

Social Media and Climate Denialism: What Role Should Social Media Hold in Fighting Climate Change?

Jiarui Wu

University of California, Irvine, California, 92612, USA

*Jiaruw4@uci.edu

Abstract

In recent times, many scholars proposed an important question: social media companies, such as Facebook and YouTube, have proved their capacity in enriching science facts and restraining lies, but will they employ their ability to protect Earth from its most emergent threat? Our popular social media is gradually polluted with science denialism and climate lies, but what causes that? This paper explores the sources of science denialism, which progressively influence the internet community, and the importance of social media in influencing public attitude toward environmental awareness. I suggest that social media companies should undertake more responsibilities in fighting current climate change crises.

Keywords

Social media, climate change, denialism, interest group, public attitudes.

1. Introduction

Climate change is one of the most urgent threats and crucial international problems in today's world. Climatic variation and its consequences include global warming, extreme weather patterns, natural disasters, rising sea levels, etc. Both of these crises will jeopardize human's current life and future development. Although some people ascribe the reasons for climate change to natural forces or non-artificial phenomenon, there are more and more people realize and support that human development and pollution – such as emission greenhouse gases, excessive exploitation of natural resources, and industrial contamination – are the primary reasons giving rise to the global climate change. Social media is one of the most significant power in influencing public attitudes or recognition of climate change today. Nevertheless, though many mainstream social media companies proved their capacity on enriching climate facts, restraining capital or commercial lies, and supporting environmental awareness, their actual practice were poles apart. In this paper, I will explore how did interest groups employ strategies to underplay industrial pollution and detriment on the environment and the significance of social media in affecting public attitude toward environmental awareness. I will then suggest that social media, especially its companies, should undertake a more positive and responsible role in regulating science misinformation and fighting climate change.

2. Causes of Climate Denialism

There is widespread consensus among both the public and scientific community on climate change and global warming today, but interest groups underplay the actual industrial pollution and its impacts on the environment or even deny climate change. According to Professor Eva Darian-Smith, 97% of climate scientists reach agreements on global warming and view it as a significant threat (Darian-Smith 1). The investigation held by Yale University and George Mason University also shows that nearly 70% of Americans were worried about climate change and roughly half of Americans believe climate change is jeopardizing human society right now

(Leiserowitz et al., 2021). Nevertheless, since the development of the environmental protection movement, following political regulations, and growing public awareness will decrease some people or groups' interest, these interest group – “capital powers” – will support the denial of climate science or underplay their industrial pollution, benefiting their profits. For instance, fossil fuel companies are responsible for global warming because the burning of fossil fuels produces most of greenhouse gases emissions, causing global warming issues. The increasing environmental protection movement and public resistance to use fossil fuels will inevitably impact fossil fuel companies' profits. Therefore, these companies implemented different strategies to protect their interests. According to a CNBC report, the oil industry and conservative foundations in the US have spent billions of dollars to suppress the climate agreements, regulations, and subsidized organizations that deny climate science (CNBC 2020). The “Water Grabbing” and “Green Washing” is another widespread example of capital strategy. Many powerful interest groups take control of or divert valuable water resources and watersheds for their own benefit, depriving or exploiting local communities who highly depend on these resources and ecosystems for their daily lives (Kay 342). These capital powers and commercial groups privately control the natural resources and excessively exploit them in a “legal way”. They describe or depict their products as green and environmentally friendly goods to persuade people's green concerns and underplay their pollution on the environment. This deceptive strategy is broadly employed by diverse companies to handle public concerns or political regulations.



