

DENY, DECEIVE, DELAY

DOCUMENTING AND RESPONDING TO CLIMATE
DISINFORMATION AT COP26 AND BEYOND



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

ISD | Powering solutions
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and disinformation

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PURPOSE

Reset.
AUSTRALIA

STOP
funding
HEAT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

In February 2022, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) took an unprecedented step, [citing mis- and disinformation and the “politicization of science” as key barriers to action](#). For the first time, a document [accepted by all Member Governments](#) stated that rhetoric from “vested economic and political interests... undermines climate science” and in turn has driven “public misperception of climate risks and polarised public support for climate actions”. The diagnosis was explicit, and built on a growing body of evidence produced across the environmental and research sectors in recent years: to solve the climate crisis, we must also tackle the information crisis.

Drawing on research compiled over the past 18 months, and especially in the margins and aftermath of COP26, we have clear evidence of the challenge at hand: the failure to stem mis- and disinformation online has allowed junk science, climate delayism and attacks on climate figures to become mainstreamed. Our analysis has shown how a small but dedicated community of actors boast disproportionate reach and engagement across social media, reaching millions of people worldwide and bolstered by legacy print, broadcast and radio outlets. Far from helping to mitigate this issue, tech platform systems appear to be amplifying or exacerbating the spread of such content. Moreover, the taxonomy of harm relating to climate mis- and disinformation has been poorly defined to date, providing an inadequate basis for response.

This report - ‘Deny, Deceive, Delay: Documenting and Responding to Climate Disinformation at COP26 and Beyond’ - is a collective effort to quantify the problem and establish concrete responses for the months and years ahead. Produced by [ISD](#), [CASM Technology](#) and the [Climate Action Against Disinformation](#) alliance (CAAD), it is a data-driven examination of the landscape, actors, systems and approaches that are combining to prevent action on climate.

The coalition urges governments and multilateral bodies to:

- 1) Implement a unified definition of climate mis- and disinformation within key institutions (e.g. UNFCCC, IPCC, COP Presidency)**
- 2) Limit media exemption loopholes within legislation (e.g. the EU Digital Services Act, UK Online Safety Bill and other proposals)**

The coalition urges regulators and tech companies to :

- 3) Reflect the definition of climate mis- and disinformation in tech company Community Standards and/or Terms of Service.**
- 4) Enforce platform policies against repeat offender accounts.**
- 5) Improve transparency and data access for vetted researchers and regulators on climate misinformation trends, as well as the role played by algorithmic amplification.**

- 6) **Restrict paid advertising and sponsored content from fossil fuel companies, known front groups, and/or other actors repeatedly found to spread disinformation that contravenes the definition in Policy Ask 1.**
- 7) **Ensure better platform labeling on ‘missing context’ and the re-posting of old or recycled content.**
- 8) **Enable API image-based searches to support research on viral disinformation.**

Disinformation and influence campaigns operate across the online ecosystem, and issues are rarely exclusive to one product or service. As such, many of the recommendations above would be better served through more coordinated, cross-platform analysis and action. Industry bodies have been established to address other harms, including [violent extremist and terrorist content](#) and [child sexual exploitation](#) online - no parallel entity exists for disinformation, whether around climate or other key policy issues such as electoral integrity, public and reproductive health, targeted harassment or migration. ISD has long-advocated for a cross-platform initiative of this nature, within which climate would be an important (but by no means exclusive) threat vector.

Why does climate mis- and disinformation matter?

Many large-scale polls - including [a 2021 study](#) by UNDP and the University of Oxford that surveyed 1.2 million people in 50 countries - show there is now a strong public mandate to address the climate crisis. Outright climate denial still exists in many corners of social and legacy media, but it has largely been confined to the margins of public debate.

In its place, however, narratives have emerged discrediting any proposal for mitigation, adaptation and transition - arguments sometimes referred to as ‘[discourses of delay](#)’ (see Fig. 1). Even with broad consensus on the reality of climate change, there is a long road ahead and a shrinking window of opportunity to achieve policy change, in line with IPCC warnings and the [goals of the Paris Agreement](#). This makes attempts to delay action through mis- and disinformation potentially as damaging as earlier claims which denied the very existence of climate change.

