

Expert Testimony to Special Committee on foreign interference in all democratic processes in the European Union, including disinformation (ING2)

Jennie King, ISD Head of Climate Research and Policy
28 February 2023

Thank you to the Committee for inviting me today and holding this important session. The previous speakers – John Cook and Jon Roozenbeek - have already covered the key narrative shifts in climate mis- and disinformation, so there is only one point I'd like to add on that front:

It should be of great concern to this Committee, and the European Union as a whole, that public understanding of both climate change and climate action are being distorted through the lens of disinformation, conspiracy theories and, in the most extreme cases, targeted abuse. What is now happening to the environmental agenda mirrors the fate of other policy issues in recent years – public health, migration, civil rights and electoral integrity in particular. All these areas require scrutiny and dialogue between citizens and governments; unfortunately, the current information landscape will make it ever-harder to build a mandate based on credible science and in line with the EU's commitments over the coming years.

COVID-19 was a crucible for mis- and disinformation in many areas, in which diverse groups came into collision online and new hybrid conspiracies were forged. In the process, those spaces were infiltrated by everything from vaccine scepticism and climate denial to extreme ideologies grounded in White Supremacy or antisemitism. Since 2020, [ISD has documented](#) how the trauma of that period is being weaponised by those opposed to climate action, who have successfully laundered 'delayist' talking points and a new breed of climate denial firmly into the mainstream. This trend thrives in part due to a historic erosion of trust in institutions, which we are witnessing across Europe and beyond – trust in governments, multilateral bodies, scientists, the media. Such an environment drowns out legitimate questions or even concerns about climate policy with a mass of baseless claims, smear campaigns and misleading propaganda, much of it sponsored by the fossil fuel industry itself.

What ISD's research reveals – and that of our wider coalition Climate Action Against Disinformation – is that climate mis- and disinformation is also a problem fuelled and compounded by weaknesses in digital platforms. There are clear vulnerabilities in the way social media platforms are designed and governed at present which allows such content to rise to the surface, and in many cases to dominate public discussion of climate policy at a time when – [as the IPCC has stressed](#) – there is a 'brief and rapidly closing window' to act. Those flaws are continually exploited, not just by industry and those with vested interests in maintaining the carbon economy, but also by hostile actors who see climate as another axis to spread distrust, drive division, and weaken democratic process.

Three particular areas I would like to highlight today: advertising, monetisation and amplification.

1) Advertising

Writ large, the advertising ecosystem amplifies climate mis- and disinformation in two key ways. First, by creating a business model for 'outrage merchants' online, who continue to generate revenue for misleading and outright false content on their websites and channels via ad tech systems. Second, by increasing the reach of disinformers, who can use advertising products themselves to target consumers, voters and other key constituencies across the internet.

Digital advertising has a supply chain which remains complicated and opaque, enabled by technology which few understand; this vastly increases the opportunity for monetising climate denial and ‘discourses of delay’. Brands who may well be supportive of climate goals are inadvertently funding disinformation through their advertising budgets, via adtech intermediaries like Google, Amazon and Taboola. In parallel, those with the greatest financial resources can pay for exposure to millions of unsuspecting users, even when they are promoting at best misleading, and at worst actively false, claims on climate change and related action. For companies like Meta, YouTube and Twitter to generate profit from ad campaigns that deny climate change is a reality, promote non-viable solutions or target harassment against specific individuals should be unacceptable in any case. But the situation is even more egregious when those same companies continually tout their ‘climate credentials’ and contributions to ESG.

To illustrate: According to just [one piece of research we conducted with the University of Exeter](#) last year, 3,781 ads were live from fossil fuel-linked entities around COP27, who spent roughly USD \$3-4 million on Facebook and Instagram campaigns in just 3 months. The Top 10 pages for ad volume or spend in that period were almost all industry PR and lobbying groups, many masquerading behind names that make them seem grassroots or community-led (for example using language like ‘Energy Citizens’). Some of the most prolific advertisers posted ads with active climate denial - for example claiming that a *“New poll debunks the 97% consensus claim about #climatechange”* or asking *“Has environmentalism become a religion?”* As I highlighted at the start, these campaigns are increasing couched in divisive and misleading rhetoric, drawing links between climate action and a supposed loss of civil liberties, shadowy agendas or economic crisis.

Google, for its part, implemented a policy in 2021 which was explicitly intended to demonetise climate denial across its products and services. But analysis by our partners [Dewey Square Group and Friends of the Earth US reviewed](#) 113 of the top websites spreading climate misinformation – sites that cumulatively receive over 56 million weekly visits, according to available data – and 80% displayed advertising via one or more of the major adtech providers such as Google and Amazon. Those ‘middleman’ companies are not only profiting from climate misinformation, but allowing sites who repeatedly share falsehoods and attacks to turn such activity into a business.

