracts the senior citizen clientele, but I go there because it's one of the only places in town where you can get actual vegetables and fresh brewed iced tea.

I interviewed three people, all of them age 60+, and got three different camps represented in the Yale Project on Climate Change's Six Americas: a Concerned, a Doubtful, and a Dismissive.

The Concerned guy was the easiest to talk with. He had a good idea of what causes global warming – CO2 emissions from vehicles and power plants – and of its impacts – extreme weather, droughts, and hurricanes. He thinks it's already happening, and thinks there should be more policy emphasis on electric vehicles, less reliance on coal, and that Americans need to cut back on energy consumption. However, he emphasized that he was "not a tree hugger" and didn't seem alarmed. He also thinks scientists are divided about climate change, so he's not plugged in enough to know there's a 97% consensus. He thinks the media sensationalizes climate change, but that it does deserve prominence in the national conversation. He gets most of his news from newspapers and the internet, but said you have to use a filter with these sources.

The Doubtful guy was a retired architect who said his previous firm designed many buildings at Ohio State. He didn't seem to know much about climate change, but was pretty sure it is caused by long range natural cycles. He said he hasn't noticed much climate change in his lifetime, and that these cycles are so long range that you'd only see a small part during a lifetime. He also thinks scientists are split on climate change, and says he hasn't taken any action to address it because he wouldn't know what actions to take. He reads a variety of newspapers and magazines, and says you can get any opinion in the media you want. He doesn't have much confidence in most of what he reads but would weigh the opinion of a scientist more heavily. At the end of the interview his wife said she was proud he didn't mention Al Gore. She thinks Gore has staked out the issue of climate change to score political points but doesn't know anything about it.

The third interview was the most interesting. I wanted to interview a woman thinking I'd be more likely to find someone concerned with the environment and acting on climate. Boy was I wrong. The first answer this woman gave when I asked what comes to mind regarding climate change was "hoax." She thinks climate change is a big conspiracy thought up by greedy scientists chasing grant money, which she described as "seductive." She is adamant that climate change is not happening – "There's been no warming in 18 years – that's been proven," she said. She also thinks it has been proven that there are more polar bears than ever, and more Arctic ice than ever. Throughout the interview she conflated weather and climate, and seemed completely unaware there's a distinction. "They can't predict the weather five days out, let alone 100 years, and the computer models are flawed anyway," she said. She later said the scientists know climate change is a lie, but they publish bogus opinions in order to chase grant money.

Since she didn't think climate change is happening, I didn't ask her when and where its impacts would be felt. I did ask about actions she might take to address it. She said she didn't think people should be wasteful, and she believed in recycling – which fits in with the idea that you don't necessarily have to believe climate change exists to take action. But that got her talking about all the policies “liberals” have put into place that feel good but don't work out – things like low-flush toilets (why are these people stuck on that?) that she said uses twice as much water, and incandescent bulbs full of mercury that have to be cleaned up by Hazmat if they break.

All this got me very curious about where she gets her information, so I drilled into that in detail. She had her iPad out and showed me several websites. They all turned out to be conservative news sites that aggregate stories with a slant further to the right of even Fox News. Her favorite site is Lucianne.com, which is run by Lucianne Goldberg whose son Jonah Goldberg is a conservative columnist. She loves the Daily Mail, which she described as Britain's only conservative paper amid a sea of Communist outlets like The Guardian.¹ Other sites she reads are HotAir.com, Newsbusters.org, Conservative Tree House, Breitbart.com, and Powerline. She said she is a voracious consumer of information online, and that if you are not on the internet, you don't know much because newspapers and TV won't cover this stuff.

From there the conversation devolved into a political rant. This woman, who is a realtor in Upper Arlington, loves Sarah Palin and has a Ted Cruz for President bumper sticker. She said Palin was forced out of office due to frivolous lawsuits from Democrats. She viscerally hates Harry Reid, Chuck Schumer and Nancy Pelosi. She thinks the Obama administration “had something” on Chief Justice John Roberts, which is why the Supreme Court approved Obamacare. She said there is widespread voter fraud, which she has “seen with my own eyes.” She thinks Communists have invaded government administration and academia.

All of this is evidence in favor of Dan Kahan's thesis that your opinion on climate change is based on your tribal identification. This woman identifies not just as a conservative, but as a far right raging Tea Partier. It has become a litmus test that this group must deny climate change.

But here is the kicker: She then got to discussing local politics. Apparently last year the city council for Upper Arlington tried to put an office building in the green space around City Hall near the corner of Tremont and Kenny. This green space is an iconic area for Upper Arlington with lots of old memorial trees, and she did not want it disturbed. She spoke at length about how they tried to ram this through with little notice to citizens, but people found out and she testified against it. For now the city has backed off, but she is sure it will come up again if citizens are not vigilant. So, apparently if a development project harms an area she personally knows and holds dear, she can see the harm and will work to stop it. But this same sort of concern for the environment does not translate broadly. Instead, she has bought into everything this self-selected conservative media publishes, and is completely sure the impacts of climate change are a hoax.

¹ The US political editor of the Daily Mail is a guy named David Martosko who was previously editor of the Daily Caller in Washington, DC. He was forced out after it became public that the paper had paid two women in Mexico to claim they were hired as prostitutes by a Democratic congressman. Before that he worked for Richard Berman, aka “Dr Evil,” who runs dozens of front groups attacking public interest organizations that work on behalf of environmental protection, animal welfare, teachers unions, restaurant workers, public health, etc.