By focussing efforts in that gap - between recognition, buy-in and policy - those who oppose climate action can prevent progress without resorting to the more taboo, denialist narratives of the nineties and early noughties. These are tactics well-developed by historically polluting industries and net exporters of fossil fuels, as well as those financially benefiting from the status quo: to advocate for inertia or [inactivism](#) using arguments framed as “pro-green” and applying the veneer of fiscal pragmatism, free market logic or concerns about individual liberty to their positions. The result is that environmentalism has gradually become enmeshed in broader identity and grievance politics and emerged as a vital [new front in the culture wars](#).

Whether through conspiracies like ‘[climate lockdown](#)’, or by conflating climate with divisive issues like critical race theory, LGBTQ+ rights and abortion access, the goal of much climate change disinformation is now to distract and delay. Given that the window to act is “[brief and rapidly closing](#)”, this approach could have devastating consequences.

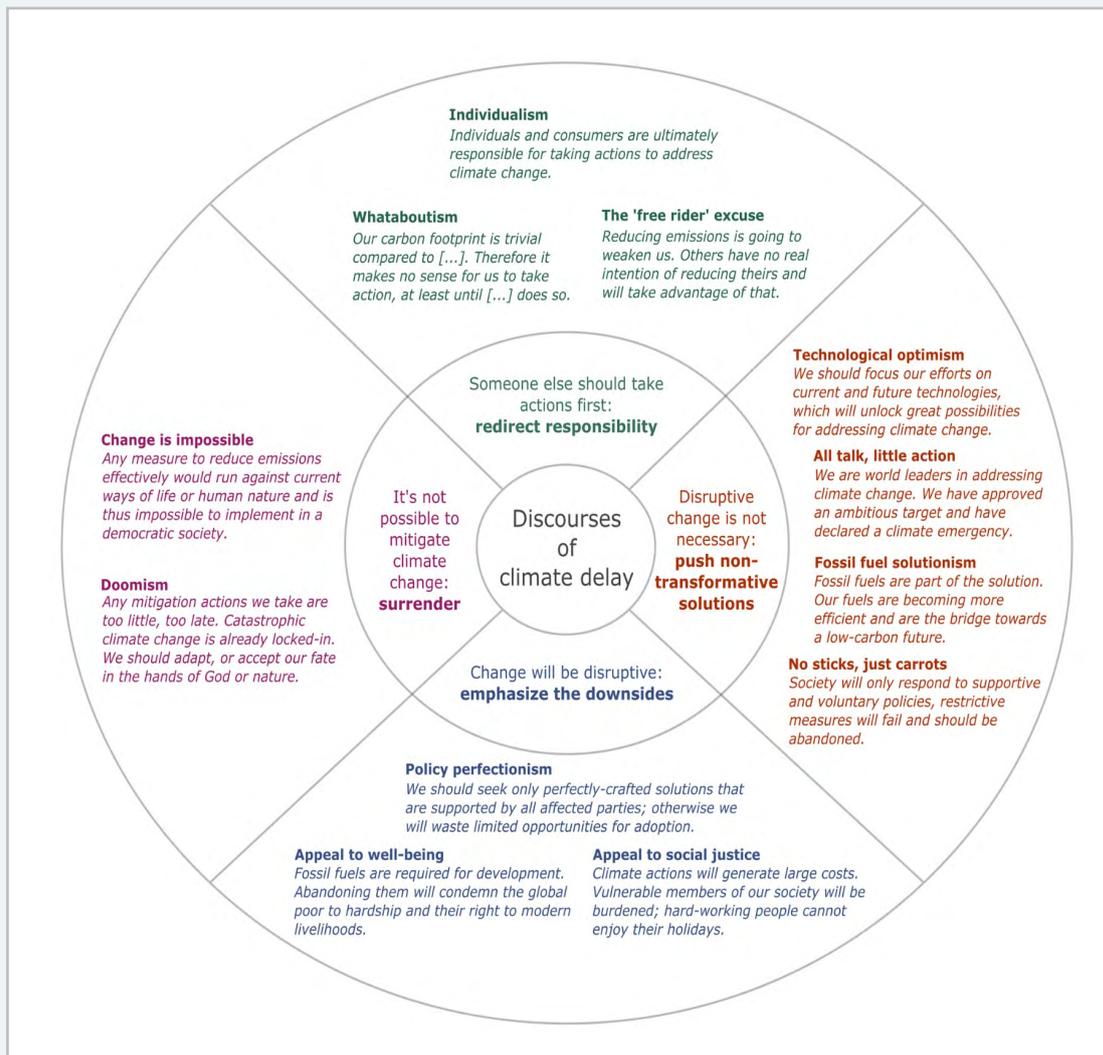


Fig.1 Taxonomy for ‘Discourses of Delay’ from Lamb, W., Mattioli, G., Levi, S., Roberts, J., Capstick, S., Creutzig, F., . . . Steinberger, J. (2020). Discourses of climate delay. *Global Sustainability*, 3, E17. <https://doi.org/10.1017/sus.2020.13>

What do we know about climate opposition online?

