International IDEA

The Stockholm Series
of Public Lectures on
Climate Change and Democracy

Overheated: The fight for Information Integrity, Climate Action, and Democracy

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KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG

The Stockholm Series of Public Lectures on Climate Change and Democracy ("Stockholm Series") is a cooperation between renowned Stockholm-based institutions with a particular focus on climate change and democracy from different perspectives, including the Stockholm Environment Institute; the Stockholm Resilience Centre; Future Earth; the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung's Nordics Office; LSU – The National Council of Swedish Children and Youth Organisations; and We Don't Have Time. It aims to inform, inspire, and engage experts and the general public alike by providing high-profile public lectures on the interlinkages between climate change and democracy, followed by debate.

Jennie King's lecture **"Overheated – The Fight for Information Integrity, Climate Action, and Democracy"** took place on Tuesday, 23 April 2024, at International IDEA's Headquarters at Strömsborg in Stockholm, Sweden.

Democracy demands a public mandate, translating our common will into policies that can benefit the whole. This is especially true for the climate crisis, as we face a 'brief and rapidly closing window' (IPCC) to act for a liveable future. Despite the urgency and gravity of this moment, public discourse on the issue is increasingly fragmented, partisan, and unmoored from science. Climate action has become a lightning rod for conspiracism and mistrust of institutions and is being weaponised to deepen social divisions. How did we get here? Who stands to benefit? And, above all, how can we chart a pathway forward?

The lecture was followed by a conversation with **Dr Victor Galaz**, Associate Professor, Stockholm Resilience Centre & **Dr Kevin Casas-Zamora**, Secretary-General, International IDEA, as well as questions and comments from the audience, and a reception.

**Stockholm,
23 April 2024**

Let's begin with a story…

It's April 2020, and the world is reeling from a new pandemic first declared in Wuhan, China just weeks before. To safeguard public health and prevent the virus' spread, authorities have imposed lockdown measures across the country, with nations around the world soon to follow suit. Amidst the turmoil of those early days, the UK's *Guardian* newspaper, a prestigious left-wing outlet with international reach, publishes an article claiming that a "return to normal" should not be our aim; that instead, the coronavirus has opened a gateway for systemic change and a re-making of our economic, social, and political norms to address the climate emergency. In it, their Editorial Board asks readers: "*Could the renewed shock of human vulnerability in the face of COVID-19 make way for an increased willingness to face other perils, climate chaos among them?*"

The very next day, the article is posted to Twitter by the Director of an infamous fossil-fuel think tank, with a caption that reads "*how climate bedwetters hope to translate the coronavirus lockdown into a climate lockdown*"—it receives just a few likes and shares, disappears into the ether, but he is undeterred. Over the coming months, his network will keep plugging this new catchphrase—"climate lockdown"—across social media, waiting for their moment.

Fast forward to September 2021, and the famed economist Mariana Mazzucato publishes a piece in *Project Syndicate*, an outlet which happens to receive funding from both the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and George Soros' Open Society Foundations. It is titled "*Avoiding a Climate Lockdown*" and argues that a radical overhaul of energy systems is needed to prevent such extreme measures in the future. Far from celebrating the idea of a lockdown, she lays out policies which can help us avert them. Finally, their moment has arrived. In the week following publication, tweets containing 'climate lockdown' rise from just 26 to nearly 3,000. Suddenly, the spectre of "green tyranny" is being picked up by a wider range of accounts and right-wing media, often in response to other mainstream outlets or entities like the World Economic Forum.

Cut to July 2022, and "climate lockdown" has spread like a virus. It now appears in thousands of social media posts each day, has penetrated far-right groups on platforms like Telegram and 8kun, and merged with radicalised conspiracy cults like QAnon and the New World Order. By December 2023, "climate lockdown" is endemic, a recurring feature of discourse around everything from wildfires to traffic reduction schemes. It has been mainstreamed by public figures and media from the UK to the US, Germany to Australia, Canada to Brazil. It has metastasised into claims around a 'Great Reset' and '15-minute prisons', spurred death threats and vandalism of public infrastructure, driven protests, and galvanised thousands of seemingly disparate groups in opposition to climate action.

