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'Climate Lockdown' and the Culture Wars: How COVID-19 sparked a new narrative against climate action

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Pierre Vaux

About this report

This report documents a new trend used to drive anti-climate debate – ‘Climate Lockdown’ – focussing on English-language content within the UK and US contexts. It documents the first emergence of this narrative in March 2020, spurred by the public health response to COVID-19, and the subsequent evolution and spread of content across social media. It also analyses the amplifiers at key milestones over the past 18 months, including the unwitting role played by ‘green’ media outlets in driving pushback and more recent crossovers into known extremist and conspiracy groups.

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CASM Technology

CASM Technology is a technology company dedicated to building better ways of researching the internet. It combines social and data science with machine learning and natural language processing to unlock the value of online data to genuinely inform important decisions. It has spent the last ten years developing a research environment called Method52, and deploys this to confront hate, extremism, state influence operations, anti-vaccination disinformation, anti-climate action campaigns, illicit wildlife crime, electoral interference and harassment towards political candidates and activists.

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Executive Summary

In September 2020, ISD analysts identified an emerging trend on social media relating to the term 'climate lockdown'. This spike in volume seemed to be driven primarily by climate sceptics, who claimed that the COVID-19 pandemic was merely a precursor to future 'green tyranny', and that both governments and global elites would curtail civil liberties under the pretext of climate change. Over the following eight months, analysts conducted a detailed study of the emergence and mainstreaming of this phrase across Twitter, Facebook and YouTube.

The goal was four-fold:

1. To understand how 'climate lockdown' was being framed within broader socio-politics;
2. To establish who the main proponents and amplifiers were;
3. To determine crossover with other groups and movements studied by ISD (e.g. anti-lockdown; anti-vaxxers; extreme far-right; conspiracists); and
4. To assess the potential influence of this trend on wider climate change debate.

This report details the chronological growth and evolution of 'climate lockdown', divided into two sections. The first outlines how the narrative emerged and was repurposed by malign actors, making its way onto different social media platforms. The second illustrates how liberal media missteps in early 2021 reignited the narrative, causing it to merge with other, pre-existing conspiracies and ultimately become centred in wider anti-elite discourse.

The report concludes with potential lessons for climate change communications, not least in the run-up to major events like COP26, national elections and regional votes on legislation.

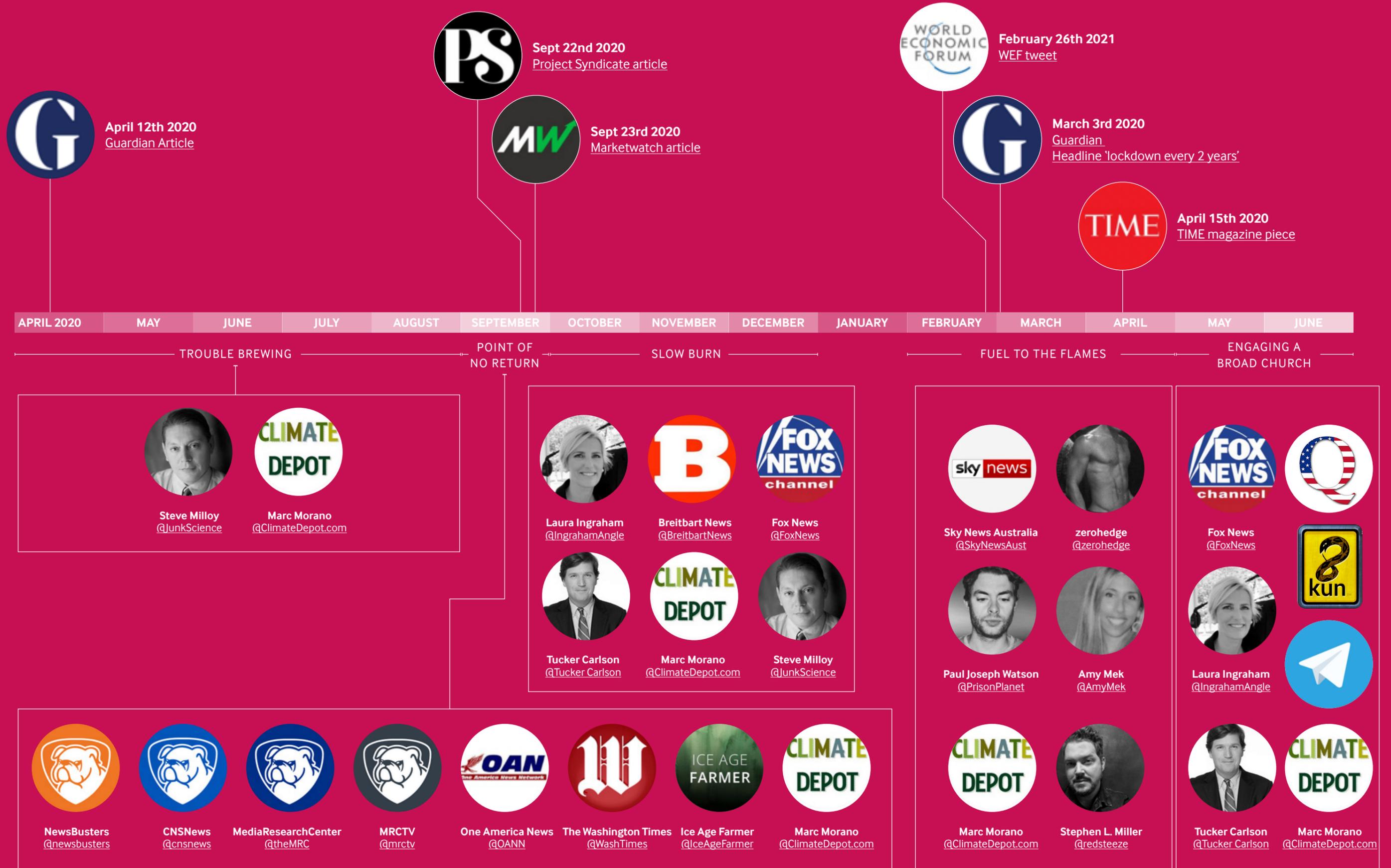
'Climate Lockdown' is not a story of outsider threats to popular discourse, but a lesson in how any message can be weaponised by those intent on harm - whether to profit from disinformation and manufactured outrage, to fuel mistrust in institutions, or to confirm existing biases about certain groups and causes. Climate change reporting must tread an increasingly narrow tightrope: emphasising the stakes of inaction without sounding overly apocalyptic or callous, and providing the evidence for bold agendas without enflaming public fear and grievance in the wake of COVID-19.

