CLIMATE-RELATED MIS/DISINFORMATION MUST NOT BE ALLOWED TO DISRUPT CLIMATE MITIGATION EFFORTS

Efforts to downplay the effects of climate change and thereby undercut efforts (whether individual voluntary initiatives or broader regulatory initiatives) to mitigate climate change have been a feature of the climate change landscape for decades. The Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has warned of "irreversible" impacts of climate change and has described the window to act to counter the effects of climate change as "brief and rapidly closing." In this context, and mindful of the fraught political landscape we face, it is all the more critical that climate-related mis/disinformation, which the IPCC warns is contributing to policymaker indecision and delay, does not ultimately drive a loss of public and policymaker support for critically important reforms in support of climate mitigation and adaptation.

Regrettably, the online world not only facilitates, but is amplifying, climate scepticism/denial, allowing proponents to conflate climate change with other culture war wedge issues. I explore these issues below.

The IPCC Identifies Contrarian Climate Change Communications

In its February 2022 report, Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability (see my previous briefing note, available here), the IPCC identified climate-related rhetoric and mis/disinformation (citing "contrarian climate change communications") as sowing uncertainty, impeding the recognition of the attendant risks and inhibiting effective responses to climate change. The IPCC report noted specifically that:

> Despite scientific certainty of the anthropogenic influence on climate change, misinformation and politicization of climate change science has created polarization in public and policy domains in North America, particularly in the US, limiting climate action. Vested interests have generated rhetoric and misinformation that undermines climate science and disregards risk and urgency. Resultant public misperception of climate risks and polarized public support for climate actions is delaying urgent adaptation planning and implementation.

ISD Identifies Weaponization of Climate Change

A study (Deny, Deceive, Delay: Documenting and Responding to Climate Disinformation at COP26 and Beyond), just released by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), has found that climate change sceptics/deniers have weaponized climate as one of a number of wedge issues in the culture wars being fought across the internet. The ISD study also found that, as public opinion has shifted significantly in favor of addressing climate change, the rhetoric is changing. Those seeking to undermine action on climate change are shifting away from outright denials about climate change to a more nuanced set of tactics of "denial, distraction and misinformation."

In short, mis/disinformation has morphed into seeking to sow doubt about climate change – doubt about science, doubt about whether climate change is real, doubt about whether to trust climate scientists, doubt about the urgency of mitigating the effects of climate change and doubt about the need for societal and individual efforts to counter climate change. Afterall,

this is a subject replete with complexities – for the longest time, the sources and effects of climate change were largely invisible and the subject only of warnings from academics and technical experts, the concepts and measures of climate change were, and still are, highly complex (*see, e.g.,* my previous briefing note, available here), the impacts of climate change have tended to be viewed as distant in time and the magnitude of the threats faced by the planet overall is hard to fully comprehend. Low levels of awareness and engagement among the public and a mainstream media that tended to seek out balanced narratives have compounded the doubt. (*See, e.g.,* Susanne C. Moser on Communicating climate change).

These evolving narratives are capitalizing on the significant regulatory challenges needed to meet the Paris Agreement goals (in effect, a gap between recognition of the threats, acceptance of the appropriate solutions and concerted action) and are seeking to discredit any proposals for mitigation, adaptation and transition (what some refer to as discourses of climate delay). As the window to act effectively is rapidly closing, conflating climate with other wedge issues and weaponizing mis/disinformation to distract and delay, or even reject, mitigation strategies could prove fatal.

The authors of Discourses of Climate Delay identify a four-pronged taxonomy deployed by climate sceptics/deniers. Rather than continue to deny the existence of climate change, the focus has shifted to the following:

- mitigating climate change is impossible (due to seemingly insurmountable political, social or biophysical challenges) or will be too little, too late (surrender);
- change will be too disruptive (emphasizing the downsides; the costs of acting outweigh the costs of inaction – targeting appeals to social justice, for example, to more marginalized communities and developing countries, and highlighting just transition concerns);
- someone else should take action first (redirecting responsibility, through, for example, "whataboutism" or "free rider" excuses); and
- disruptive/transformative change is not necessary (promoting, for example, ineffective alternative technological or other solutions or establishing narrow definitions of success).

Discourses of Climate Delay

ISD, working with various other coalition partners as part of the Climate Action Against Disinformation (CAAD) effort organized around COP26, identified four discourses of delay across social media:

- *Hypocrisy and elitism* – these narratives portrayed COP26 as elitist, highlighting double standards proffered by delegates and in some cases referencing broader conspiracy theories around globalism. In short, COP26 was characterized as corrupt, irrelevant and/or without a public mandate.

- *Absolutism* – these narratives sought to absolve a given country from taking action on climate change by highlighting the perceived failings of others, thereby undermining the Paris Agreement principle that, as climate change is a global threat, every country must pledge and implement nationally-determined contributions and the general consensus of climate scientists that solutions must be global.

- *Unreliability of renewals* – a classic example was the disinformation associated with the Texas blackouts in 2021.

- *Ineffective electric vehicles* – attacks against EVs often were framed as pro-environmental stances.

ISD found that climate sceptic actors span the political spectrum, but the strong presence of US, UK and Canadian right-wing Twitter communities suggests that these actors are making inroads in reframing online conversations about climate change along partisan lines. Some actors that historically focused only on climate issues have expanded into other policy areas and/or culture war issues. ISD found that in the United States there is significant overlap between right-wing political groups and those denying environmental and public health crises.