Figure 1. Current new studies suggest that the era of climate science denial is not over.
Photograph: Torsten Blackwood/AFP/Getty Images

3. Significance of Social Media on Public Attitudes and Awareness

Social media is significant for these interest groups or capital powers to spread the ideas of climate change denials or understate the impacts of industrial pollution on environmental problems. Michael A. Peters and Tina Besley, two distinguished educational professors at Beijing Normal University, argue that several powerful, well-funded interest groups are practically boosting science denialism – social media is their primary measure (Peters 11). With

the development of the internet and our society, the use of social media is more and more pervasive in today’s world. Nevertheless, the influence of conspiracy theories, which include climate change denials and other mendacious but seemingly plausible information, are augmented with people’s increasing use of social media. According to Professor Darian-smith, Rupert Murdoch, an Australian-American media tycoon, promotes science denial through his media empire which includes Fox News (Darian-Smith 9). If social media companies, the “superintendent” and chief promoters of these internet sources, employ positive strategies to suppress these environmental or science denial ideas, it will be highly beneficial to the development of environmental protection movements or public awareness of green ideas. However, facts actually backfired from the wish. Conclusion.

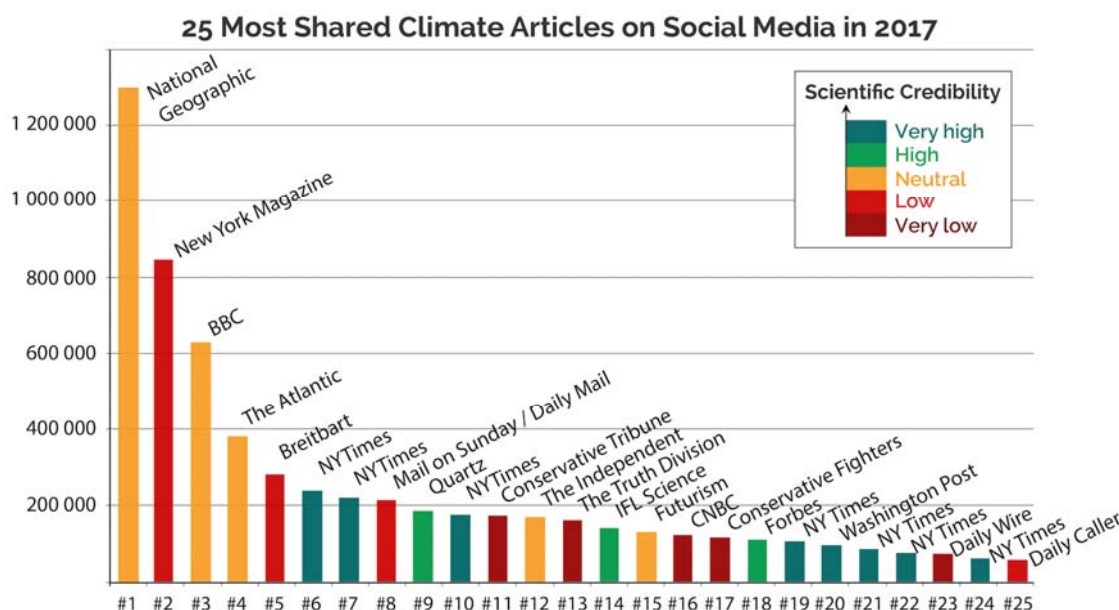


Figure 2. Climate Feedback: most popular climate change articles on social media in 2017

4. Capacity of Social Media Companies

Many social media companies proved their strong capacity to enrich facts and restrains lies, but most of them showed less interest in “protecting Earth” from climate change. Both interest groups or profit-oriented organizations can easily publish their deceptive or misleading ideas through social media work to satisfy their own interests. These information – such as conspiracy theories, greenwashing brands, and understatement of industrial pollution – can cause far-reaching and widespread impacts on public attitudes toward environmental and green promotion. Dr. John Cook explored social media companies’ abilities to handle false ideas through US presidential election. The facts prove that they are able to address misinformation on a broad scale (Bensinger 2021). Popular social media companies can employ multiple strategies to help amplify facts and effectively control deceptive information. Nevertheless, we still not witness their effective actions or efforts. “Researchers for the environmental group Stop Funding Heat found that climate misinformation is viewed as often as 1.36 million times daily on Facebook” (Bensinger 2021). The rapid deterioration of global climate change and the progressively expanding number of misleading information in social media requires these companies to make some changes.