The key takeaways from the research, covered in greater detail in the report, are as follows:

- Dedicated **climate denialists had been attempting to generate hype around 'climate lockdown' from as early as March 2020**, but received little-to-no traction on social media.
- The narrative **only gained purchase online following a series of poorly thought-out headlines and posts from mainstream institutions**, including media outlets such as The Guardian and international think tanks like the World Economic Forum, which provided grist for a reactionary media ecosystem.
- As such, **'climate lockdown' does not fit the model of more recent phenomena**, where a conspiracy originates and gains momentum within fringe platforms or groups before gradually piercing the mainstream. On the contrary, the narrative was seized upon by right-wing media outlets and pundits only after misleading citations from the perceived 'liberal establishment'.
- Once it had garnered attention, **the notion was swiftly integrated into a pre-existing 'culture war' framework and related national offshoots** – this was less driven by fringe bloggers, and more by high-visibility outlets like Fox News who transformed 'climate lockdown' into a vision of impending authoritarian doom. In recent months, such ideas have crept into a broader swathe of far-right and conspiracy movements, most recently appearing in forums for the infamous QAnon cult.

Timeline of Major Events and Key Actors

'Climate Lockdown' and the Culture Wars:
How COVID-19 sparked a new narrative against climate action



'Climate Lockdown' in 2020: A Conspiracy is Born

January-March 2020 – Quiet on the Western Front

The phrase 'climate lockdown' was used sporadically after the first COVID-19 lockdown was imposed in Wuhan on the 23 January 2020, appearing a mere 2 days later. Most initial uses of the phrase had positive connotations, contrasting the relative urgency with which one near-term deadly threat (COVID-19) was approached, with the more catastrophic, long-term issue of climate change. Early examples of editorials appeared in March 2020 via Forbes¹ and Dawn².



Analysts found only two tweets framing 'climate lockdowns' in a conspiratorial or negative sense in the first three months of 2020.

April-August 2020 – Trouble Brewing

This trend changed in mid-April, when *The Guardian* published an editorial³ arguing that a post-lockdown "return to normal" should be challenged, in order to maintain the drop in emissions resulting from reduced demands for fuel. The following day *Steve Milloy*, Director at the Heartland Institute (a major funder of climate change denial⁴), tweeted a link to this article⁵, commenting: "how climate bedwetters hope to translate the #coronavirus lockdown into a climate lockdown".

Milloy's tweet was then amplified and used as the centrepiece for an article⁶ on *ClimateDepot.com*, a climate change denial website run by *Marc Morano*, also a writer for the Heartland Institute. These initial, negative uses of the phrase hint at a type of pattern emerging, where current outrage and frustration about government imposed COVID-19 lockdown measures was pivoted towards climate issues. This being said, neither of these negative uses of 'climate lockdown' achieved much traction, circulating for only a day or two each but failing to enter wider discourse.

Late September 2020 – The Point of no Return

The phrase continued to appear sporadically, with low volume and in largely positive terms, until the 22 September when *Economist* and UCL Professor *Mariana Mazzucato* published an article for *Project Syndicate* titled 'Avoiding a Climate Lockdown'⁷. Mazzucato argued for a "green economic transformation" and a "radical overhaul" of energy, warning of the steps that may be necessary if this agenda fails, such as limits on car use, meat consumption and extreme energy-saving measures. She also connected the current climate, economic and public health crises, linking pandemics like COVID-19 to environmental degradation and social injustice. **Her argument did not celebrate the idea of climate-related lockdowns, but rather laid out the policies needed to avoid them.**

