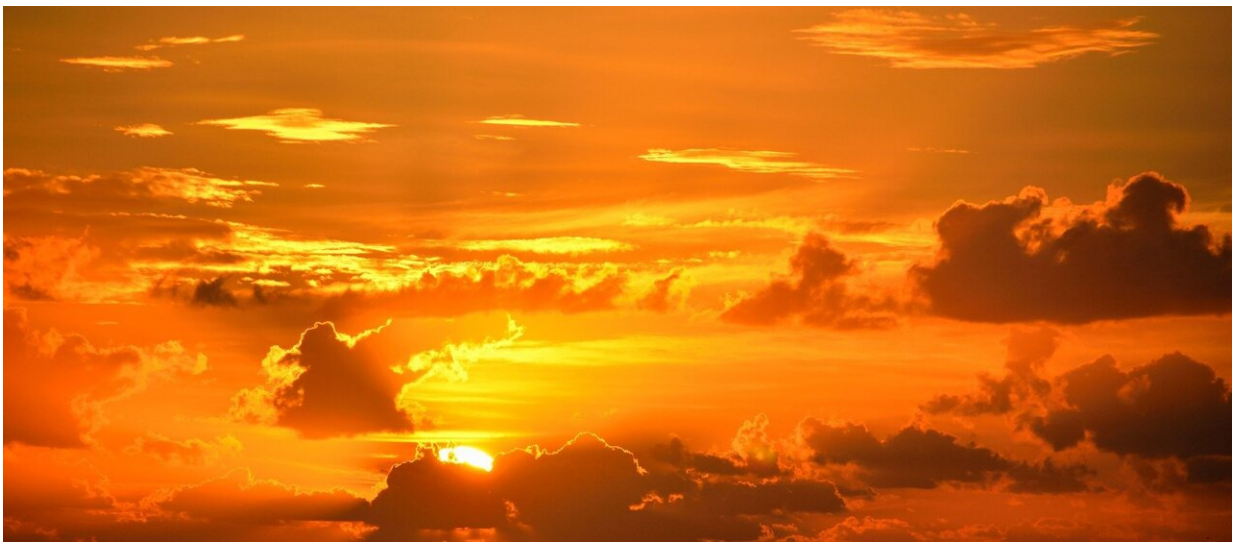


'The future of this planet is at stake,' new report pressures Facebook, YouTube and Twitter to battle climate lies

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The nation's leading social media companies have pulled out the stops to shut down conspiracy theories, hoaxes and falsehoods about COVID and vaccines, QAnon and the 2020 election, but they are far less aggressive when it comes to the latest hotspot in the war on misinformation: climate change.

Social media researchers and [climate scientists](#) say hundreds of

thousands of posts denying [climate change](#) can be found on Twitter, Facebook and its app Instagram, Tik Tok and YouTube. And, a new report from Advance Democracy shared exclusively with U.S. TODAY found that warning labels or links to credible information are frequently missing from posts that deny the existence of climate change, dispute its causes or underplay its effects.

Among them is the false belief that the Grand Solar Minimum, a period of low solar activity, will cool the planet and cause the next ice age, which is particularly popular among prominent climate change deniers and even has its own YouTube channel.

Michael Mann, director of Penn State University's Earth System Science Center, warns that fossil fuel interests are weaponizing social media platforms to sow doubt and division and suppress public support for climate change initiatives.

He's calling on tech companies to identify, flag and take down accounts that repeatedly push climate lies and keep [misinformation](#) from spreading largely unchecked.

"Nothing less than the future of this planet is at stake," Mann, author of "The New Climate War," told U.S. TODAY.

On Twitter in 2020, there were nearly a half million climate change denial posts, according to Advance Democracy, a research organization that studies disinformation and extremism. So far this year, there have been 83,590, with climate change denial content surging during the Texas blackout in February and President Joe Biden's climate change summit in April.

Twitter climate change deniers seize on global cooling

myth

Posts with the hashtag #GrandSolarMinimum accounted for nearly 9% of all climate change denial content on Twitter, the report found. The posts pointed to cold snaps around the world including in Greenland as purported evidence that the Grand Solar Minimum—a period during which the sun gives off less energy—is cooling the globe.

Scientists say the Grand Solar Minimum, which reduces average temperatures by a half a degree Fahrenheit or less, does little to offset offset global warming, yet all of the top five Twitter accounts pushing climate change denial promote claims it does.

"We recognize more can be done on services like Twitter to elevate credible climate information, including on how we can mitigate climate crisis harms," Twitter said in a statement. "Our teams are thinking about ways we can best serve the global climate crisis conversation happening on the service, including through tools that surface and make reliable information and resources more readily available."