The Social Media Ecosystem

- Climate mis- and disinformation on social media appears to outperform verified content, even when the latter is promoted by platforms themselves.

From 31 October - 12 November 2021, [ISD tracked posts](#) produced by Facebook's official [Climate Science Center](#) and attempted to benchmark these against accounts with a track record of climate scepticism, such as Breitbart London, Spiked Online, Net Zero Watch, GB News and the Heartland Institute. Not only did the latter group outmatch the Climate Science Center in volume and frequency of posts (449 versus 188 that matched climate-related keywords), but they continually gained more traction and engagement on such content (average of ~92,000 interactions versus ~7,500).

- By far the most prominent anti-climate content stemmed from a handful of influential pundits, many with verified accounts on social media. COVID-19 and climate sceptic accounts also overlapped both structurally and in the content they share.

Network analysis by [Graphika](#) of 16 accounts 'super-spreading' climate misinformation on Twitter revealed 13 sub-groups, largely converging around anti-science and conspiracy communities in key countries (US, UK, Canada). Many influencers in this space commonly come from scientific or academic backgrounds and some were previously involved in the green movement. This allows them to present as 'rationalist' environmentalists and claim greater credibility for their analysis, while continually spreading the Discourses of Delay and other mis- or disinformation described below. It also gives them significant appeal online and the potential to galvanise far broader audiences, since they are frequently invited by conservative media outlets as 'climate experts.'

- Other key influencers fit into a broadly contrarian set, sometimes branded as the '[Intellectual Dark Web](#).' While their focus is on social wedge issues, climate change also plays a role in broader 'anti-woke' messaging.

For example, Michael Shellenberger tweeted a graphic entitled "[Woke Religion: A Taxonomy](#)" on November 11 2021, as COP26 negotiations were reaching their climax. The taxonomy was co-authored with academic Peter Boghossian and positions climate change alongside other contentious issues such as racism, gender identity, crime and mental illness. Among other '[easily debunked myths and supernatural beliefs](#)', the taxonomy cites claims such as "The Earth's climate was safer in the past", "We can power the world with renewables" and "Prosperity doesn't depend on high energy use". Notably, Jordan B. Peterson was also the fourth most followed account in the overall network; this further emphasises the role that such personalities play in amplifying and sustaining a climate sceptic community, even when the issue is tangential to their overall platform or 'brand'.

- **A small group of repeat offenders can have a disproportionate effect on seeding and pushing adversarial content.**

From 25 October to 21 November 2021, tweets and quote tweets from the 16 accounts referenced above amassed a total 507,000 likes and retweets (“interactions”) on climate narratives alone¹. This includes individuals such as Michael Shellenberger, John Stossel, Bjorn Lomborg and Patrick Moore, whose stances on and engagement with climate as an issue are profiled in this report. By comparison, engagement with content from these 16 accounts far exceeded the combined total from 148 other known sceptic and denial accounts on Twitter².

- **Repeat offenders have often spread mis- or disinformation on multiple topics.**

This is clearly observed in the number of high-traction accounts sharing misleading claims on both climate and COVID-19, but encompasses a wider range of issues - from anti-vaxx sentiment and genocide denial to conspiracies such as QAnon, The Great Reset and electoral fraud. This should provide even greater incentives for platforms to act, since an effective response against such accounts could have a ‘force multiplier’ effect and mitigate harm in multiple areas.

- **Accounts are repeatedly fact-checked without any meaningful response from platforms.**

Many of the largest tech companies tout their partnership with ‘independent, third-party’ fact-checkers, certified via bodies like the [International Fact Checking Network](#) (IFCN), to identify, review and take action on questionable content. Our analysts found some instances where fact-checking labels had been applied, or where users were directed to more reliable content hubs and sources. However, beyond this lowest-tier measure, we found little evidence of any enforcement against known disinformers, even during critical moments like a global climate summit or extreme weather event.