Why am I telling you this? Because 'climate lockdown' is perhaps the neatest case study of how our information ecosystems now function, and how discussions about climate change have been co-opted - often deliberately and cynically - into the so-called 'culture wars'. It is a uniquely 21st-century fable, reliant on the interplay between our 'offline' lives and the internet, and the new forms of community-building, identity-expression and knowledge-sharing that enables. And above all, it reveals something essential, not only about the prospects of achieving a sustainable future for mankind, but also about the survival of democracy writ large. In just three years, a fringe catchphrase pushed by fossil fuel lobbyists helped to drive protests that brought anti-vaxx conspiracists, neo-Nazi groups and right-wing politicians to the streets of a UK town. So, how did we get here, and what happens next?

Section 1: How did we get here?

Climate action is an unprecedented test for democracy. To meet the scale and urgency of the challenge, we need a strong public mandate and a common understanding of the viable pathways forward – including potential trade-offs. Equally, the manner in which we achieve climate goals will reflect the strength of our political systems. The Paris Agreement hopes to ensure a liveable future for mankind, but it cannot come at the expense of rights and freedoms here and now.

This tension has been all-too acute at recent COP summits, with the Presidency held by authoritarian states or Petro-dictatorships multiple years in a row. The delegate compound is a world unto itself, but a stark reality lies just out of sight – one of political prisoners, stifled media, forced labour and the disappeared. As many in the climate sector have argued: if we allow fundamental human rights to be eroded in the race to Net Zero, can that really be deemed "progress"? What credibility does climate action have, if those most marginalised are once again treated as 'collateral damage'? And if we pander to illiberalism for the sake of some wider vision, where will we end up?

In this sense, climate justice and democracy are bound together—achieving either one without the other will lead us to ruin. Climate is an agenda that not just endorses, but actively depends on, Big Government approaches, multilateralism, long-term thinking, behavioural change, adaptation at all levels of society and in most aspects of public and private life. To achieve our goals we therefore have to go beyond 'safeguarding' democracy to actually revitalise and reinvent what democratic life means in practice.

And how does this relate to our information space? The holistic nature of the climate crisis makes it incredibly vulnerable to attack and, for many people, a symbol of everything unequal and broken in our current system. Climate is the victim of a trend that has befallen various policy issues in recent years, among them migration, public health, sexual and reproductive rights, and racial justice. What makes it unique, and I will delve into further in this address, is that within climate discourse you see a multi-billion-dollar 'disinfo machine' (which has been honing its playbook for over 50 years) collide with a decentralised, even "entrepreneurial" set of new actors in the digital space.

"The holistic nature of the climate crisis makes it incredibly vulnerable to attack and, for many people, a symbol of everything unequal and broken in our current system."

And why now? Well, we know that disinformation thrives in times of crisis, and most societies are contending with multiple, seismic crises all at once: first, the aftershocks of Covid-19, with spiralling inflation and cost of living, not to mention prolonged stresses on healthcare and mental wellbeing; second, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the renewed, devastating conflict in Israel-Palestine, both of which have strained geo-politics and deepened supply chain issues for energy and trade; third, the consolidation of wealth amongst a tiny minority and a growing gulf between the 'haves' and 'have nots' in every major economy; and underneath this all, a wholescale collapse of trust in institutions, which taints - not just government—but the media, science and other historic pillars of public life. When combined, these crises provide the perfect soil for disinformation to flourish, and for actors previously on the fringe to engage with and influence a mainstream audience.
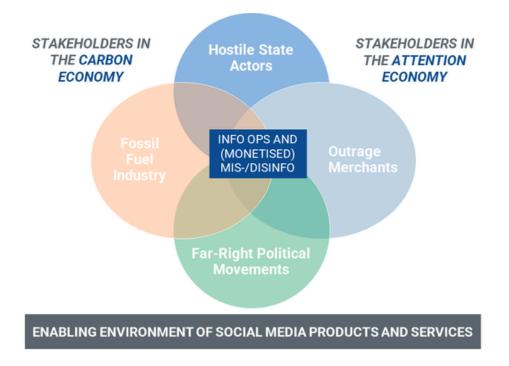
In such a landscape, climate has become a lightning rod for conspiracism, and for exploiting social divisions to achieve financial and political ends. For the first time in 2022, the IPCC recognised this issue as a key barrier to action, urging a response within wider climate efforts. According to the Executive Summary of their 2022 report, signed off by every Member State: "vested economic and political interests" have "generated rhetoric and misinformation that undermines climate science and disregards risk and urgency". According to their analysis, this has driven "public misperception of climate risks and polarised public support for climate actions", ultimately weakening consensus and extending the timeline to achieve meaningful progress.

