

DISINFORMATION

When you are plunged into chaos

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Climate change disinformation

Climate change is one of the most urgent issues of our time and is subject to disinformation campaigns and public misunderstanding.

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Climate change is one of the most urgent issues of our time. Without swift action, its impacts will become more severe, costly, and irreversible. Unfortunately, climate change is also a complex issue that is subject to disinformation campaigns and public misunderstanding.

Powerful lobby groups have promoted false claims about climate change for decades. These claims filter down to everyday conversations in which ordinary people repeat things they have heard. For example, people may naturally talk about climate change during a heatwave, after a flood, or when a new environmental policy is introduced. Statements like "the climate has always changed" may appear reasonable as it has a kernel of truth. In other circumstances, it may be spoken in jest or it may be spoken in anger by those opposed to climate action.

Although it is tricky to negotiate topics that have become politicised, it is important to encourage climate conversations that are fact-based and accurate. Otherwise, individuals and communities will not be empowered to make informed decisions about the future.

While the specific topic of this lesson is climate change, the insights learned can be applied to many other topics. In particular, learning about climate change offers valuable insights into the influence of powerful interest groups and into the challenges of negotiating subjects that have become politicised.



False claims about climate change

Opposition to climate change comes in two main forms: 'climate denial' rejects climate science and claims there is nothing to worry about while 'climate delay' acknowledges that climate change is real, but makes excuses to prevent or delay action.

Climate denial aims to convince people that climate change isn't real, isn't caused by humans, or isn't a problem. The following statements are examples of climate denial with explanations for why these statements are untrue or misleading:

- Denial claim:** "climate science is unreliable".
Reality: The vast majority of climate scientists agree that climate change is occurring. Multiple studies confirm long-term warming of the planet.
- Denial claim:** "the climate has always changed".
Reality: It is true that the climate changes naturally over the course of thousands of years, but current changes are happening very rapidly due to the use of fossil fuels.

Climate delay aims to prevent the implementation of climate action. It seems more reasonable than climate denial because it does accept that climate change is real. Ultimately, however, it still denies the need for urgent action. The following statements are common examples of climate delay with explanations for why these statements are untrue or misleading:

- Delay claim:** "Why should we cut emissions if China is still polluting?".
Reality: All countries must act and play their fair role. Moreover, developed nations have emitted the most historically and benefited the most.
- Delay claim:** "Scientists with new technologies will figure it out".
Reality: Earth is running out of time to prevent irreversible changes. We already have the technology to cut emissions—what's missing is action.

As you can see from the examples above, false claims about climate change may have a kernel of truth or may seem superficially reasonable. When ordinary people express these views, they are not being stupid. They are likely to be repeating claims they have heard elsewhere.

Very often, these claims can be traced back to powerful lobby groups representing the interests of the fossil fuel industry. Just as the tobacco industry denied the harms of smoking for decades, fossil fuel interests have worked to confuse the public and stall climate action.

The campaign against climate action

Many large corporations, especially in the fossil fuel, manufacturing, and agricultural sectors, use disinformation and deceptive tactics to slow climate action while protecting their profits. These strategies create confusion, weaken public pressure, and delay government policies that could reduce carbon emissions.

ExxonMobil, one of the world's largest oil companies, has played a major role in delaying climate action. In the 1970s, Exxon's own scientists accurately predicted global warming from fossil fuels. Exxon suppressed this research and launched a public disinformation campaign to cast doubt on climate science. Other large corporations followed this model.

The campaign against climate action is one of the most extensive the world has ever seen. It includes:

- Paying think-tanks, lobbyists, scientists, and media outlets to cast doubt on climate science.
- Pretending to be invested in "green" alternatives while continuing to pollute. This is called 'greenwashing'.
- Lobbying politicians to block or weaken climate policies.
- Emphasising the need for individuals 'to reduce their carbon footprint' (a term invented by British Petroleum) rather than the responsibility of fossil fuel corporations.
- Promoting false solutions such as 'carbon capture' and 'clean coal'.

It can be helpful to inform people about the scale of the campaign against climate action, as it has successfully shifted responsibility onto individuals, making them feel guilty about their personal choices while downplaying the role of major polluters.