- **Media outlets are key to the mis- and disinformation ecosystem for climate change online.**

Coverage across radio, print and broadcast media continues to amplify and legitimise climate-sceptic views, and in turn provide ostensibly ‘credible’ reference points for pundits and high-traction accounts on social media. Among the network described above, outlets such as The Daily Mail, The Telegraph, The Wall Street Journal and Sky News Australia served as key content hubs.

¹ Messages that triggered narrative filters for climate- or COP26-related keywords - other unrelated messages were excluded.

² The 148 accounts referred to here are a seed list of climate-adversarial-only accounts measured in a specific dashboard during COP26. These accounts received 330,000 interactions over the same period.

- **Misleading content often lacks platform labelling, alerts or any form of added context.**

[Media Matters](#) reviewed 140 Facebook pages that consistently post climate or energy-related misinformation, and identified 100 posts with the most interactions (likes, comments, shares) shared between 1 September 2021 and 1 April 2022. This content earned 5.2 million interactions, with only two posts labelled by Facebook for missing context; despite the company's [claims that it reduces the distribution of posts containing misinformation](#). The top-ranked post came from the page of Christian evangelist Franklin Graham, earning 300,000 interactions overall. It claimed that God controls the climate and is the sole factor in related events or crises, citing biblical stories such as Noah's Ark and the famine which Joseph predicts in Egypt.

- **Viral disinformation often spreads via image-based content, whether videos, memes or decontextualised still photos.**

The passage of such content across social media remains difficult to track, largely due to limits in API access, but has dominated events such as the [Texas Blackouts in March 2021](#). ISD analysts found that a viral image used to discredit wind energy in fact dated back to a Swedish article from 2015 and had been 'meme-ified' by anti-climate actors for years as and when it proved useful. The specific tweet which ignited a frenzy around Texas garnered more than [30k retweets and 90k likes](#) in just a few days before the author (a Texan oil and gas consultant) made his account private to avoid backlash.

Equally, an image dating back to America's Aviation website from 2017 was used to spread the false claim that private jets were queuing up in Glasgow for the COP26 summit. Our analysts found that the meme was first published by a [Libertarian page](#) on Instagram and Facebook and then re-uploaded more than 360 times (342 Facebook; 19 Instagram) by other like-minded groups and pages.³ In total, posts with this single meme were interacted with more than 220,000 times (185,081 Facebook, 40,719 Instagram). The same idea was then repurposed in cartoon or even more hyperbolic forms (as shown in examples [1](#), [2](#) and [3](#)) to bolster the 'Hypocrisy and Elitism' lines of attack detailed below.

- **Paid advertising, including from fossil fuel companies and their front groups, continues to increase the reach of greenwashing and other delayer narratives.**

Influence campaigning encompasses both typical 'greenwashing' ([as defined by Client Earth](#)) and more nuanced 'woke-washing' (using marketing to project a stance on popular social issues, while maintaining corporate practices directly counter to that stance). Both present a barrier to public understanding of climate policy and to achieving the Paris Agreement goals, although many may seem innocuous to the casual or less informed reader.

Analysis by [Eco-Bot.Net](#) found that just 16 [Carbon Majors](#) ran 1,705 sponsored ads containing climate or energy mis- and disinformation on Facebook from January - September 2021; the content received over 150 million impressions, primarily in the US, and generated up to \$4.8 million in net revenues for parent company Meta.

³ Our research covers public groups, pages and verified profiles only.

Discourses of Delay

Analysis of social media activity over the past 18 months, and especially during COP26, confirms the growing [trend in disinformation away from outright climate denial towards a broader ‘culture wars’ frame](#). The urgency of proposed mitigation and adaptation strategies is continually downplayed or condemned as unfeasible, overly expensive or disruptive. Four such ‘Discourses of Delay’ were particularly prominent around the summit, and repeatedly gained high traction or exposure across social media platforms:

- 1) **‘Elitism/Hypocrisy’, the narrative generating the most activity around COP26, centred on themes of wealth, power and legitimacy.** Content in this category highlighted alleged double standards for delegates and, in some cases, referenced wider conspiracies around globalism or the [‘New World Order’](#). Hypocrisy was argued on two key fronts: first, the climate impact of the event itself (e.g. through use of air travel), and the perceived pivot on public health measures (e.g. ‘the pandemic has conveniently disappeared now they want to discuss climate change’). These arguments tended to conclude that COP26 as a process was corrupt, irrelevant and/or had no public mandate, and as such the negotiated outcomes should be discounted. In many instances, a similar line of reasoning was applied to environmental agendas writ large.

