Climate Mis/Disinformation in a Post-Factual Era

8 July 2023, Lyon (France)

The pre-conference "Climate Mis/Disinformation in a Post-Factual Era" is hosted by IAMCR's Political Communication Research Section in collaboration with the MediaFlows research group. We expect the pre-conference to serve as a meeting point for expanding on IAMCR's debates on the challenges that inhabiting the planet pose to Political Communication, with a focus on environmental accountability.

Date: Saturday, 8 July 2023.

Time: 09h00 – 18h30.

Venue: SciencePo Lyon, France.

Abstract submission deadline: 05 May 2023.

Climate change mis/disinformation is being fuelled by well-funded, transnational interest groups, as well as conservative politicians and social media algorithms. These campaigns are changing the contours of political communication and blocking effective action. A sense of emergency is spreading, and the European Union is now calling for a universal definition of climate disinformation (EU, 2022). Last year, the impact of misinformation on climate action was included for the first time in a United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report (IPCC, 2022). That same year, a group of civil society organisations urged the COP26 Presidency and the CEOs of big social media companies to take action against climate change mis/disinformation.

In a post-factual world, current debates about factuality and authenticity take place within a collapse of previously taken for granted categories of knowing and truth claims (Lindholm, 2008; Thurnell-Read, Skey and Heřmanová, 2023). Fuelled by rapid sociocultural and technological changes, we are witnessing a restructuring of how truth and fakery are constructed, and sold. For instance, untruthful information such as the denial of climate change can be perceived as true as long as it is felt as authentic, and transmitted through trustworthy (social) networks (Gehl and Lawson, 2022).

Big-tech firms play a role in this cycle, functioning without proper climate misinformation policies and amplifying climate mis/disinformation on social media. This is because algorithms, homophily and echo chambers provide a promising environment for mis/disinformation to spread (Treen, Williams and O'Neill, 2020). After an open letter led by the Conscious Advertising Network (CAN, 2021), Google, Pinterest, Twitter and Facebook issued new commitments to fight climate change disinformation. However, Facebook's algorithms continue to recommend pages fuelling disinformation (GlobalWitness, 2022).

There is a growing body of literature exploring the rise of the far-right and its use of social media affordances to spread climate mis/disinformation (Fraune and Knodt, 2018; Gottenhuber and Mulholland, 2019; Hameleers, 2020). Over the last few years, we have witnessed a global institutionalisation of far-right discourses in a context of a global pandemic, met with neoliberal carelessness and a crisis of democratic institutions. Right-wing leaders around the world have joined vested interests and co-opted climate debates as part of their culture wars. Denialist claims go from logical fallacies, fake experts and conspiracy theories (Cook, Ellerton and Kinkead, 2018) to the fabrication of fake controversies (Hansson, 2017). However, in a context of overwhelming scientific evidence about the climate crisis, clear-cut disinformation and denialism are being combined with mere

"inactivism" (Mann, 2021), recurring to more sophisticated techniques that send deterring and misleading messages (Forchtner and Lubarda, 2022).

Climate disinformation goes well beyond denying the climate change (Cook, 2020). Donald Trump, for instance, has made contradictory statements (Allen and McAleer, 2018; Cheung, 2020) while withdrawing from the Paris climate agreement and taking over a hundred steps to scale back measures that tackle climate change (Columbia, 2022). Similarly, the far-right coalition has issued confusing statements while voting environmental policies down in the European Parliament (Gottenhuber and Mulholland, 2019). While pledging climate neutrality in 2050, Bolsonaro's policies have also ravaged an Amazon damaged by out-of-control wildfires and deforestation. These examples suggest that clear denial is combined with more subtle techniques, such as "inactivism" (Mann, 2021) or "delayism" (Lamb et al., 2020). Some of these tactics include questioning the authority and integrity of scientists and climate advocates, as well highlighting the negative effects of policies that tackle global warning, often in economic and moral grounds. In this context, we need further insights that explore the changing nature of climate mis/disinformation, as well as their contribution to policy obstruction and public polarisation (CAN, 2021; Hornsey, Harris, and Fielding, 2018).

Submissions:

We welcome original, state-of-the-art contributions that broaden our theoretical and/or empirical understanding of climate mis/disinformation, as well as a variety of methodological approaches. This includes, but is not limited to, the following debates:

- **Authenticity and mis/disinformation**: How do performances of authenticity influence our perception of untruthful information?
- **Common-sense versus scientific "truth" in a post-factual era**: Claiming ordinary's people truth while dismissing scientific facticity as one of the strategies of epistemological populism (Bergmann, 2020; Hameleers, 2020; Prasad, 2019).
- **Vested interests, power and misinformation**: A recent report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2022) sees misinformation as a tactic "to maintain the status quo by actors in positions of power". What are the vested interests behind climate mis/disinformation?
- **State-sponsored disinformation**: A chief sponsor of climate mis/disinformation has been the State and its institutions, be it governments, parties, or security agencies, which often count with sophisticated techniques and vast resources. What role does the State play in denying climate change or delaying action?
- **Big tech, algorithms and amplification**: How are social media algorithms amplifying climate mis/disinformation? What action is being taken?
- **Climate-change, activism and "inactivism"**: When scientific evidence of climate change becomes blatant, how do far-right organisations and vested interest respond? Are we witnessing a transition from denialism to "inactivism" (Mann, 2021)?
- **From denialism to "delayism"**: Recent studies have identified a reduction in climate change scepticism. In this context, factual interests are experimenting with more subtle tactics to distract citizens from this topic and delay action (Lamb et al., 2020). How are these tactics evolving and how can we analyse them?
- **Climate change advocates, elitism and hypocrisy**: Politicians, celebrities and the "climatism" cartel (Bohr, 2016) are often accused of being hypocrites who defend elitist policies that damage citizens' interests (King, Janulewicz and Arcostanzo, 2022; Marquardt, Oliveira and Lederer, 2022). How does the connection between populists' alleged anti-elitism connect with climate mis/disinformation campaigns?

- **Green (eco)populism and green patriotism**: Some studies suggest that far-right parties support green populism (Stone Jr., 2022) and green patriotism (Schaller and Carius, 2019), co-opting discourses of regional and national environmental conservation while rejecting green energy policies and international treaties. Is the far-right abandoning clear climate change denial?
- **Ecobordering**: Far-right discourses on climate change often blame migrants for threatening the conservation of the national territory, and point to the Global South (rather than wealthy industrialised nations) as responsible for major environmental destruction (Turner and Bailey, 2021). What are the connections between far-right chauvinism and climate mis/disinformation?
- **Climate mis/disinformation and its consequences**: Misinformation has been shown to lead to misconceptions (Ranney and Clark, 2016), to decrease people's support to mitigation policies (van der Linden et al., 2017), and to foster social polarization (Cook, Lewandowsky and Ecker, 2017). How can we better assess its consequences?

Please submit a 500-word abstract (excluding references) in English by emailing it to Sara García Santamaría, sgarciasanta@uoc.edu, by 5 May 2023. Please include title, full name, affiliation and contact information. Decisions on acceptance will be communicated by the 15 of May.

Registration:

The preconference has a registration cost of €30.

Keynote Speakers:

- Anabela Carvalho, Universidade do Minho (Portugal)
- James Painter, Reuters Institute, University of Oxford (UK)

Organisers:

- Marie Grussell, University of Gothenburg. Chair of IAMCR's Political Communication Research Section. Contact: marie.grusell@jmg.gu.se

- Sara García Santamaría, Universitat Oberta de Catalunya. Vice-chair of IAMCR's Political Communication Research Section. Contact: sgarciasanta@uoc.edu

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