Reinforcing accurate information

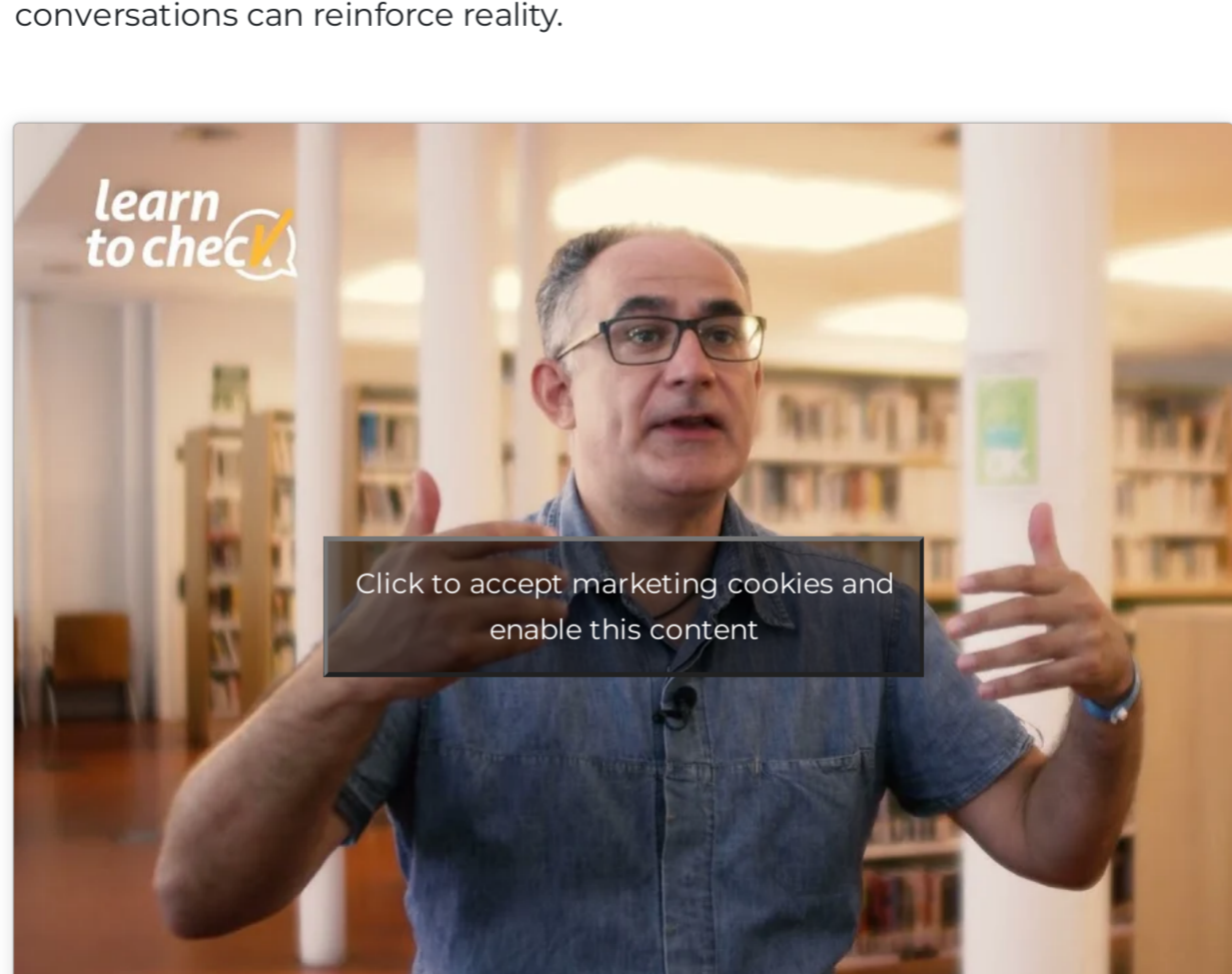
You don't need to be a climate scientist to help spread accurate, reliable information about climate change. Simply being aware of common misinformation tactics, recognising credible sources, and confidently directing people toward fact-based resources can make a big difference.

Here are some key points to remember when talking to someone about climate change:

- **Scientific Consensus is Clear:** There is widespread agreement among scientists that climate change is real, caused by human activity, and poses a major threat to life on Earth. Over 97% of climate scientists agree on this. (Source: [NASA Science](#))
- **Weather is Not the Same as Climate:** People may be confused by short-term cold spells or extreme weather events, but weather fluctuates daily, while climate refers to long-term patterns. A cold winter does not disprove global warming—just as a hot summer does not single-handedly confirm it.
- **Be Aware of Disinformation Tactics:** If a claim seems designed to create doubt, ask where it comes from and whether it's being spread by fossil fuel interests, lobbyists, or unreliable sources. Misinformation often exaggerates uncertainty or cherry-picks data.

Encourage Critical Thinking: If someone questions climate science, ask them where their information comes from and whether it's backed by the scientific consensus. Guiding people toward trusted sources like NASA, the IPCC, and major scientific organizations can help them rethink unreliable claims. For more local issues, point people to reputable factchecking organisations.

The more people hear about climate change in everyday discussions, the harder it becomes for misinformation to take hold. Even casual conversations can reinforce reality.



Taboo conversations

Climate change can be a sensitive topic, particularly in communities where local businesses, farmers, or other groups believe that climate policies may negatively impact their livelihoods. In these situations, discussing climate change can lead to tension, making it challenging to share reliable information.

Taboo conversations, where there is strong opposition, don't have to be confrontational. By focusing on common ground, listening actively, and finding opportunities, you can make discussions more productive and help shift perspectives over time.

You may want to consider the following approach:

Find Common Ground: Acknowledge concerns – If someone fears economic hardship from climate policies, recognize their concern. Find shared values – Most people care about clean air, safe drinking water, and a stable economy. Keep it local – Discuss climate impacts in their community (e.g., floods, droughts, rising energy costs) rather than abstract global trends. For example, "Have you noticed how extreme weather events have become more common around here? Scientists say it's linked to climate change."

Listen More Than You Speak: Ask open-ended questions to understand their perspective. Let them express their views before responding—people are more likely to listen when they feel heard. Avoid immediately correcting or dismissing their beliefs, as this can make them defensive. For example, "That's interesting—what sources do you trust for information on that?"

Recognize and Counter Disinformation Tactics: If they repeat misinformation, ask where they heard it and encourage finding reliable sources. Avoid arguing over conspiracies—focus on solutions that directly affect them. For example, "It's interesting how this argument always comes up—did you know oil companies spent millions funding misinformation campaigns?"

Know When to Disengage Respectfully: Some people aren't ready to change their views, and that's okay. If the conversation gets too heated, suggest continuing it another time. Leave them with a reliable resource and end on a positive note. For example, "I appreciate hearing your perspective. If you're interested, NASA has some great climate research you might find interesting."

Of course, there is no foolproof way to have these conversations. You need to use your judgment to assess the situation.

It could interest you:



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