In total, ISD identified 199,676 mentions of this narrative on Twitter (tweets and retweets) and 4,377 posts on Facebook, which were shared 101,749 times between 10 October and 19 November 2021. Volume and engagement were largely spurred by the arrival of delegates in Glasgow, in particular celebrities, world leaders and other prominent public figures. Such content declined once negotiations began in earnest, but for some outlets had already set the tone of their coverage and remained a consistent theme.

- 2) **‘Absolutionism’, the second major narrative identified, seeks to absolve a given country from taking any climate action by highlighting the perceived failings of another state or multilateral group.** In countries broadly categorised as ‘Western’, this line of argument tends to focus on China and, to a lesser extent, India for making insufficient progress or having weak onward targets. Russia and Saudi Arabia are also cited, albeit less frequently. Posts generally create a false ‘either/or’ paradigm which suggests climate action is dependent on just a few countries, and that scrutiny on progress is biased toward ‘the West’.

This narrative, which has been the subject of [previous ISD research](#), is pivotal to rhetoric of delay and deployed most often in the political sphere. It generally dismisses domestic policy-making on principle, claiming such efforts are: i) futile in reducing global carbon emissions (since others pollute more); ii) a form of ‘self-inflicted harm’ that punishes citizens (through loss of livelihoods, rising prices, lifestyle changes etc.); and/or iii) will cede power to geopolitical foes (who benefit from continued fossil fuel use and export). At a time where populism and isolationism appear to be on the rise, villainising states elsewhere can prove highly effective and make ‘green’ agendas harder to land with an electorate back home.

Around COP26 (24 October - 19 November 2021), ISD identified 6,262 Facebook posts and 72,356 tweets falling into this narrative. The main spike occurred in the opening days of the summit, when world leaders outlined their respective agendas and future policy goals. There were also two smaller spikes pre-COP that can be traced to [Congressional hearings on 'Big Oil' in the US](#). High-traction posts praised speeches by Republican Congressmen in which they argue that climate protection measures are an attack on the US fossil fuel industry and the American public, [to the benefit of countries like China](#) (see interventions by [Rep. Ralph Norman](#) (R-SC), [Rep. Clay Higgins](#) (R-LA) [Rep. Pete Sessions](#) (R-TX), [Rep. Jim Jordan](#) (R-OH)).

- 3) **'Unreliable Renewables'** is a narrative which calls into question the viability and effectiveness of renewable energy sources and is commonly used by both climate-sceptic and delayist actors. The [Texas blackouts](#) in February 2021 was an acute example, revealing how [disinformation](#) about power failures (accompanied by images taken from unrelated events) can go viral and become a defining narrative for extreme weather crises.

Considering other key events throughout the year, ISD analysed the relevant keyword set for this narrative over a longer timeframe: from 1 January to 19 November 2021. During this period a total of around 115,830 tweets or retweets were shared, alongside 15,443 posts on Facebook, with a clear spike in February around the Texas Blackouts. Another significant peak occurred in mid-October, just prior to our COP26 monitoring. This was tied to high-profile accounts posting threads that claimed countries have over-invested in renewables and that energy might have to be rationed going forward - for example from [Michael Shellenberger](#) (20.5k likes, 6.6k retweets), [Alex Epstein](#) (600 likes, 300 retweets) and [Dr Jordan B Peterson](#) (20.2k likes, 4,169 retweets), whose three accounts have a collective follower base of over 3m on Twitter alone. Another viral piece of disinformation alleged that diesel generators were powering the COP26 summit in Glasgow, and continued to gain traction even after the UK Presidency issued [an official fact-check](#).

- 4) **'Anti-Electric Vehicles'** showed comparatively less activity overall, but frames the move to electrically powered vehicles (EVs) as part hoax, part elitist plot. Prominent content falsely claimed that EVs were being charged by diesel generators at COP26, frequently connected with the 'Unreliable Renewables' and 'Hypocrisy and Elitism' lines of attack. In both the US and Canada, popular posts accused the governments of inflating petrol prices to force EVs on their citizens, while the Australian government was [attacked](#) for softening its formerly sceptical stance. COP26 also gave new life to older and [already debunked](#) allegations that EVs have an equally bad, if not worse, impact on the environment than petrol-based vehicles. [Net Zero Watch](#), the newly-minted campaign arm of [GWPF](#), and the US-based conservative non-profit [PragerU](#) were prominent amplifiers of this argument.