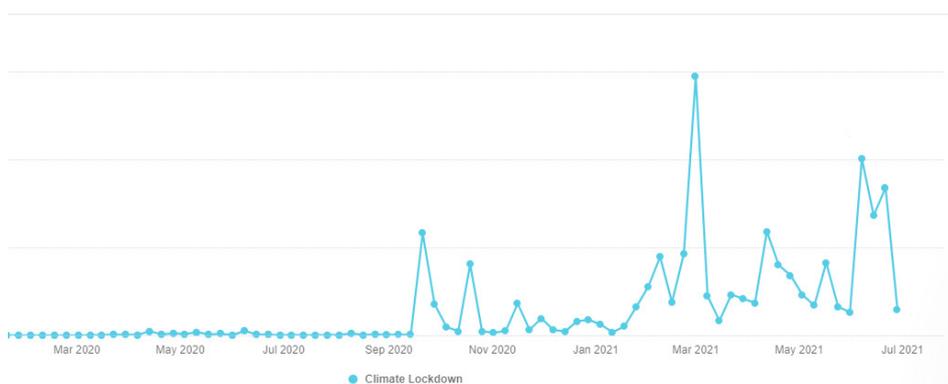


Figure 1: Volume of Tweets referring to 'climate lockdown' narrative between Jan 2020 - June 2021.

26 tweets

In the fortnight prior to Mazzucato's article, we identified this number of tweets discussing 'climate lockdown' on Twitter.

In the seven days following publication, this had risen to

2,777

In the fortnight prior to Mazzucato's article, analysts identified just 26 tweets discussing 'climate lockdown' on Twitter. In the seven days following publication, this had risen to 2,777. However, it was not Mazzucato's original Project Syndicate piece that drove this surge in activity, but rather a republishing by the financial news site **Marketwatch**, headlined, 'Opinion: We need to act boldly now if we are to avoid economy-wide lockdowns to halt climate change'⁸.

In contrast to Project Syndicate's 214.5k, Marketwatch boasts an online following of over 4m users. Their sensationalised framing of Mazzucato's article led to 'climate lockdown' being picked up and repurposed by **Newsbusters**, self-described as the "leading media watchdog in documenting, exposing and neutralizing liberal media bias"⁹. Three days after the Project Syndicate piece went live, Newsbusters published an article headlined: 'Soros/Gates-Funded Org (\$6.5m): World May Need 'Climate Lockdown'¹⁰. It centred on the fact that **Project Syndicate have received funding from both George Soros' Open Society Foundations and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation**; this was taken as evidence that the global elite are pushing an "eco extremist" idea (climate lockdown) as part of a wider agenda in social control.

Newsbusters is one of several entities owned by the **Media Research Centre (MRC)**, a conservative-leaning company who reject scientific consensus on climate change and criticise media coverage that reflects this science¹¹. Their article was quickly shared across MRC's network of accounts on social media, and within a week discussion of Mazzucato's piece and the 'climate lockdown' narrative began appearing in content from prominent climate science deniers (e.g. Marc Morano)¹²; the videos of YouTube conspiracy theorists¹³; and in misleading coverage by right-wing news outlets (including **One America News Network (OANN)**¹⁴ and **The Washington Times**¹⁵). The latter also served as channels through which 'climate lockdown' gained exposure on Facebook, where the sensational 'scenario' aspects of Mazzucato's article were a main target.

Beliefs of this nature - which allude to a "malignant global elite seeking to control the world, propped up by the complicity of governments"¹⁶ - underpin a range of popular conspiracy theories. This includes movements which have proliferated in the past year, from the New World Order to the Great Reset¹⁷ and QAnon. The affiliation of 'climate lockdown' with anti-elitist tropes marked a turning point for the narrative and its entry into wider discourse, as well as its resonance with a diverse set of audiences.

October-December – Slow Burn

The narrative resurfaced twice more in October and November, the first when Fox News presenter **Laura Ingraham** tweeted a warning about impending climate lockdowns (Figure 2)¹⁸, and the second after **Breitbart News** published an article (Figure 3)¹⁹ explicitly tying the notion to **the Great Reset conspiracy**²⁰. This theory claims that a global elite is using the COVID-19 pandemic to dismantle capitalist economies and enforce radical social change at the expense of personal freedoms.

On 21 December 2020, discussion of 'climate lockdown' first emerged on broadcast media. It appeared separately on two **Fox News** features with **Steve Milloy** and **Marc Morano**, the climate denialists who pushed the first negative uses of the phrase in April. On **The Ingraham Angle**²¹ and **Tucker Carlson Tonight**²², both Milloy and Morano **claimed that President-elect Biden was being pressured to declare a climate crisis and use emergency powers to enforce climate lockdown.**

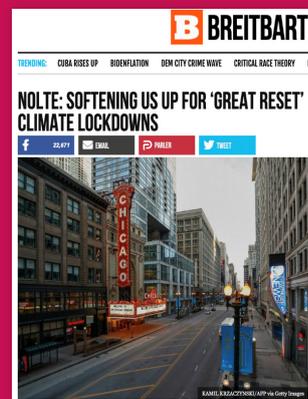


Figure 2 (above): Tweet from Laura Ingraham warning about allegedly impending climate lockdowns

Figure 3 (below): Article on Breitbart News tying the climate lockdown narrative to the Great Reset conspiracy

While Fox News has wide national reach both via live broadcast and social media, there was no significant spike in 'climate lockdown' content during or immediately after these segments. Rather, the top accounts driving the narrative that week remained Marc Morano himself (Figure 4)²³ and other dedicated climate denialists, such as *WattsUpWithThat*. This serves to reiterate our analysis that **the debate surged more in response to liberal or perceived "elite" interventions, rather than general climate denialism, even when provided a platform from outlets such as Fox.**

Following the initial proliferation of 'climate lockdown' content across Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, online discussion of the phrase went relatively dormant. Nonetheless, a misleading vision of what the term meant had crystallised in certain communities – namely, that governments were actively preparing to use the climate crisis as a pretext for restricting individual freedoms, akin to the measures introduced in response to COVID-19. While the level of discussion had died down by the beginning of 2021, this narrative was now well-established and ready to (re)activate as and when needed by relevant actors.