Section 2: Who are the key players, and what is their end goal?

So, is the goal here *only* to delay climate action and maintain the status quo? Is this ultimately a war of attrition between democracies and the fossil fuel lobby; between the majority of citizens and those who profit from a few "Carbon Majors" (the companies deemed responsible for over 80 per cent of all historic emissions)? I would argue no – that framing may have applied in the year 2000, or even 2010, but it no longer captures the full picture. In 2024, we can see that these 'traditional' climate deniers and delayers have merged with a far broader universe of online extremist and conspiracy movements, as well as for-profit disinformers, 'outrage merchants' and far-right actors. As such, the number of people who stand to benefit from producing or amplifying mis- and disinformation on climate has exploded. And crucially, the *objectives* of such content have also widened.
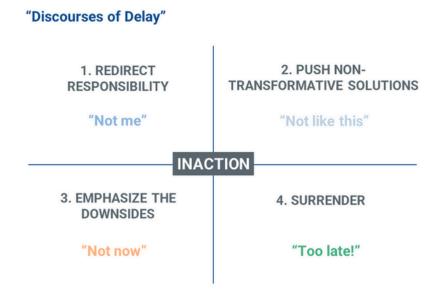
"The number of people who stand to benefit from producing or amplifying mis- and disinformation on climate has exploded. And crucially, the *objectives* of such content have also widened."

Let's start with the first group I mentioned, who we can broadly label "Stakeholders in the Carbon Economy". These are actors who profit from our continued reliance on oil, coal, and fossil gas. Since the 1970s, many have invested heavily to 'professionalise' climate disinformation and wider influence campaigns, honing careful messages around climate science, solutions and figureheads, and laundering those messages to the public through a vast network of proxy entities—everything from PR firms and ad agencies to sponsored academics, think tanks and pundits. The sheer amount of human and financial resource invested in such activity is, I would argue, something that sets climate apart from other areas of disinformation.

STAKEHOLDERS IN THE **CARBON ECONOMY**

STAKEHOLDERS IN THE **ATTENTION ECONOMY**

Hostile State Actors

Fossil Fuel Industry

INFO OPS AND (MONETISED) MIS-/DISINFO

Outrage Merchants

Far-Right Political Movements

ENABLING ENVIRONMENT OF SOCIAL MEDIA PRODUCTS AND SERVICES

After countless subpoenas, Freedom of Information requests, leaks, whistleblower accounts, and dogged journalism, the coordinated nature of this deception has become clear. Many companies not only knew about the devastating impacts of fossil fuels on the environment, but they actively commissioned the research themselves, supressed the results and then spread campaigns stating the opposite while lobbying policymakers. Our analysis shows how their information strategy has evolved with the times, and largely pivoted from outright denial of the problem to subtler 'discourses of delay'—muddying the waters on what a meaningful transition looks like. In particular, the narrative playbook centres around four core themes:

1. Redirecting responsibility ('Not Me') – arguments that imply "climate change exists but the response isn't our problem, someone else should deal with it". In a time where nativism and isolationism are on the rise, it's not difficult to see how such ideas would resonate.

2. Pushing non-transformative solutions ('Not like this') – framing that aims to appear proactive while avoiding any real system change, with carbon capture and storage (CCS) as a key example. Such avenues are being used to justify weaker targets and ambition, even though most pilots to date have had poor results and the technology exists at a tiny fraction of the scale needed.