Texas winter storm, California wildfires fuel climate misinformation

Increasingly, climate change deniers are seizing on extreme weather events, such as the Texas winter storm when some people falsely claimed the snow was fake or the California wildfires some said were the result of space lasers to promote skepticism about climate change from a public whose faith in science was already shaken by the pandemic.

When millions of Texans lost power in February, Facebook didn't label false claims that wind turbines caused the massive outages that racked up millions of views, according to a report from nonprofit Avaaz shared

exclusively with U.S. TODAY.

Mark Zuckerberg admitted that climate misinformation is a big issue at a congressional hearing in March, but when asked by Rep. A. Donald McEachin (D-Va.) why Facebook didn't apply the same rules to climate change as COVID-19 misinformation, the Facebook CEO said lies about the pandemic had the potential to cause "imminent physical harm," while climate misinformation does not.

A Facebook spokesman said climate change misinformation accounts for a small percentage of overall misinformation on Facebook platforms but declined to be specific.

John Cook, a research assistant professor at the Center for Climate Change Communication at George Mason University who is advising Facebook, says social media platforms must quickly develop effective solutions to climate misinformation the way they did for COVID.

"COVID-19 misinformation is an obvious immediate threat and social media platforms were appropriately proactive in quickly responding and stopping it from spreading. Similarly, climate change is an immediate threat as climate impacts are happening here and now, all across society and our environment," Cook said. "But unlike the pandemic, climate change is going to persist and increase in intensity over time. This underscores why it's imperative that [social media platforms](#) are proactive and urgent in stopping climate misinformation from spreading."

Scientists urge Facebook and YouTube to crack down on climate lies

Social media researchers say it's hard to get a handle on the volume of climate misinformation without access to private groups and messages.

Advance Democracy found that some of the most popular climate change denialists on Twitter also have accounts on Facebook and Instagram.

Advance Democracy also uncovered some 4,210 public posts about the Grand Solar Minimum since 2020 that generated about 97,100 interactions. Instagram hosted a smaller number of posts.

Last fall, Facebook created a Climate Science Information Center. At the time, Facebook's chief product officer Chris Cox told U.S. TODAY: "Our goal is to help people get authoritative information about climate change, and we are taking it seriously. This is one step, and there will be many more."

The center pops up when users search terms such as "global warming." It includes scientific facts, such as nearly all [global warming](#) is caused by humans, and busts common climate-change myths.

Facebook has begun to add links to the center on climate change-related posts in some places and has plans to expand. Fact-checkers also bird dog bogus claims such as that the net gain of global temperatures over the last 58 years is zero, the World Wildlife Fund funded fires in the Amazon and sea level rates haven't significantly changed in the last 120 years.

"When they rate this content as false, we add a warning label and reduce its distribution so fewer people see it. We also take action against Pages, Groups, and accounts that repeatedly share false claims about climate science," Facebook told U.S. TODAY.

YouTube, owned by Google, was singled out as a top source for climate misinformation by the U.S. House Select Committee on the Climate Crisis. The committee urged YouTube to take more aggressive steps to

fight back. Advance Democracy found that videos on one channel about Grand Solar Minimum had over 4.7 million views.

YouTube told U.S. TODAY that it surfaces authoritative content in search results and informational panels to reduce the spread of misinformation, such as a panel that defines climate change.

"For example, searching for videos about climate change or even climate-related conspiracies brings up results from authoritative sources and information panels where users can find additional context," Elena Hernandez, a YouTube spokesperson, said in a statement.

Advance Democracy says the informational panel does not pop up on searches for the Grand Solar Minimum.

According to YouTube, a climate change information panel shows a definition of climate change search results for specific events linked to climate change that have resulted in conspiracies, like "Texas Snow Fake," surface authoritative sources first.

On TikTok, Advance Democracy found 14 videos tagged with the hashtag #GrandSolarMinimum that received more than 150,000 views as of April 26.

TikTok said it works to keep "misleading, harmful or deceptive content and accounts off TikTok."

"We work proactively to identify and remove misinformation and accounts dedicated to spreading it, and we review reports from our community," the company said. "This includes misinformation related to climate change, vaccines, COVID-19, and more."

Daniel Jones, president of Advance Democracy, says climate

misinformation that obfuscates or downplays the threat to human life is delaying "necessary policy reforms worldwide."

"Our research affirms that the spread of [climate](#) misinformation is prolific on social media and could benefit from platform interventions that steer users to more accurate information," he said.

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