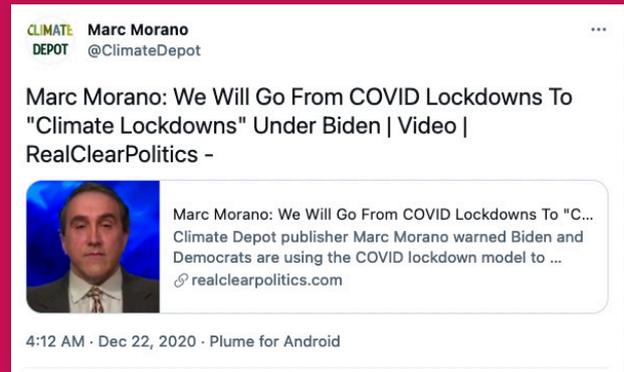


Figure 4: Tweet from Marc Morano pushing the 'climate lockdown' narrative



'Climate Lockdown' in 2021: A Series of Unfortunate Events

February-April – Fuel to the Flames

The volume of discussion remained low online until **26 February, when the World Economic Forum (WEF) deleted and apologised for a tweet** that suggested lockdowns were “quietly improving cities” (Figure 5), despite the post linking to an article discussing earthquake sensors. The impact of their mistake is significant. The Great Reset conspiracy itself arose from a June 2020 WEF initiative of the same name²⁴, which outlined the need to rebuild global economic and social systems sustainably after COVID-19. In particular, the WEF initiative suggested using the pandemic as an impetus to reduce economic disparity and address the climate crisis. Their poorly phrased tweet in February prompted some conservative news outlets, such as *Sky News Australia*, to present 'climate lockdowns' as a genuine threat connected to this conspiracy (Figure 6). Meanwhile, for existing proponents, the deleted tweet served only to reinforce their beliefs and provide evidence of a 'cover-up'.



Figure 5 (left): Correction tweet from the World Economic Forum on 27 Feb 2021

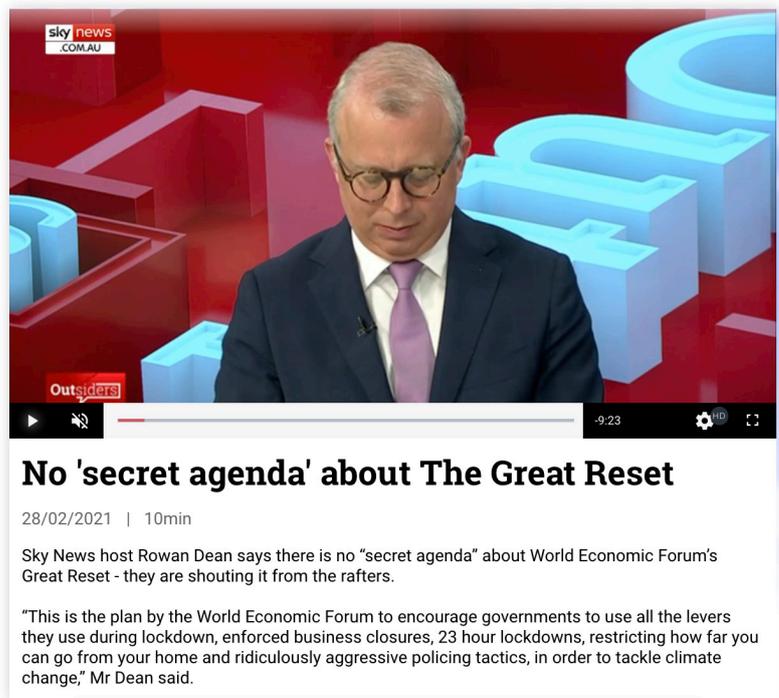


Figure 6 (right): Conspiratorial coverage about the WEF on Sky News Australia, 28 Feb 2021

On 3 March, *The Guardian* then posted a misleading headline that implied there would need to be global lockdowns “every two years” to meet the Paris climate goals. Following backlash on Twitter for this alarmist language, the paper revised the headline to a neutral alternative (Figure 7). However, this revision led to - what was at the time - the largest spike in 'climate lockdown' content since the narrative emerged.

In reviewing the top 150 most retweeted posts on Twitter citing 'climate lockdown' between September 2020 and April 2021, analysts found **29% mentioned The Great Reset or WEF** and **just under half (44%) contained some reference to an 'elite plot'**. In turn, **28% of posts specifically mentioned The Guardian article**. To then determine what sort of content was gaining the most traction online, analysts also looked at **the most shared 'climate lockdown'-related URLs** in content discussing 'climate lockdown' across Facebook and Twitter. **The Guardian article was the second most shared URL in the dataset**, and five of the top ten URLs **directly referencing it in the headline, article or video therein**. Examples include:

- An article in the far-right libertarian blog **Zero Hedge** titled, 'Guardian Promotes "Global Lockdown" Every Two Years To Combat Climate Change'²⁵;
- A post on the climate denialist site **Climatism.Blog** headlined 'SURPRISE, SURPRISE! Global Lockdown Every Two Years Needed To Meet Paris CO₂ Goals'²⁶; and
- A YouTube video - 'Coming Soon: Climate Lockdowns'²⁷ - by far-right polemicist and former InfoWars Editor **Paul Joseph Watson**. This video was the most widely shared URL on Facebook and Twitter and currently has over 80k views, despite Watson himself being deplatformed on Facebook and Instagram as of 2019.