3. Emphasising the downsides of the transition ('Not now') – claims that achieving Net Zero is too costly, too disruptive, too incompatible with local tradition and culture etc. Or equally, the opposite argument: that fossil fuels are somehow essential for 'human flourishing', especially in areas of the Global South, even though majority-population countries are suffering the brunt of climate impacts at a devastating level. And finally;

4. Surrender ('Too late!') – an appeal to doomism, the belief that humanity has left things too late and all is already lost. Systems cannot change, we are too entrenched in our ways, so let's just enjoy life until the climate apocalypse beckons.

"Discourses of Delay"

1. REDIRECT RESPONSIBILITY *"Not me"*	**2. PUSH NON-TRANSFORMATIVE SOLUTIONS** *"Not like this"*
INACTION	
3. EMPHASIZE THE DOWNSIDES *"Not now"*	**4. SURRENDER** **"Too late!"**

As well as updating its messages, the fossil fuel lobby has also developed tactics for new, digital forms of influence. Their outputs use emotive or clickbait-style language; they are copying the aesthetics of viral accounts on social media; and increasingly, they are working with online influencers to improve their image among younger or 'persuadable' audiences. DeSmog researched over 100 influencers being paid by the fossil fuel industry since 2017, all across the globe, and found their follower count alone totalled nearly 60 million. The combined reach of their sponsored content was far higher, with best estimates stretching into the billions for impressions and interactions; statistics that PR agents are only too keen to boast about. In many of the case studies to date, content creators did not disclose that posts were paid for by industry, but instead had to be exposed through investigative reporting. While examples may sound absurd, the evidence is stacking up:

- A travel blogger posts scenic videos of her road-trip across California, as her partner poses with a Shell gas pump to fuel their journey;
- A popular chef cooks fish tacos with a gas stove, noting how much it improves the flavour and adding the caption #cookingwithgas;
- A former BBC presenter launches a 5-part series on YouTube, interviewing Shell executives on the wonders of hydrogen—on Instagram he urges followers to join the 'Hydrogen powered adventure', but does not mention his formal partnership with the company;
- A 'dad influencer' poses with his four children outside a petrol station, exclaiming that a new BP lifestyle app 'really is gonna make my life!'

In our own research from COP28, we found that Chevron paid to boost 34 of its videos on TikTok and racked up 188 million views in the process, costing an estimated ~$1.8m – pocket money, if you consider their record profits in recent years. The majority of such content now aims to position industry as 'climate champions', at the forefront of bio-fuels, renewable energy and other green initiatives. To which a person might reasonably ask: "is that not progress? Don't we want these companies to adapt their business model and lead the way to Net Zero?" If such actors were to divest from fossil fuels and lead innovation for a greener future, that would indeed be cause for celebration. Unfortunately, the image they craft and disseminate in marketing does not reflect their business practice, or even their investment plans for the next 10-30 years.

A Harvard University paper from 2022 found that in a sample of 2,000 posts by major European polluters, 72 per cent tried to emphasise their spending on green technology. These same firms invested just 1.7 per cent of their annual capital expenditures in low carbon technologies between 2010 and 2018. In November 2023, the International Energy Agency (IEA) published a report showing that Carbon Majors only account for 1 per cent of clean energy investment worldwide, despite what their advertising and PR may present. These disparities underscore why greenwashing is a form of information warfare, how it aims to mislead the public, and where greater regulation is so desperately needed.

Meanwhile, even Google results have become a battleground and are being distorted by industry dollars. Search for key terms like 'climate', 'climate change', 'global warming', 'net zero', 'renewable energy' or 'COP28', and among the top links you'll find overt industry ads and misinformation, nestled among credible scientific sources. If democratic debate is something precious and essential to climate action, we have to ask: is the playing field real level?

"These disparities underscore why greenwashing is a form of information warfare, how it aims to mislead the public, and where greater regulation is so desperately needed."

Let's move on to our next set of actors, who I am calling 'Stakeholders in the Attention Economy'. This group is driven by one key goal: to harvest your engagement and convert that into a viable business model. In the online space they are constantly experimenting to maximise their reach, working out which types of content and format will yield the most likes, clicks, shares, and comments. If they can develop a strong follower base, that could mean their content is monetised by social media platforms, that they can funnel people to subscription sites like Patreon or Substack, maybe even sell bespoke merchandise or book paid speaking gigs.