ISD monitoring identified 1,612 Facebook posts and 22,421 tweets in the period from 10 October to 19 November 2021. Lines of attack against EVs have only grown since COP26, often framed as ‘pro-environmental’ stances. This includes alleged concerns over the production of EV battery packs using rare earth metals like cobalt, or the strain placed on energy grids through vehicle charging. The [Union of Concerned Scientists](#) has explored this issue and its more specious elements, [stating that](#) attacks “shouldn’t be used by the oil industry and their allies as a rallying cry to dismantle EV policy support, or as reason to stop the growth of the EV industry.” In May 2022, Climate Nexus also published [a guide](#) with evidence-based rebuttals to common arguments used to oppose EV adoption at scale.

Looking ahead: a systemic response

Governments, multilateral bodies, tech platforms and the media all have a role to play in tackling climate mis- and disinformation. Some mandates are better led via a state institution or regulator; others require buy-in and transparency from private companies. The policy asks captured below reflect both what is achievable in the near-term, and potentially without state interventions, alongside the more holistic measures needed to achieve change at scale.

Recommendations for Governments and Multilateral Bodies

- 1) **a. Implement a unified definition of climate mis- and disinformation within key institutions** (e.g. UNFCCC, IPCC, COP Presidency); and
- b. Reflect these criteria in tech company Community Standards and/or Terms of Service.**

To date, the response from technology platforms regarding climate mis- and disinformation has been lacklustre at best, and wholly absent at worst (see below). Without a basic foundation of facts, citizens cannot engage meaningfully with their policymakers or advocate for a path forward. This by no means precludes the need or opportunity for debate - as countries review the best approaches for mitigation and adaptation, there are legitimate discussions to be had about the pace, scale and efficacy of changes proposed. However, as with health measures for COVID-19 or efforts around electoral integrity, there must also be a line drawn to safeguard the public.

To shift the dial, we need a working, commonly held definition of climate mis- and disinformation recognised by key scientific and multilateral bodies. This will create a precedent for both private and third sector entities and remove the pressure for tech companies to act as sole 'arbiters of truth' on climate, which is an increasingly contentious issue. Climate Action Against Disinformation (CAAD) has co-developed the following definition as a starting base:

Climate mis- and disinformation refers to deceptive or misleading content that:

1. *Undermines the existence or impacts of climate change, the unequivocal human influence on climate change, and the need for corresponding urgent action according to the IPCC scientific consensus and in line with the goals of the Paris Climate Agreement;*
2. *Misrepresents scientific data, including by omission or cherry-picking, in order to erode trust in climate science, climate-focused institutions, experts, and solutions; or*
3. *Falsely publicises efforts as supportive of climate goals that in fact contribute to climate warming or contravene the scientific consensus on mitigation or adaptation.*

	 Meta		 		
Official acknowledgement of threat posed by climate mis- and disinformation?	YES	NO	YES	YES	NO
Comprehensive definition of climate mis- and disinformation?	NO	NO	YES	YES	NO
Formal inclusion of climate mis- and disinformation in existing policies, Community Guidelines or Terms of Service?	NO	NO	YES	YES	NO
Specific policy on monetisation of climate mis- and disinformation?	NO	NO	YES	YES	NO
Transparent and comprehensive data published on prevalence and nature of climate mis- and disinformation on their platforms?	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO
Transparent and comprehensive data published on enforcement of fact-check and/or content moderation processes for climate disinformation?	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO
Transparent policy for accounts repeated violating policies, Community Guidelines, or Terms of Service for climate disinformation?	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO

2) Limit media exemption loopholes within legislation (e.g. the EU Digital Services Act, UK Online Safety Bill and other proposals)

Policymakers across the globe are developing a new era of tech regulation, deciding how and where governments should intervene to protect their citizens online. With various pieces of proposed or existing legislation in development, including the EU Digital Services Act (DSA), UK Online Safety Bill (OSB), US Digital Services Oversight and Safety Act (DSOSA) and others, a key question is whether tech companies should moderate the content of media outlets active on their products and services. Proposed exemptions would prevent platforms from taking action on content made available by a media provider when it violates their Community Standards.

Arguments in favour of this approach, many coming from media lobbies and publishers, state that freedom of the press is a central tenet of democracy and private companies should not be empowered to monitor 'the fourth estate'. Moreover, many countries already have regulatory bodies that oversee the sector and are responsible for arbitrating cases related to media content - this means any additional requirement to comply with platforms' Terms of Service could prove a form of indirect 'double regulation' and have a chilling effect on free speech. At the same time, there are significant concerns about granting media outlets (or those claiming to be such) with de facto impunity in what they post or share online. The nuance of how to protect media freedom, pluralism and access to reliable information online is central to any legislation going forward. Nonetheless, it should not allow loopholes for the media to misinform the public or cause wider harm without consequence.

