Climate Disinformation 101

Did you know that climate change was actually a bipartisan issue in the 1980s? George H. W. Bush pledged to "fight the greenhouse effect with the White House effect." The issue wasn't always so polarized. Polarization didn't consume the climate change debate until the early 1990s, when conservative think-tanks started pushing disinformation campaigns with the goals of polarizing the public and delaying meaningful action. Now more than 90% of papers that are "skeptical of climate change" come from conservative think tanks.

Why do people spread climate disinformation?

Lots of people are invested in the fossil fuel-powered "business as usual" status quo. The energy business is one of the largest industries in the world. Major fossil fuel companies make billions in profits by extracting and distributing oil, gas, and coal. Legitimate climate action threatens their economic or political interests so they've been working to prevent it for years.

How do they do this?

Even though the scientific evidence of anthropogenic (human-caused) climate change has been clear for decades, fossil fuel companies used many deceptive tactics to cast doubt on the science. For a long time, this looked like **climate change denial**. The campaign to undermine public trust in climate science is sometimes called the "denial machine." Those with economic, political, or ideological interests in delaying climate action used conservative media and "climate skeptics" to **manufacture uncertainty** about climate change.

Recent research has shown that climate change disinformation isn't just about denialism anymore though. As the science becomes more and more impossible to deny, climate disinformation tactics have shifted to **distraction and delay**. You might see fossil fuel companies pushing narratives about the "importance of individual action" while ignoring calls for actual regulation. (The concept of an individual carbon footprint was actually popularized by fossil fuel company BP in order to shift blame and focus onto consumers and their actions). While individual action is absolutely important it must be combined with systemic change.

There are a lot of different narratives that bad actors use to deny, distract, and delay. The figure below breaks them down into five major groups:

1. Global warming is not happening
2. Human greenhouse gasses are not causing global warming
3. Climate impacts are not bad
4. Climate solutions don't work
5. Climate movement/science is unreliable

I sometimes refer to a sixth type of disinformation narrative which is "it's too late to fix climate change so why bother?" This is **climate doom** and it is another trick used for preventing meaningful action. Afterall, why bother with action if you're convinced there is no point?

What to do if you see climate disinformation

Don't share disinformation and don't platform people who spread it. If you see these narratives on TikTok or any other social media platform, offering a correction in the comments can be helpful for other people who might also see the video. If you do this, you may encounter some trolls and it's best not to engage with trolls. There is a common saying on the internet: "Don't feed the troll." And that applies for climate change disinformation too.

If you see inaccurate information, the best thing you can do is go find a piece of high-quality, accurate information and share it instead.
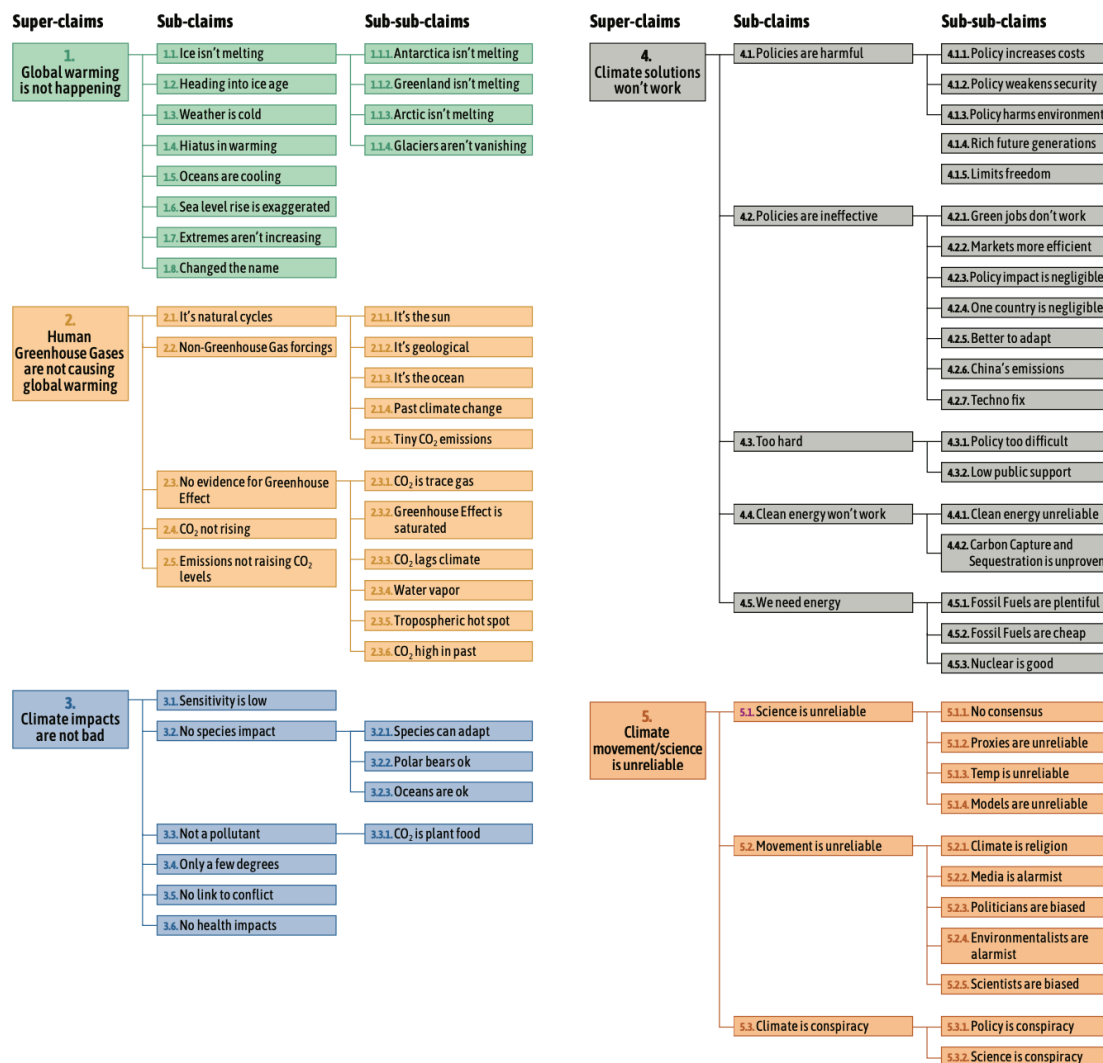
Figure 1. Taxonomy of climate contrarian claims. This figure displays the three layers of claim-making by climate change contrarian actors.

Coan, T., Boussalis, C., Cook, J., & Nanko, M. O. (2021, March 9). Computer-assisted detection and classification of misinformation about climate change. https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/crxfm