Many of these actors cultivate their brand as contrarians or polemicists, who are ostensibly 'speaking truth to power' and challenging the orthodoxy of liberal thinking. Some have appointed themselves the 'Intellectual Dark Web', even though they now boast tens of millions of followers and are among the loudest voices in mainstream discourse. Crucially, their engagement with climate issues is, at best, opportunistic and, at worst, overtly cynical. In many cases, there is little-to-no attempt to address the substance of climate policy debates, or develop real critiques of the green agenda. Instead, they know that algorithms on social media tend to reward the most divisive, incendiary, or conspiratorial content, and climate provides excellent material.

"Algorithms on social media tend to reward the most divisive, incendiary, or conspiratorial content, and climate provides excellent material."

Some may genuinely believe that climate action is a pretext for tyranny; that the government plans to force-feed you bugs; that heatwaves are geo-engineered by weather forecasters; that wind turbines cause cancer; that wildfires were started by climate activists or Directed Energy Weapons; or indeed that George Soros and the World Economic Forum plan to enslave you within walking distance of your home (yes, these have all been viral trends in our research). However, I think it would be fair to say that many are just playing 'engagement bingo'—throwing content grenades into a crowd and seeing which ones blow up.

This is how 'outrage merchants' game the system, dragging climate discourse down with them. To make things worse, social media platforms both enable and encourage such actors, since they too must harvest engagement to sell ad space and please shareholders. At COP26, we compared seven Facebook pages known to be sceptical of climate action or amplifiers of misinformation with seven official pages in the platform's Climate Science Centre—a hub that Meta had widely touted to the press, policymakers and civil society as a pillar of its 'climate-forward' approach. We found that, in terms of engagement, the former group outperformed Facebook's partner pages by a factor of 12. Time and again, this 'organic' misinformation from high-traction accounts steals the limelight, even when platforms claim to actively promote fact-checked or verified sources.

> **"Time and again, this 'organic' misinformation from high-traction accounts steals the limelight, even when platforms claim to actively promote fact-checked or verified sources."**

What's more, just a handful of actors can have a disproportionate impact on the information space. Also at COP26, we revealed that just 16 'super-spreader' accounts on Twitter—repeat offenders for creating or amplifying misinformation—had amassed over 500,000 likes and retweets on their climate content during the summit. For perspective, that vastly outweighed the total of 148 other well-known denial and sceptic accounts on the platform. Skip a year to COP27, and if you typed 'climate' into Twitter's search bar the first result it would recommend with autocomplete was "#climatescam", featuring above either "climate crisis" or "climate emergency". This trend has stuck throughout the past 18 months, despite us flagging the issue to the platform's Trust and Safety team. According to our research, the virality of the hashtag links back to a small group of accounts.

Unfortunately, while this content may lack evidence or logic it does not lack an audience. The unifying themes of state overreach and elite power resonate across the globe, and they are often built on the foundations of legitimate grievance. Covid-19 turbo-charged these ideas, serving as a 'radicalising moment' for many ordinary members of the public —it would be unfair to characterise all, or even most, of these people as lunatics and extremists, even if they have been susceptible to wilder forms of mis- and disinformation. Overnight, we saw the reality of our lives change in profound, disturbing ways, and the ongoing trauma of the pandemic should not be dismissed. Fear about the future and our role within it provides the connective tissue for these actors, and it is why climate features more and more in broad pushback against the 'woke agenda': a phrase meant to condemn everything from gender identity debates and Black Lives Matter to abortion rights and decolonisation.

