
The Pros and Cons of Bitcoin

Videos:

“Why Bitcoin is so bad for the planet”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=INGwQhXfB88>

(5:58 minutes)

“Bitcoin is Protecting Human Rights Around the World”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xLYYh4aPXAM>

(5:37 minutes)

Guide:

The questions below will help students achieve a better understanding of the arguments made on either side of a contentious topic. Because these questions often touch upon statements made briefly in the videos, we recommend reading the questions before watching each video.

Students are encouraged to take notes during the videos, and it may be helpful for students to break into groups, each taking responsibility for only a few questions, before coming together for discussion.

Analysis Questions:

1. What are the opposing ideas in these two videos?
2. What is the primary reason that the Guardian video claims Bitcoin is bad for the planet?
Why does Alex Hern suggest encouraging more electricity consumption is bad?
3. According to the Guardian video, what percentage of the world’s electricity does Bitcoin use? What other electricity-consumption facts did we learn about Bitcoin?
4. What is the primary reason that the Reason video claims Bitcoin is good?
5. According to the Reason video, Bitcoin is Protecting Human Rights Around the World, what are some of the advantages that Bitcoin offers in comparison to traditional currencies? Do you know of any other advantages?
6. In the Guardian video, Alex Hern talks about the concept of “stranded generation.” What does “stranded generation” mean? What are the two sides of the stranded generation argument?
7. In the Reason video, Alex Gladstein calls Bitcoin “a tool for protecting human rights.” What does he mean by this? How does Bitcoin help?
8. What were some of the countries in which Bitcoin was helping people fight tyrannical rulers?
9. What does devaluation mean? How does Bitcoin help those people who live in countries that devalue their currency?
10. Alex Hern says Bitcoin uses about the same amount of electricity as Norway, about 2.5 times the energy used per year by Amazon, Apple, Facebook Microsoft, and Google, combined. Does that surprise you? Should we be concerned about that? Why/Why not?

11. We learned that Bitcoin electricity consumption totals 29 million British pounds each day. That's roughly \$40 million U.S. dollars each day. Does it matter how much electricity people consume mining and trading Bitcoin? Does it matter how much electricity people consume? Why/Why not?
12. Taking the number of transactions per second into account, how does electricity consumption for Bitcoin compare with that of Visa?
13. Is electricity a finite resource we should worry about using up? Please explain.
14. In the Reason video, cash is referred to as "one of the last bastions of privacy and freedom." Is it? How so? How do traditional online payments reduce our privacy?
15. Alex Gladstein argues that many critics of Bitcoin live in democracies and have freedoms that people living under dictatorships do not. Do you think that skews the critics' views? Why/Why not?
16. In the Guardian video, Alex Hern says he can't see Bitcoin being the future of a sustainable financial system unless it improves its energy efficiency. Is energy efficiency important? Why/Why not?
17. In the Reason video, Alex Gladstein says we shouldn't write off Bitcoin as a "vehicle for financial speculation." What does he mean by this?
18. Alex Hern points out that we use electricity for many non-essential purposes. How do we determine whether a purpose is essential or not? Should we make that determination? If the user is paying for the electricity, why does it matter? If the market isn't the right way, how should decisions be made about who gets to use how much electricity?
19. Before watching these videos, were you aware of how much energy Bitcoin requires?
20. Before watching these videos, were you aware that Bitcoin has been used by activists to circumvent authoritarian governments?
21. One video argues that Bitcoin is harmful; the other argues it's helpful. Could both arguments be true? Why/Why not?
22. In your opinion, are the trade-offs for Bitcoin worth it? Should one of the arguments we heard carry more weight than the other? If so, which one? Why?
23. How does this debate compare to other environmental debates? Are there other examples of activities that are potentially harmful to the environment, but help vulnerable people?
24. Did you have an opinion of Bitcoin before watching these videos? If so, what was it? Has your opinion changed? If so, how? What did you learn from either video that affects your views of the debate over Bitcoin?
25. What more would you like to know about Bitcoin that might affect your view of this debate?
26. What else would you like to learn about Bitcoin?