

Event Report: Climate Change and Mis/Disinformation: Clearing the Air October 1

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Introduction

The Info Integrity Lab's event Climate Change and Mis/Disinformation: Clearing the Air centered on the critical issues of climate change communication, denial and misinformation, and also served as the launch to the Lab's new focus on climate change, including through a Summit on Climate and Mis/Disinformation planned for June 2025. Featuring insights from prominent speakers, including Dr. Katharine Hayhoe, the event highlighted the historical context of climate change perception, current challenges in communication, and potential strategies for addressing misinformation.

Historical Context

Dr. Hayhoe reflected on her experiences as a graduate student in the 1990s, noting the absence of climate denialism at that time. While climate change seemed distant then, this viewpoint persists today – indeed, despite the evidence of climate change becoming more “real”, it has become increasingly a partisan issue over time. Misinformation has become intertwined with a broader web of disinformation, complicating public understanding. A key takeaway was that the challenge lies not in the need for more education but in overcoming political polarization.

The “War on Science”

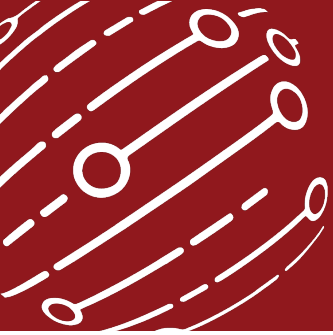
The phenomenon of climate denialism can be likened to the playful yet serious themes of Calvin and Hobbes. Author Shawn Otto describes this as “the war on science,” leading to what some call “the death of expertise.” Resources like The Debunking Handbook reveal how easily misinformation spreads, primarily driven by individuals, not just bots. Platforms like YouTube contribute to the dissemination of bizarre theories, while AI poses challenges in combating climate disinformation.

Roots of Climate Denial

Climate denialism intensified when climate change shifted from a future concern to an immediate one. The purpose of this denial is often to prevent meaningful action, creating a “whack-a-mole” scenario where new misinformation arises as old issues are addressed. The role of “merchants of doubt” and “petroleum papers” illustrates how vested interests perpetuate confusion, framing misinformation as a form of solution aversion driven by ideology.

Political Polarization and Misinformation

Misinformation is intricately tied to political beliefs, ironically particularly among individuals with higher scientific education, who can be better at justifying their beliefs and may become more polarized. This phenomenon is pronounced in developed countries, where a divide exists between those who accept climate change and those who do not. Powerful industries, such as oil and gas, resist change and obscure scientific truths, complicating the path forward.



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Books like *Merchants of Doubt* by Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway highlight how a small group of contrarian scientists has perpetuated confusion around scientific consensus. Similarly, Geoff Dembicki's *The Petroleum Papers* documents how oil companies were aware of climate implications yet engaged in disinformation campaigns.

Strategies for Countering Misinformation

Traditional debunking methods have proven insufficient. Instead, “prebunking”—a form of inoculation against misinformation—has emerged as a critical strategy. This approach involves replacing false narratives with accurate ones that resonate with existing worldviews. For example, framing climate change in terms of national security can appeal to conservative audiences. Addressing Canada's reliance on oil and gas necessitates developing strong financial incentives to foster societal debate. Engaging with those who have become wedge issues in the ongoing war on science is essential.

Communication Challenges

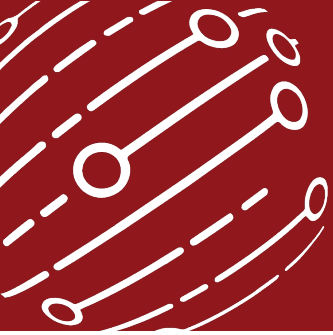
Canada faces a significant gap in communicating effective climate policies and the real impacts of climate change. Many Canadians acknowledge climate change but may not grasp its immediacy. This discrepancy underscores the importance of selling the co-benefits of climate action, demonstrating how proactive measures can positively affect communities. Two central themes emerged in communication strategies: how we communicate and what constitutes meaningful action. Catherine McKenna emphasized the need to transcend ideological divides when addressing the oil and gas industry. While many Canadians recognize climate change, fewer feel personally impacted, highlighting the need for relatable narratives that include addressing “hands, hearts and minds”.

The Role of Conspiracies and Greenwashing

The prevalence of climate conspiracies was discussed, with Dr. Daniel Stockemer noting that Canadians are slightly less likely to believe in them compared to other nations. Dr. Patrick McCurdy warned of the dangers of greenwashing in the Canadian oil sands sector, where emissions continue to rise despite corporate claims of sustainability. Dr. Chris Russill raised questions about public participation in the energy transition, emphasizing that misinformation spreads through both supply and demand. The amplification of false narratives during crises, such as wildfires, illustrates the need for a concerted effort to engage the public.

Proposed Solutions

In the Q&A session, several solutions were proposed. Dr. Russill emphasized that increasing scientific knowledge alone is insufficient; Canada has over-invested in complex policies that may not resonate with people's experiences. Meeting individuals where they are—both in understanding and in their daily lives—is crucial. Helen Hays advocated for improved platform governance and public participation in climate conversations, while Dr. Stockemer called for enhanced civic education to combat polarization. The overarching sentiment was that effective communication about climate change requires a shift in approach, emphasizing relatable narratives that connect people's hearts and minds to actionable solutions. Éric St-Pierre of the Trottier Family



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Foundation illustrated scenarios envisioning a future shaped by these narratives, inspiring action and accountability. Jennifer Irish, the Lab's Director, described how the themes of the event would fit into the Roadmap to the Climate Change Summit and beyond (which will be disseminated separately).

Conclusion

Dr. Katharine Hayhoe's insights reinforced the necessity for a collective movement toward climate action and these sentiments were echoed by the roundtable participants in a number of overlapping as diverse approaches. As we advance toward future initiatives, the focus must be on creating environments where effective and practical solutions are not just discussed, but embraced and implemented. To combat misinformation, thought leaders must connect people's heads to their hearts, emphasizing the significance of addressing what individuals care about and why climate solutions matter. Engaging deeply with individuals is essential to bridging the divide created by ideology and misinformation. This makes it all the more important that the Lab and its partners and collaborators advance not just an understanding of how mis/disinformation impedes understand and actions, but also concrete deliverables and tools for mitigating its influence.