So, we come to our final cast of characters: hostile foreign states and far-right movements. These actors sit, to varying degrees, on the spectrum between the Carbon and Outrage Economies I've described, but share a desire to widen their base. In the case of pro-Kremlin propaganda, for example, we see no consistent or coherent messaging on climate—instead, narratives are adapted for different contexts, in service of their geopolitical goals. In the West, this generally amounts to sowing chaos and exacerbating tensions both within and between countries. Content posted by Russia Today in Spanish and German has cast doubt on renewable energy, stoking fear among European citizens

that wind and solar are unreliable or will leave them freezing to death in winter. In the Global South, however, these same technologies are celebrated and championed...so long as the projects are funded by Russia or its allies, namely China and Iran. We have also seen State-affiliated actors cast the Paris Agreement as 'neo-colonialism' or part of a 'Western imperial agenda', while in tandem pushing for fossil fuel and resource extraction in areas like sub-Saharan Africa— seemingly, such activity ceases to be exploitation if backed by Putin, or if it boosts trade and diplomatic ties with the Chinese regime.

Similarly, far-right political movements have jumped on the bandwagon, using climate discourse as a vehicle to promote and normalise their worldview. The farmers' protests we are witnessing across Europe—in the Netherlands, Germany, France, Poland, Ireland and elsewhere—are just one stark example. They have offered a clear point of entry into the news cycle and allowed parties to create an image of 'hard-working people of the land' pitted against a shadowy, Brussels elite hell-bent on climate action at any cost.

To reiterate: belief in climate mis- and disinformation is *not* inherently extremist, but there is 'radicalising potential' in these debates. As climate conspiracies are mainstreamed, it creates an opening for groups to co-opt the debate and centre more violent or extreme agendas. In the online space, fascist, neo-Nazi or White Supremacist groups might find common cause with users who would otherwise never seek out or be exposed to such ideas. This is not a foregone conclusion, or necessarily a regular trend, but the risk should be taken seriously. Once again, Covid-19 offers a case study on how these dynamics can play out and the very tangible harms that may result – from attacking public infrastructure to targeting individuals and, in the worst cases, wider mobilisation to violence.

The upcoming European Parliamentary elections mark a key moment: they will reveal how successful far-right parties are in weaponising climate, and which demographics they can persuade in the process. Polls are a flawed metric, but forecasts for the vote should concern both the climate sector and defenders of democracy—by current projections, the parties likely to hold a majority post-June have voted against almost all climate policy in recent years, including the flagship EU Green Deal, and have no qualms about sharing mis- or disinformatio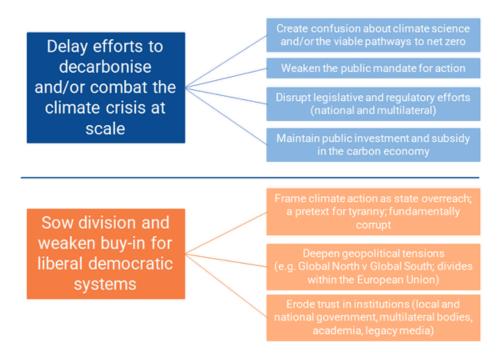n in their campaigns. More broadly, they seem to show contempt for liberal norms and discredit the very premise of the European Union, aiming to pull apart the fabric that holds together this messy, imperfect, but extraordinary democratic project.

> **"Belief in climate mis- and disinformation is *not* inherently extremist, but there is 'radicalising potential' in these debates. As climate conspiracies are mainstreamed, it creates an opening for groups to co-opt the debate and centre more violent or extreme agendas."**

So, where does that leave us? Earlier, I said those spreading mis- and disinformation are now concerned with more than delaying climate action. Seeding doubt about climate science, weakening public mandates for action, and maintaining investment in the carbon economy are all still relevant goals—mostly for the fossil fuel lobby and Petrostates. But there is a wider objective at play that has brought an unexpected and diverse set of actors into this space: namely, using climate change as a blunt weapon

to sow division and hasten the breakdown of public life. The targets of this attack are not only liberal democratic systems, but the very idea of international cooperation. Rather than confront the climate crisis together, a global community who will all suffer its impacts in some form, the crisis becomes an excuse to turn ever-more inwards and pursue a nativist, parochial and often xenophobic vision of politics. If we hope to mount an effective response, we must be sober to these distinct and emerging drivers, as well as which actors are involved and how they interact with each other both on- and offline.

Climate Info Ops – What are the End Goals?