The Center for Countering Digital Hate, in a report published last November, posited that ten fringe publishers account for 69% of climate change denial/scepticism spread on social media platforms, attempting to give the impression that there is broad, legitimate scientific debate on the fundamentals of climate change.

Policy Solutions

ISD outlines seven policy solutions to detect, analyse and counter mis/disinformation in the climate space so as to minimize the influence of false and misleading content that might otherwise derail climate legislation:

- *Implement a unified definition of climate mis/disinformation* recognized by key scientific and multilateral bodies (e.g., UNFCCC, IPCC, COP Presidency) *and reflect these criteria in platform community standards and/or terms of service*.

  ISD's suggest adopting the definition developed in partnership with the Conscious Advertising Network, namely deceptive or misleading content that:
  - 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 Agreement;
  - misrepresents scientific data, including by omission or cherry-picking, in order to erode trust in climate science, climate-focused institutions, experts and solutions; or
  - falsely publicises efforts as supportive of climate goals that in fact contribute to climate warming or contravene the scientific consensus on mitigation or adaptation.

- *Enforce platform policies against repeat offender accounts*. ISD research indicates 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 as sharing false or misleading content, yet appear to remain live even after repeated notifications to the platforms. This content often is not limited to climate change issues, but rather covers a broad range of culture war wedge issues.

- *Improve transparency and data access for vetted researchers and regulators on climate misinformation trends, as well as the role played by algorithmic amplification.* ISD monitoring of climate change content underscores why it is imperative for platforms to provide access to algorithmic design and conduct systemic audits, whether via regulators or vetted third parties. ISD analysis from COP26 revealed that the most popular narratives travelling across platforms were those able to combine misleading or false content on climate with broader culture wars narratives. Divisive posts, whether factual or not, appear to be continually rewarded by social media algorithms optimised for engagement. In addition, users are seemingly served content that affirms their pre-existing beliefs, biases and misperceptions, although limited data access provided by platforms means researchers have been unable to fully understand this phenomenon.[1]

- *Limit exemptions in proposed legislation for media content* (*e.g.*, the EU Digital Services Act, the UK Online Safety Bill, the US Digital Services Oversight and Safety Act, the Australian Online Safety Act). Research shows that mis/disinformation can be spread by malign actors presenting themselves as journalists. Among the concerns raised about these exemptions is the definition of a "legitimate media outlet" or a "journalist" in the digital age.

- *Restrict paid advertising and sponsored content* repeatedly found to spread disinformation that contravenes the definition suggested above*.*

- *Ensure better platform labelling on "missing context" and the re-posting of old or recycled content.* Recirculation of old media is a common disinformation tactic, especially articles that boast misleading headlines or unsupported claims. This content often is misconstrued (or deliberately framed) as current news, forcing scientists and fact-checkers to re-assess claims that have already been shown to be false.

- *Enable Application Programming Interface (API) image-based searches to support research on viral disinformation.* Researchers must be able to identify and track image-based trends in real time, not least during periods of heightened crisis where disinformation can be amplified and be harder to counter. At present, such functionality is either limited or absent from platform APIs.

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[1] University of Indiana researchers identified three types of bias that contribute to the spread via social media of mis/disinformation: cognitive bias (mental short cuts to avoid information overload), social bias that leads people to believe information that comes from people they know and algorithmic bias whereby social media platforms curate content likely to be the most engaging and relevant for each individual user. These biases are inter-related in the sense that algorithmic bias tends to reinforce cognitive and social biases, making users all the more vulnerable to manipulation. The platforms employ two other tactics – exposing users to less diverse sources of information, creating homogeneity bias, and algorithms that promote content based on popularity, feeding back into cognitive bias and reinforcing what appears to be popular irrespective of quality. All of this gets amplified via bots.

Concluding Thoughts

As I noted in a previous briefing note (available here), as we emerge from an unprecedented public health crisis and continue to face challenges ranging from emboldened autocrats to the existential effects of climate change, unprecedented polarization and, in some cases, risks of political sectarianism, we cannot lose sight of the role that disinformation plays in creating, maintaining and exacerbating the divisions that undermine democracy. As we embrace broad-based solutions to counter mis/disinformation, we need to be mindful that, as ISD notes, while significant global efforts to identify and counter disinformation at scale tend to focus on safeguarding elections from interference by malign actors, climate change-related mis/disinformation has received less attention and yet it is now firmly embedded as a wedge issue in the ongoing culture wars that show little sign of retreat. Climate change is but one of the pressing transnational issues of the day, joining migration, human rights and sexual and reproductive health, that are under sustained attack by malign actors that seek to influence public opinion and shape policy agendas.

In light of the urgency of addressing climate change, it is imperative that actions and initiatives to facilitate the transition to net zero, including legislation to mandate climate- and biodiversity-related corporate and financial intermediary disclosure, as well as other regulatory efforts along the lines of the proposals included, for example, in the Build Back Better Act (see my previous briefing note, available here), are not delayed, suspended or reversed. Recognizing and countering climate-related mis/disinformation will undoubtedly be an important part of keeping these efforts on track.

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