Despite only being published in March 2021 (i.e. at the end of the data collection period), this shows the extent to which Guardian article drove conversation and conspiracy online.

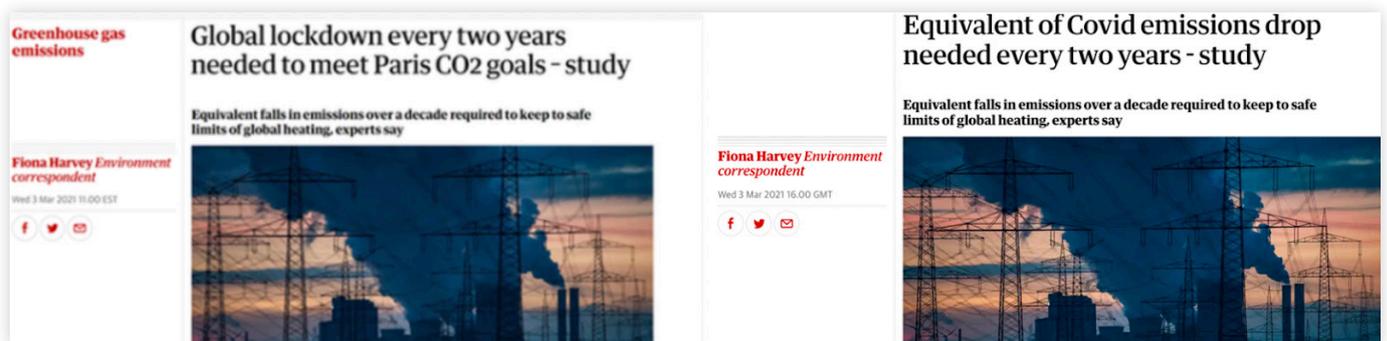
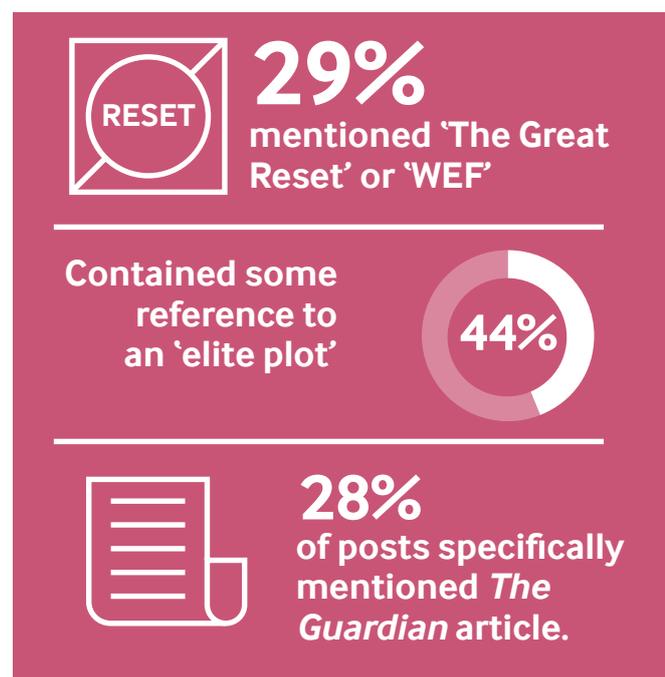


Figure 7: Original headline in The Guardian on 3 March 2021 (left), and the revised headline a few hours later (right).

The re-emergence of 'climate lockdown' as a right-wing talking point demonstrates how small missteps in reporting can have long-term impacts.

Misleading headlines or those easily taken out of context are seized upon by fringe actors and presented as evidence, legitimising their wider claims and identity politics. Moreover, screenshots of original tweets and posts can be shared ad infinitum, even if the text is edited for nuance – once the damage is done, it provides fodder for bad-faith attacks whenever an opportune moment occurs.

Online discussion did not settle following these events, but rather remained constant until mid-April, when **Time Magazine** published a cover story titled "The Pandemic Remade Every Corner of Society. Now It's the Climate's Turn"²⁸. This was interpreted by existing 'climate lockdown' figures, such as Marc Morano and Spectator US journalist Stephen L. Miller, as further proof of an attempt to transition COVID-19 lockdowns into an enduring climate equivalent.