2) Amplification and Monetisation

The crisis of mis- and disinformation around climate change is not an issue of false or greenwashed content alone. Debate over content removal 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 spreading dangerous content that might otherwise have limited reach or visibility.

The largest technology companies claim to be tackling disinformation, climate or otherwise, through policies within their Terms of Service. By engaging third-party fact-checkers, the premise is that posts rated ‘false’ or ‘misleading’ will be labelled, downranked and/or removed, and some punitive action taken against the related account depending on the severity of the content and number of ‘strikes’ already recorded. Such measures should be properly enforced and, above all, prevent repeat offenders acting with impunity on their platforms. Unfortunately, this is not the case, even for the types of disinformation explicitly covered by company policies.

As in other areas like public health, ISD's 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. The highest-traction posts come from, more often than not, verified or 'blue tick' accounts and pages who are afforded additional profile and credibility via that status. In the 4-week period before, during and after COP27, [we found](#) that just a dozen actors posted 388 times on Twitter using common disinformation keywords around climate, and garnered an aggregate of 343,862 shares from this content. The organic audience of these accounts varies from 65k to over 1.9m followers. Nine of the twelve were, and remain, verified accounts.

We know that sensational content fuels the 'outrage economy', and therefore serves the current business model of most platforms, and climate is no exception - whether outright denial or other forms of disinformation, this content is generally high engagement, which increases the value proposition for advertisers on social media. As such, efforts like Facebook's Climate Science Center become somewhat moot - while they have reported an average of 100,000 daily visitors in the past, organic content from known 'super-spreaders' of disinformation gains vastly more reach and visibility.

Indeed in 2021, [a study from our COP26 Intelligence Unit](#) found that a handful of pages known to spread climate misinformation on Facebook outperformed the accounts within its own Climate Science Center by, on average, a factor of 12. Meanwhile, on Twitter that year, just 16 'super-spreader' accounts amassed a total 507,000 likes and retweets on their climate content, outperforming the combined total of 148 other prominent deniers and sceptics on the platform. Even within the misinformation network, real influence is concentrated among the few.

These repeat offenders have often spread mis- or disinformation on multiple topics, from vaccines and electoral fraud to extreme conspiracies such as QAnon, the Great Reset or genocide denial. Many have also been fact-checked multiple times via certified bodies like the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN), yet continually hit view, like and share figures in the millions. This should provide an even greater incentive for us to act, since an effective response against such accounts could have a 'force multiplier' effect and mitigate harm in multiple areas covered by this Committee.

So what are the solutions at our disposal?

- 1) **Adopt a [clear definition of climate mis- and disinformation](#) which can galvanise a response across the EU and beyond.** To shift the dial, we need commonly held parameters for the issue that are backed by key scientific and multilateral bodies. This will remove the pressure on, for example, tech companies to act as sole 'arbiters of truth' on climate, which is an increasingly contentious issue. It by no means precludes the need or opportunity for public debate - as countries review the best approaches for mitigation and adaptation, there are vital discussions to be had about the pace, scale and efficacy of changes proposed. However, as with public health measures or efforts around electoral integrity, there must also be a line drawn somewhere.
- 2) **Press for robust and meaningful transparency reporting on climate mis- and disinformation within the Digital Services Act.** As the DSA begins to implement protocols for risk assessment and audit, climate should be considered as a vector for harm alongside other critical issues that impact public safety and the future wellbeing of societies within the region. Entities like ISD and CAAD are ready to work constructively with platforms to understand these harms at a systemic level – not merely fixate on individual posts – and to create digital environments that foster more meaningful, good-faith debate on climate policy at the local, national and regional level.

- 3) Apply more stringent criteria for how advertising products and services are used both on- and offline.** We have seen progress on the issue of greenwashing through entities like the [UN High Level Expert Group](#), who launched a roadmap in Sharm el-Sheikh last November. However, far greater transparency must be demanded both from social media companies and wider ad tech providers – not only so we can ensure disinformation on climate ceases to be a profitable enterprise, but also so that those with clear agendas and deep pockets cannot monopolise the online space with ads that serve the public falsehoods, cherry-picked data and attacks on science as a whole.

To finish: I think there is a great danger in assuming that issues like climate are a 'settled matter' or that key arguments have been won. We are witnessing historic backsliding of rights and policy in a number of areas internationally, and climate is just as vulnerable. [The report our coalition published in January 2023](#) shows that even the base consensus can be weakened or undermined, and with it any public mandate for action. Among critical improvements needed in public education, media and scientific literacy and community engagement, I would strongly encourage the European Parliament to consider mechanisms at its disposal now – this is not an unfixable issue, but one that requires clear definition and a coordinated response. Thank you again for inviting me today, I look forward to any questions from the Committee.