

Professor Sir Brian Hoskins:

Is public debate a good forum for discussing science issues such as climate change?

A public debate about current issues is a hugely beneficial way of enabling a very wide and extensive audience to hear about the modern debates which affect us all today. Fundamentally the very fact that the forum is a *public* debate allows many more people to access the debate than would normally be permitted too, and this increase in the number of those listening to scientific debates, like those about climate change, will undoubtedly have many advantages for both society and science itself. Although there would be some aspects of the on-goings of public debates which could be abused by speakers for various reasons, the overwhelming advantages effected by a public forum greatly outweigh these problems.

However it can be argued, with some credibility, that the public debates would be used by speakers to portray a certain desired image of their argument to the audience to both channel public interest and to secure political results (such as financial backing for a new research project). Speakers may also try to steer clear of areas of debates which are known to be unpopular or controversial topics with the public (for example animal testing or stem cell research), to keep the public supportive of government funding. Orators might even manipulate the debate to put a particular slant or perspective on a point, or exaggerate certain arguments. That said, one benefit of having a debate is that if correctly challenged, speakers would be forced to be transparent about their evidence and points so all would be able to see the real truth behind an argument.

Similarly a public debate may be attacked as an inappropriate forum for debating important, current science issues like climate change by academics or specialists for creating the wrong environment for debates. Due to the nature of a public debate with a potentially completely non-specialist audience, scientific language, explanations and theories may have to be 'dumbed down' and censored to ensure the debate can be understood by all. This could prove to be a very unjust handicap if certain speakers may not be able to relate their elaborate and complex theories and challenges to the debate, as they have to recalculate their points to be more socially comprehensible. Academia and creativity should not be penalised for the benefit of the non-specialists. Unfortunately, this point cannot be effectively refuted however the many benefits that arise from public debates, more than sufficiently counteract this argument.

One important benefit of holding a public debate to discuss climate change, would be the widespread consequential actions of all those listening to the debate. Having been informed about the difficulties and challenges facing humanity due to global warming, rising sea levels and changing rainfall patterns, many people may feel encouraged to form lobby groups and campaigns to put public pressure on governments and councils to react to the pressing issues. Public debates could thus be used to generate and stimulate widespread

support for certain topics and political actions. Likewise, having been educated about the harsh realities of climate change many more listeners than usual would feel a collective responsibility to tackle climate change on a local and national level; for example communities may rally together to start a local recycling program, or schools may commence educating children about how to cut down on their carbon footprints and water usage.

Yet public debates would be most useful to society, primarily because they would massively expose the reality of many threatening issues like climate change to a much wider audience. This broadening of the audience itself has a bountiful array of advantages. Firstly many students may feel inspired by debates about current science issues, having heard passionate speakers battle over the necessary actions required to counteract climate change, and be encouraged to study science at a higher level of education. Also the increase in number of listeners will increase the opportunity for creativity within the debate; as the pool from which ideas, opinions and theories can be drawn from will have rapidly expanded. Finally the public forum will greatly increase the chances of the debate gaining media coverage - whether it be by television, radio or internet - and this would enable more and more people to be educated by the debating speakers, and would enable the debate to be accessed from anywhere and shared among the public.

Thus to conclude, despite a few problems which may occur due to the nature of humans running a debate, the public forum for science debates would have many key benefits for both society and science itself. The extensive widening of the audience would enable many more people to be educated about the current issues like climate change and the consequences of a broader science education for all of society, would be profound.

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