Tweets to this effect from both Morano²⁹ and Miller³⁰ were circulated widely, contributing to the surge in online discussion observed in April. However, of greater bearing on this surge was a post³¹ from the prolific Twitter user and far-right "activist" Amy Mekelberg³², in response to reports of the dire situation faced by India with the second wave of COVID-19³³. Mekelberg suggested that such "international left-wing" media reports were trying to spread COVID-19 hysteria, demonstrating **how 'climate lockdown' had become a bolster for arguments against the perceived liberal establishment in general, rather than in and of itself.**

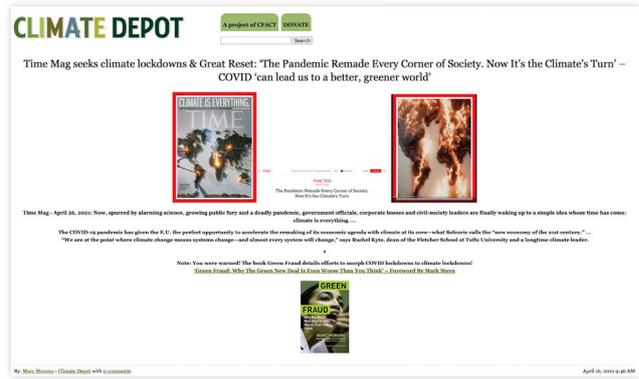


Figure 9: Coverage by denialist site Climate Depot linking TIME article to climate lockdown and Great Reset



Figure 8: Tweet from Spectator US journalist Stephen L. Miller criticising TIME Magazine's reporting

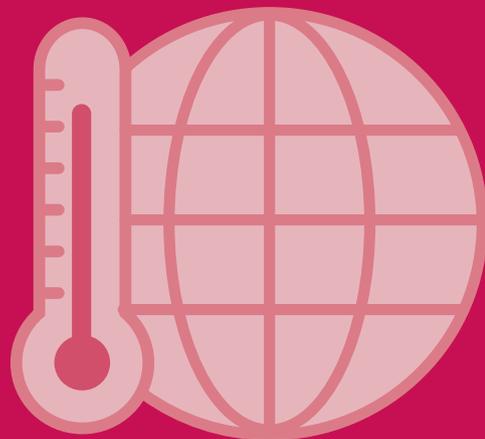


Figure 10: Tweet from far-right pundit Amy Mekelberg linking COVID-19 'hysteria' to climate lockdowns

May-June – Continued Mainstreaming / Engaging a Broad Church

May saw another spike, though smaller in volume than the compound surge from April, when Laura Ingraham appeared on her Fox News programme to push 'climate lockdown' in two consecutive episodes³⁴.

Citing a report³⁵ from the International Energy Association, which made reference to positive behaviour change in the face of COVID-19, Ingraham claimed that the "climate agenda isn't really about saving the planet; it's about controlling the people." These broadcasts generated far more traffic on Twitter than the previous two segments in December.



The Future of 'Climate Lockdown': A Conspiracy Fit for All

In June, the 'climate lockdown' narrative entered a new phase that developed independently of major media and high-profile pundits. Between the 9-12 June, analysts witnessed what was, at the time, **the second highest spike since the term entered online discourse, with nearly three thousand mentions.** This time, the surge reflected the entry of the 'climate lockdown' narrative into QAnon-affiliated groups and spaces online.

The key piece of media driving this spike appeared to be a TikTok video³⁶, among the first of eight, produced by a Christian conspiracy theorist, writer and podcaster called **Terry Wolfe**. In the video, published on 7 June 2021, Wolfe discusses Mazzucato's article from October 2020, before linking it in subsequent outputs to a wider conspiracy theory involving Pope Francis, the Great Reset, "population reduction", Satanism and the Book of Revelations.

Earlier 'climate lockdown' content, such as Laura Ingraham's Fox broadcasts or Paul Joseph Watson's YouTube videos, had been shared in the "Q Research" board of 8kun, the successor to 8chan and epicentre of the QAnon movement. However, this was the first video to be reflected in a major spike of QAnon believers on Twitter.

Wolfe's video started circulating widely on Twitter on 9 June 2021. The next day, it was posted to the 8kun Q research board³⁷ and Twitter traffic jumped significantly – **the tweet reaching the largest audience was from a since-deleted die-hard QAnon account.**

Many of the accounts sharing the narrative since show signs of engagement with QAnon beliefs, such as mentions of the "Great Awakening"³⁸ or discussions of "patriots" working to counteract "traitor" government officials in the United States.

Of the top 20 accounts most frequently sharing climate lockdown posts between 8 and 14 of June, four have since been deleted or suspended, and three have removed all of their posts. However, it is less easy to quantify the scale of the Q constituency here as many followers have adapted their language to avoid deplatforming or content moderation on social media.

The message has also been boosted by several minor celebrities, including 90s UK pop group Right Said Fred³⁹, who highlighted the Mazzucato piece, and TV psychotherapist Emma Kenny⁴⁰.

The entry of 'climate lockdown' into QAnon discourse, which has attracted a broad following, could provide an audience far beyond traditional climate sceptics, deniers or delayers – according to a recent poll, over 15% of US respondents self-report belief in one or more of the stances espoused by the movement⁴¹.

Simultaneously, the narrative was being given further weight by Fox News, with Tucker Carlson again interviewing Marc Morano on the 23 June. This time, Fox News packaged the segment in a YouTube video titled, "Tucker: Brace yourselves, climate lockdowns are coming"⁴². This video and Laura Ingraham's May segment⁴³ have been viewed a combined total of 4.6 million times on YouTube alone, alongside the audience tuning in live or viewing posts across other platforms. Subsequently, while the impact on social media has been less dramatic than previous spikes, their reach is possibly far greater.