5. Current Global Efforts on Climate Change: Social Media Companies Should Undertake more Responsibilities in Fighting Science Denialism

Recent global efforts on addressing climate change problems made so little headway – it is an essential time for mainstream social media companies to undertake more responsibility in enriching climate facts and suppressing science denial lies. There are several international treaties negotiated or adopted by global parties in recent years, but results were not prominent in most cases. The 2015 Paris Agreement (the COP21 Agreement) is one of the most famous international treaties on climate change problems. The facts prove that it is a market-based solution (Cristano 2021) and faced excessive challenges. Interest groups were still implemented new strategies to fight against environmental policies, and politicians who pursue their own political gains were still trying to oppose these climate change agreements. Dr. Noam Chomsky stated that there were only about 25% of US Republicans recognize humans are responsible for global warming and the US Republican Party opposed the Paris Agreement for their own political interests, such as objection to any restrictions on US power and rejection to the environmental protection efforts. (Chomsky 2021). Though the current COP26 treaty received broad support from global parties, it still causes significant side effects. Indigenous communities will experience more crises of land grabs, water shortages, violations of human rights due to the COP26 deal and its corresponding influence (The Guardian 2021). Since these current global solutions caused little impact on solving climate change issues, social media become another momentous battleground to fight against climate change.



Figure 3. Indigenous Peruvian people protest in London, saying Cop26 was a failure.
Photograph: Dominika Zarzycka/NurPhoto/Rex/Shutterstock

6. Conclusion and Suggestion

Generally speaking, the Climate crisis is an urgent global problem that threatens human society and future development. Its sources and consequences are worldwide, comprehensive and diverse. The influence of social media in today's world is also worldwide, comprehensive, and diverse. Many interest groups utilize social media to underplay the actual impacts of industrial pollution, fabricate science denial misinformation, and fulfill their own interest which ruins the environment. Since the progressive deterioration of climate change problems is pressing,

current global treaties on solving climate change issues are immature, social media firms currently implemented negligible efforts but possess strong capacity on regulating misinformation and amplifying science facts, I suggest it is imperative for social media companies to undertake more responsible roles in fighting climate change and thus implement more efforts on it.

References

- [1] Leiserowitz, A., Maibach, E., Rosenthal, S., Kotcher, Carman, J., Wang, X., Goldberg, M., Lacroix, K., & Marlon, J. (2021). *Climate Change in the American Mind: December 2020*. Yale University and George Mason University. New Haven, CT: Yale Program on Climate Change Communication.
- [2] CNBC, "Why Climate Change Denial Still Exists in the US", December 20, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f1rxv1yPQrc>.
- [3] Peters, Michael A and Besley, Tina. Education and the New Dark Ages? Conspiracy, social media and science denial. Access: *Contemporary Issues in Education*. 2020, VOL 40, NO. 1, 5-14. <https://doi.org/10.46786/ac20.3082>.
- [4] Kay, Sylvia and Franco, Jenny. *The Global Water Grab: A Primer*. Green Planet Blues, 2019. <http://www.tni.org> under a Creative Commons License.
- [5] Cristiano, Riccardo De. The financialization of environment protection, 2021. https://climateandcapitalism.com/2021/03/11/the-financialization-of-environment-protection/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+climateandcapitalism%2FpEtD+%28Climate+and+Capitalism%29.
- [6] Chomsky, Noam and Pollin, Robert. *Climate Crisis and the Global Green New Deal: The Political Economy of Saving the Planet*, 2020.
- [7] 'A death sentence': Indigenous climate activists denounce Cop26 deal. *The Guardian* <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/nov/16/indigenous-climate-activists-cop26-endangers-native-communities>.
- [8] Bensinger, Greg. Social Media is Polluted with Climate Denialism, 2021. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/12/opinion/climate-change-facebook-glasgow.html>.
- [9] Darian-Smith, Eva. *INTL ST 17 Lectures*, 2021. University of California, Irvine (Professor and Chair of International and Global Studies).