While platforms could be prohibited from more punitive actions, such as suspending or deplatforming media accounts, to deny any response mechanism could create an unfair distinction between users. The ability to demonetise and downrank content, as well as apply fact-checking labels, is essential to combatting disinformation at scale - this remains true whether the source is an unknown citizen or a multinational news channel. In cases where an outlet is itself a 'repeat offender', platforms must be authorised to act in line with their Terms of Service or Community Guidelines and minimise the impact of such content. Mainstream outlets appeared frequently in our monitoring as content hubs for the denial and sceptic communities; this suggests that any outright exemption for media would seriously weaken the ability to challenge disinformation at scale.

Recommendations for Regulators and Tech Companies

3) Enforce platform policies against repeat offender accounts.

As in other areas like [public health](#), our research shows that a small group of accounts create the majority of anti-climate content; originate or amplify new lines of attack; and have disproportionate influence on the public debate across social media. Many of these accounts have been [labelled by fact-checkers](#) for sharing false or misleading content, yet remain live even after repeated flags by our coalition directly to the tech platforms' internal teams. Such disinformation is often not limited to climate issues, but runs the gamut of 'culture wars' talking points: from anti-vaxx and COVID-19 scepticism to conspiracies like the [New World Order](#), unsubstantiated claims of 'voter fraud', or Holocaust denial.

If exceptions are being made by platforms to their stated policies, these decisions should be fully transparent. For example, as part of the ['Facebook Files' disclosures](#) by whistleblower Frances Haugen, the platform was discovered to have an ["XCheck" program that resulted in many high-profile accounts being exempted from Community Guidelines](#). This elite tier, which is said to include at least 5.8m users such as celebrities, politicians and journalists, have allegedly been 'white-listed' for years (i.e. shielded from enforcement actions) and/or allowed to post violatory content while remaining on a 'pending review' list for Facebook employees. It is unclear whether the actors detailed in this report have benefitted from such initiatives, informally or otherwise. Many are 'blue tick', verified or high-follower accounts, yet continue to drive a climate disinformation ecosystem with little-to-no repercussions. Rather than fixate on individual posts, accounts which consistently distort, undermine or refute scientific consensus should be addressed in line with Terms of Service, Community Standards and the definition outlined in Policy Ask 1.

4) Improve transparency and data access for vetted researchers and regulators on climate misinformation trends, as well as the role played by algorithmic amplification.

The crisis of mis- and disinformation around climate change is not one of false content alone. Debate over content removal versus freedom of speech is too often binary, and has obscured the role that distribution mechanisms play in amplifying and targeting content beyond its original audience. These mechanisms, be it the micro-targeting of ads or recommendation algorithms, constantly make decisions for users about what they see online. They also play an intrinsic role in the disinformation ecosystem, spreading dangerous content that might otherwise achieve limited reach.

In her [testimony to UK parliament](#), Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen explained that the platform's recommendation system not only "amplifies divisive, polarising, extreme content" but that this kind of content "gets hyper-concentrated in 5% of the population." Allowing little-

understood algorithms to determine which voices are heard, and how information around climate change is distributed, ensures that a small number of sceptics, deniers and vested interests are given disproportionate reach and power. The question we must ask is how and why such content continues to gain traction across social media platforms, when tech companies allege their strong support for climate action.

At present, this question is impossible to answer for the climate sector. Independent researchers are continually working to expose manipulation on social media, both in crisis situations and beyond, but face restrictions on data access - for example, the lack of an official TikTok API, or changes to Meta's [Crowdtangle platform](#) and other tools that have limited functionality. Not only do research entities like ISD lack understanding on the full magnitude of the problem (i.e. how much climate disinformation is known to exist across platforms; how does this differ by language, geography etc.), but also the reach and impact of such content and to what extent platforms are consistently taking action on these issues.