Delay efforts to decarbonise and/or combat the climate crisis at scale
- Create confusion about climate science and/or the viable pathways to net zero
- Weaken the public mandate for action
- Disrupt legislative and regulatory efforts (national and multilateral)
- Maintain public investment and subsidy in the carbon economy

Sow division and weaken buy-in for liberal democratic systems
- Frame climate action as state overreach; a pretext for tyranny; fundamentally corrupt
- Deepen geopolitical tensions (e.g. Global North v Global South; divides within the European Union)
- Erode trust in institutions (local and national government, multilateral bodies, academia, legacy media)

Section 3: What happens now?

And now we arrive at, hopefully, some good news. Unpacking the threat landscape can be overwhelming and it may feel like the problem is just too complex to solve, with so many vested interests and perverse incentives at play. But if we can confront the climate crisis - which scientists assure me we can! - then tackling mis- and disinformation is well within our grasp. We will need to leverage both regulatory and 'soft' approaches, bringing climate concerns into tech regulation, using science as the basis for digital literacy, improving media scrutiny, developing better campaign and outreach strategies, and more. With the time left today, I would like to highlight just a few examples which give me hope and provide a framework for how we might move forward.

Earlier, we explored the gulf that exists between fossil fuel companies' self-promotion and their actual business activity. The issue of greenwashing has been championed by many leading figures, including blunt calls to action from António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations. That momentum has been captured in new UN guidance that set far more stringent criteria on what constitutes a "net zero pledge". Similar agendas are unfolding in national and regional jurisdictions, including the EU's new Directives on Green Claims and Corporate Sustainability Reporting, revised Green Guides from the US Federal Trade Commission, and the UK Financial Services Authority's "Sustainability Disclosure Requirements".

Equally, many advertising watchdogs are rising to the occasion and applying unprecedented levels of scrutiny. In October 2022, the UK Advertising Standards Agency ruled that two poster campaigns from HSBC should be removed, since the content could mislead consumers about the bank's green credentials. Similar cases have followed, challenging companies' tactical playbook at a systemic level: adverts are being taken down, not because they contain overt lies, but because the overall campaign could create a false impression and therefore deceive the public.

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Such scrutiny is sorely lacking in the online space, where the fossil fuel lobby continues to act with impunity. Our research has shown that social media companies are making hundreds of millions of dollars each year from Carbon Major advertising, and that is likely the tip of the iceberg – platform's ad libraries make it nigh-on impossible for us to track or quantify activity at scale. The same is true for non-paid-for content, including an explosion of "grassroots" groups, bots and troll networks that are in fact orchestrated by lobbyists and trade associations.

Without transparency, our public discourse will always be stacked in favour of those with the deepest pockets and the most to lose. Although it may feel distant from your core mission, this is an agenda where both climate and democracy advocates have to step up. Regulation like the EU's Digital Services Act hope to radically change the game, forcing companies to assess systemic risk and provide credible plans on how they will mitigate, measure and report on user harm. We can all support this effort by helping to build an evidence base, documenting how bad actors are abusing the digital commons across languages, geographies, and platforms. That may be daunting alone, but countless coalitions have already formed to drive activity and spotlight specific issues. Our alliance —Climate Action Against Disinformation—now includes over 50 organisations worldwide and has achieved levels of impact that no single member could manage by themselves.

"Without transparency, our public discourse will always be stacked in favour of those with the deepest pockets and the most to lose."

Equally, pressure can be applied directly on companies and their shareholders. Almost all the tech giants—Meta, Google, TikTok, Alphabet —tout their commitment to Net Zero, with plans on everything from recycling to reducing their emissions. If this is more than just lip service, then tackling how their products are used to spread climate mis- and disinformation should be an obvious step. Sadly, efforts on this front generally tinker around the margins without ever broaching the core issues—above all, why false and polarising content is continually recommended to users; why the same content is repeatedly monetised, creating a business model for disinformers; why they are happy generating profit from fossil fuel greenwash; and why the abuse of public figures like scientists and policymakers so often takes place without consequence. We can all use our voice to hold Big Tech accountable, and to render inaction both a financial and reputational risk.