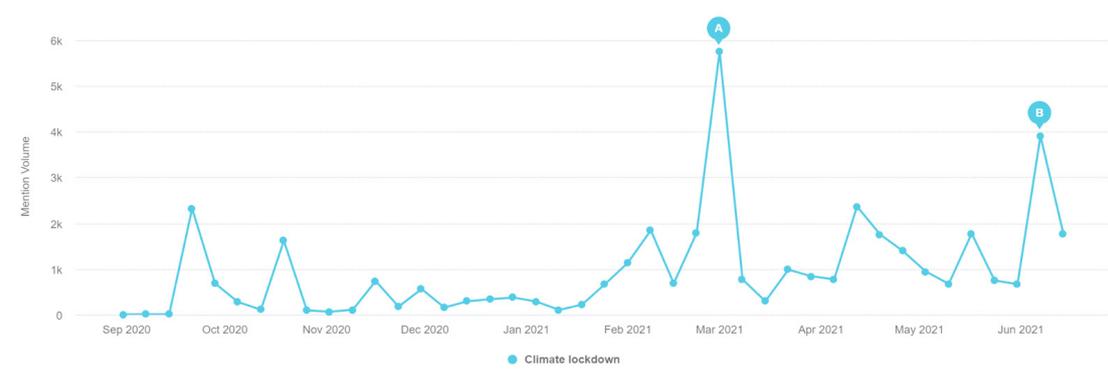


Figure 11: Graph of Twitter mentions over time - spike marked A represents backlash to The Guardian's March headline; B denotes the recent spike involving QAnon followers.

August 2021

As this report was being finalised in late August, analysts observed the highest ever volume of mentions for 'climate lockdown' on Twitter. This was caused by two factors: firstly, the entry of the narrative into mainstream electoral politics in Canada; secondly, and perhaps more importantly, as a result of media outlets trying to expose the conspiracy theory as dangerous and in turn granting it a far wider audience than ever before.

At the beginning of the month, Canadian Conservative Party MP Cheryl Gallant's campaign office released⁴⁴ a leaflet claiming that the incumbent Liberal government would "legislate rolling lockdowns in response to an ill-defined climate emergency" and urged voters to "make the coming election a referendum on more lockdowns." The leaflet also included a post-in poll, asking readers whether they supported a "climate lockdown."

CHERYL GALLANT
MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT
RENFREW-NIPISSING-PEMBROKE

NO MORE LOCKDOWNS

CLIMATE EMERGENCY

Does an undefined "climate emergency", which changes meaning depending who you are talking to, on what day, justify destroying Canada as we know it? Is that how the grand social experiment, referred to as "The Great Reset", "Build-Back Better", or whatever other slick catchphrase dreamed up by the elites to manipulate public opinion will be implemented?

Remember all the mistakes Trudeau made in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic and the billions squandered⁵. The lives are gone⁶. Taxpayers' dollars continue to disappear.

Make the coming election a referendum on more lockdowns.

Before Canadians agree to a "climate emergency" lockdown, they need to ask a series of questions.

What will my home and community look like if and when the liberals legislate rolling lockdowns in response to an ill-defined climate emergency once the COVID pandemic is finally brought under control?

How will I make a decent living for me or for my

nowhere to go. Will you be satisfied with a headset and a screen for entertainment between power failures?⁸

Who decides who wins, who loses? Will you be satisfied with decisions made in a Liberal political backroom in Ottawa without meaningful public debate, where you, as a citizen of Canada, are not allowed to participate.

Trudeau and his administration are appeasing the hardcore green left and their environmental industrial complex base.

*"Energy independence, national security, billions in revenue, and thousands of high-paying jobs will be sacrificed to the mythical gods of climate change."*⁹

What has been lacking in the "existential debate" about climate change in Ottawa has been a note of sanity.

Canadians should not be asked to choose between ensuring a livable planet for our children and putting food on the table on one hand, and the future envisioned by George Orwell in his visionary novel "1984", which warns against a world governed by propaganda, surveillance, and censorship.

When Trudeau and his Liberal Party do call the next election, get involved. Ask questions. Be skeptical. Use your own common sense. Canada is at a crossroads.

No More Lockdowns.

(Please Print)

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

Postal Code _____

Email _____

Phone _____

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DO YOU SUPPORT A CLIMATE LOCKDOWN?

YES

NO

Figure 12: Pages 1 and 3 of Gallant's campaign leaflet.⁴⁷

Gallant, who has a history of adopting fringe, right-wing conspiracy theories, had already publicly embraced the climate lockdown narrative as early as June, when she shared a (since deleted) video about the subject on Facebook. However, it was not until the 29 August that she received significant criticism for her promotion of the conspiracy theory – this occurred after Conservative Party leader Erin O'Toole was questioned twice, both at a campaign event and during a radio interview, on whether he agreed with Gallant's claims. On both occasions, O'Toole declined⁴⁵ to answer the question.

It took only hours for the Conservative Party leadership to change tack and demand Gallant take down her videos, but the press coverage around O'Toole's initial hesitancy produced the greatest weekly volume of tweets mentioning 'climate lockdown' since the phrase first appeared in early 2020.



Figure 13: Graph of Twitter mentions over time - spike marked A represents surge in discussion following media questioning of Canadian Conservative Party leader O'Toole.