In the absence of formal regulation or government oversight, there are creative routes for increasing researchers' capability in the near-term. Companies have a chance to take the initiative, using their privileged insight into which signals can help detect coordinated disinformation on their platforms. New collaborations should be trialled, whereby they produce 'dummy data' that artificially simulates cases of platform manipulation. By creating invented scenarios, data privacy and competition risks are mitigated, while still improving knowledge-sharing with the independent research sector and enabling large-scale, quantitative data analysis. To this end, in May 2022 a working group run by the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) and the Institute for Data, Democracy & Politics (IDDP) at George Washington University [published an 180+-page guide, outlining how to provide researcher access under Article 40 of the EU's General Data Protection Regulation \(GDPR\)](#).

- 5) Restrict paid advertising and sponsored content from fossil fuel companies, known front groups and/or other actors repeatedly found to spread disinformation that contravenes the definition above (see Policy Ask 1).**

Challenging ad tech business models that enable the production and monetisation of mis- and disinformation is among the most powerful tools at our disposal. Digital advertising has a supply chain which remains complicated and opaque, facilitated by technology which few understand but that vastly increases the opportunity for monetising climate denial and 'discourses of delay'. Sites designed to maximise engagement and capture users' attention are attractive to advertisers, which also creates perverse financial incentives for 'outrage merchants', scammers and malicious actors. Estimates of the scale of this problem vary, but an August 2021 study by Newsguard and Comscore found that [\\$2.6 billion was being spent by big brands advertising on misinformation sites](#). Over time this has created a profit model for hate and misinformation which undermines the efforts of brands with climate targets, who are [inadvertently funding such content](#) through their advertising budgets.

Implementing manifestos from the [Conscious Advertising Network](#) and the [IPA Climate Charter](#) would change the advertising supply chain and help to defund climate mis- and disinformation, as well as ensure that credible climate voices are funded. As with other issue areas, platform approaches should not fixate on individual pieces of content or asking third party fact-checkers to review millions of posts, but rather address behaviours and actors. This means clearer Terms of Service or Community Guidelines on climate mis- and disinformation (see Policy Ask 1); tackling known repeat offenders who build influence via their products (including companies); and revising their underlying systems to prevent the promotion or neglect of such content.

6) Ensure better platform labelling on ‘missing context’ and the re-posting of old or recycled content.

Recirculation of old media is a common tactic in the disinformation playbook, especially articles that boast misleading headlines or unsupported claims. Such content is often misconstrued (or deliberately framed) as current news, forcing scientists and fact-checkers to re-assess claims that have already been debunked. Some mitigating steps have been taken by social media platforms, for example via [fact-checking programs](#) or prompts that ‘increase friction’ (such as [urging users to read content before sharing](#)) – however, the lack of contextual information in link previews remains a significant hurdle.

At present, neither Twitter or Facebook displays contextual information for a given piece of content, meaning users must click through before they can see important elements such as publication date and authorship. These details are easily overlooked, especially when browsing at speed. Conscious of this issue, The Guardian website [began adding bright yellow tags](#) with the date to old stories in 2019. In lieu of action from the tech platforms themselves, media outlets should also adopt banners, labels or other alerts to signpost older content (e.g. articles >6 months) for readers.

Such changes alone will be insufficient, but adding extra context in link previews (generated when users share posts) could help prevent the ‘re-virality’ of content as it resurfaces online. In addition, platforms should increase the prominence of ‘missing context’ labels, as they can often prove inconspicuous and fail to obscure the original post before reading or watching. Notably, this does not solve the issue of users who share content [deliberately](#) and in full knowledge of its deceptive or misleading nature. As such, platforms should amend their enforcement mechanisms so that posts rated “false” are actively downranked or replaced with a link to the relevant fact-checked content. In parallel, it may be feasible to have scaled warning mechanisms whereby a platform applies friction to accounts that repeatedly share links rated “false” (e.g. forwarding limits, alerts before posting).

7) Enable API image-based searches to support research on viral disinformation.

The use of memes and other image-based content lends itself to virality, since these posts can transcend language barriers and engage people via humour or recycled formats. Such content also removes the need to engage substantively with climate policy or related events, instead distilling opposition into pithy one-liners. The immediacy of an image can bypass critical thinking and, as such, prove a highly effective vector to land false ideas in the mainstream.

It is essential that researchers have the means to identify and track image-based trends in real time, not least during periods of heightened crisis where disinformation can be turbo-charged and prove much harder to counter. At present, such functionality is either limited or absent from platform APIs. Quantifying the spread of images remains near-impossible on Twitter, while tools on Facebook and Instagram only enable searches if the image contains specific text. However, since memes generally splinter into different, slightly adapted forms, embedded text is likely to change as the disinformation spreads within and between platforms.