Making mis- and disinformation unprofitable—both for platforms and content creators—is a good start. But we cannot only address the 'supply' side of this equation; we also have to recognise the 'demand' for such content and why it seems to resonate so deeply. It is easy to blame social media for all society's ills, and there is no doubt they play a role in the polarisation and mistrust that democracies now face. But people's disenchantment with democracy is not just an issue of information, accurate or otherwise. These are fundamentally unequal and precarious times, where many see little in their future to inspire hope. The climate sector must have an answer to this and ensure that people lie at the heart of their communications.

"We cannot only address the 'supply' side of this equation; we also have to recognise the 'demand' for such content and why it seems to resonate so deeply."

Many of our coalition partners work on the frontlines, leading community outreach, strategic campaigns and education in contexts across the globe. Their evidence overwhelmingly points in one direction: that if you can contexualise the crisis at a hyper-local level and engage people on what the transition means directly for them, they will support even ambitious climate policy. Equally, if you can ['inoculate' people to the misleading claims](#) they may encounter—whether from an oil company or a conspiracy theorist – they are more likely to critique and resist those claims.

Crucially, any attempt to 'pre-bunk' must [centre the facts and avoid amplifying the falsehoods.](#) This is a common trap that media outlets fall into, with headlines that cite an inaccurate claim but only provide counterevidence or fact-checks lower down in the piece. I'm sure all of us are guilty of scanning the headlines without scrolling further, and research shows that most social media users follow suit. That means a well-meaning reporter can, unwittingly, do a disinformer's job on their behalf. Instead, we should all use the ['truth sandwich' approach](#): start and finish any statement with the correct information, and in between explain how the original content was false. Extra credit if you can paraphrase rather than restate the misinformation, thereby reducing its impact even further. In the process, raising awareness on *why* an actor may want to deceive is also key—disinformation does not happen in a vacuum, but we often lack the context on what financial, political, ideological, or personal motives may be at play. Simple steps, but they can make a radical difference.

"If you can contexualise the crisis at a hyper-local level and engage people on what the transition means directly for them, they will support even ambitious climate policy."

Let's finish with a story…

Lastly, I would urge us to take a step back. Our information space moves so fast that fixating on each individual piece of content, every new conspiracy or viral lie, will always leave us on the back foot. Sometimes there is benefit in a fact-check, but if our lens is always trained on a newsfeed we can miss the bigger picture and haemorrhage our resources in the process. After four years of leading research in this space, I can say with confidence that unifying themes, grievances and fears run through almost all mis- and disinformation.

"The connective tissue is a story about power and freedom, about who has a seat at the table and how they got there, and about an essential need to be seen and feel like we matter in the course of events."

The connective tissue is a story about power and freedom, about who has a seat at the table and how they got there, and about an essential need to be seen and feel like we matter in the course of events. Democracies claim to do exactly that, but so many sense their voices are irrelevant or unheard. Climate justice aims to redress the imbalance, but its goals can seem too intangible. This is where I will close my remarks today, with a plea: not just to defend liberal norms, but to re-make them for genuine inclusion, participation, and empowerment. We want to build a liveable future and we believe democracy is the best vehicle to achieve that—if so, flooding the zone with facts will never be enough.

Many thanks for your time.

Jennie King is the Director of Climate Research and Policy at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), leading efforts to translate ISD's digital research into frontline programming and response. Through ISD, she helped found Climate Action Against Disinformation (CAAD), a coalition of over 50 organisations working to identify, analyse and counter this threat worldwide. She has spearheaded research in contexts across Europe, North America, Asia Pacific and sub-Saharan Africa; led real-time Intelligence Units at three COP summits; and co-authored flagship reports including the "Deny, Deceive, Delay" series. Jennie also advises both national and multilateral bodies on the response to mis- and disinformation, and in February 2023 testified before the European Parliament on this issue.

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The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) is an inter-governmental think and do-tank with a sole mandate to advance democracy worldwide. In addition to its established programming on electoral processes, constitution-building processes, and democracy assessment, the Institute has emerging workstreams on climate change and democracy as well as digitalization and democracy.

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