The effect of the coverage is even more striking when a filter is applied to include only tweets from accounts that self-identify as located in Canada:



Figure 14: Graph of Twitter mentions from accounts self-identifying as located in Canada over time - spike marked A represents surge in discussion following media questioning of Canadian Conservative Party leader O'Toole.

It is noteworthy that far-right Canadian news outlet Rebel News seized upon this and amplified the conspiracy theory online, with one of their posts⁴⁶ receiving more retweets than any other mention of the phrase that week.

This further underscores the importance of media sensitivity when reporting on conspiracy theories, and the fact that efforts to expose mis- or disinformation can backfire dramatically by broadcasting such concepts to a wider audience.

What Next: Lessons for Climate Change Communications

The case of 'climate lockdown' - once an innocuous phrase, then an anti-climate argument, now part of extreme conspiracy theories and culture war polemics - presents an almost top-down approach to narrative building. In other words, the narrative was borne out of commentary from liberal, mainstream media sources and trickled down into fringe communities: Marketwatch's republishing of Mazzucato's original article caused it to gain traction with 'alt-media' accounts on Twitter and Facebook, before YouTube influencers began to create content of their own; the WEF deleting their tweet led to screenshots being shared across platforms by climate opposition accounts; and for those promoting the 'climate lockdown' narrative, The Guardian editing the title of their article served as proof of its legitimacy.

Continuous efforts by climate denialists to push the idea of a 'climate lockdown' failed to gain any traction preceding these incidents. Their commentary was only sought by major outlets such as Fox News once the discourse had broken into the mainstream. This presents a stark contrast to the bottom-up nature of conspiracies like QAnon, for example, where ideas emerged from an anonymous message board on a fringe platform (8chan) before proliferating into the mainstream and being promoted by higher-reach influencers.

The unusual materialisation and development of 'climate lockdown' is a case study in how any message can be seized upon by reactionary media and adapted to serve an existing political framework. This is evident over the last nine months, during which the concept has moved from being a positive comparison with public health efforts to an elite conspiracy to maintain power. The narrative has been repackaged to fit with an existing right-wing and often conspiracist worldview, and is now firmly embedded in the mainstream American right. The comments broadcast on Fox News in December last year, that President Biden would "bypass democracy" in order to impose climate lockdowns, are a perfect example of adapting new information to a preset agenda.

Furthermore, the movement has transitioned from the mainstream to the fringes, picking up an eclectic and alarming new audience in the process. As 'climate lockdown' developed, it moved from liberal newspapers and multilateral bodies through to mainstream (albeit incendiary)

right-wing outlets, and then via key influencers to the extreme far-right. **The most extreme fringe is exemplified by the QAnon community or outlets such as Red Ice, an online media entity run by Swedish neo-Nazi Henrik Palmgren, who has been pushing a version of the climate lockdown narrative since February.**

It is therefore critical for those engaged in communicating, not only about climate, but also public health and politics at large, to be cognisant of this narrative framework and the way such phrases are weaponised. The climate sector and campaigners may want to avoid feeding this engine by employing overdramatic, portentous or ominous language for the sake of arresting headlines. Names such as "the Great Reset" or the TIME cover story are ripe for such exploitation. On platforms such as Twitter, where users can create instant content and reactions, this sort of language is quickly picked up and can be reused or repurposed on the back of any new wedge issue and high-profile event.

Writers, editors and PR professionals must anticipate the tactics of this reactionary media system. Future outputs discussing the aftermath of COVID-19 restrictions (whether positive or negative) will need to tread carefully, and be aware that actors are trawling for any evidence to boost the 'climate lockdown' outrage. **As populations recover from the trauma of the pandemic, there is greater fear and grievance to capitalise upon, and a broader constituency who could be turned against climate action.**

Annex 1: Methodology

Data collection

Between **1 January 2020** and **30 April 2021**, data was collected from Twitter and Facebook through Brandwatch and Crowdtangle respectively, using the Boolean query:

'climate lockdown' OR "climate lockdowns" OR "climatelockdown" OR "#climatelockdown" OR "#climatelockdowns" OR "mazzucato lockdown" OR "Lockdowns needed every two years to save the planet" OR "Equivalent of Covid emissions drop needed every two years" OR "In the near future, the world may need to resort to lockdowns again - this time to tackle a climate emergency" OR "lockdown every two years" OR "global warming lockdown" OR "climate shutdowns"

This surfaced **29,207 posts on Twitter** and **1,838 posts from public Facebook pages and groups** that had been **interacted with 170,721 times**.

Thematic classification

To understand what sort of messaging around 'climate lockdown' was gaining the most traction on Twitter overall, we analysed the **top 150 most retweeted posts in the dataset** - this covered a large proportion of the total number of engagements with all posts mentioning 'climate lockdown'. Analysts manually coded each post according to the broad themes it raised. The categories were not pre-selected but rather derived from the content itself.

YouTube

Analysts conducted a manual search from a new YouTube account using the keywords 'climate lockdown' OR "climate lockdowns" OR "climatelockdown", generating a list of **55 videos** that contained the keywords either in their video title or video description.

Data collection and analysis was enabled by Method 52, a bespoke system for gathering, dissecting and visualising online discussions at scale, developed by CASM Technology and ISD.

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