

DISINFORMATION AND SUSTAINABILITY IN THE PRIVATE SECTOR

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1. Introduction

Environmental disinformation is one of the most significant obstacles to the transition towards sustainable development models. It involves the intentional or unintentional dissemination of false, misleading or incomplete information on environmental, climate or energy issues; disinformation affects both public perception and the political will to adopt transformative measures. This analysis briefly examines the main types of environmental disinformation, the channels through which it is disseminated, and strategies to counteract it through media literacy and the regulation of digital platforms.

2. Types of environmental disinformation in the private sector

Environmental disinformation takes many forms that hinder the social consensus necessary for climate action. Firstly, there is the direct denial of established scientific consensus, such as the claim that climate change ‘is not happening or that its causes are exclusively natural’. Although this form has lost ground in public discourse, it persists in certain sectors and has been documented on platforms such as YouTube and TikTok, where denialist content questioning anthropogenic global warming proliferates (Loiola, 2022).

Secondly, disinformation through distortion acknowledges the existence of a problem but exaggerates its uncertainties or presents false solutions. This strategy has been identified by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) as part of ‘discourses of *delay*’, which exploit the gap between acknowledging the problem and taking effective action (Institute for Strategic Dialogue & Climate Action Against Disinformation, 2022). A prime example is the claim that ‘nuclear energy is the only viable alternative, whilst downplaying its associated risks and costs’.

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Thirdly, displacement disinformation shifts environmental responsibility onto marginal actors, such as individual citizens, whilst exonerating major corporate emitters. This strategy has been extensively documented in the report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which highlights how ‘established economic and political interests have organised and funded disinformation and anti-climate communications’ (Sankaranarayanan et al., 2025, p. 1).

3. Dissemination channels and the role of algorithms

The channels through which disinformation is disseminated have evolved significantly in recent decades. Whilst in the past disinformation was mainly controlled through *think tanks* and like-minded media outlets, social media now constitutes the primary vehicle for its spread. According to the European Union (2022), 57% of viral content on Twitter relating to climate change contained false or misleading claims.

The role of recommendation algorithms is particularly worrying. Recent research has shown that platforms such as Facebook steer sceptical users towards increasingly extreme and conspiracy-theory-based content on climate change (BBC News, 2022). In a simulated study, a user profile following sceptical pages was quickly recommended content that denied anthropogenic climate change and attacked measures to mitigate it, whilst a profile following authoritative scientific sources consistently received reliable content (BBC News, 2022). This algorithmic behaviour has been described as a ‘rabbit hole’ phenomenon, where content becomes increasingly extreme as users interact with posts on a particular topic.

Furthermore, evidence suggests that Facebook’s ad delivery algorithm can act as an active player in the climate discourse, exerting a statistically significant influence on where adverts are delivered (Sankaranarayanan et al., 2025). This algorithmic behaviour may not be fully understood by the platform itself or its creators, which poses significant challenges for regulation and transparency in climate communication (Sankaranarayanan et al., 2025).

4. Consequences of environmental disinformation

The consequences of this phenomenon are measurable and far-reaching. Disinformation has contributed to delays in the introduction of carbon taxes in various countries, has fuelled opposition to wind farms and solar power stations through false claims about their impact on health, and has generated mistrust of scientific institutions (Institute for Strategic Dialogue & Climate Action Against Disinformation, 2022). The IPCC has identified ‘rhetoric, disinformation and the politicisation of science’ as key barriers to climate action (Sankaranarayanan et al., 2025, p. 1).

A prime example is the disinformation campaign regarding Chinese solar panels, which falsely claimed that the manufacture of these devices generated more emissions than they

saved over their lifetime. This narrative has been based on deliberately erroneous calculations regarding China's energy *mix*. In this context, fact-checking carried out by agencies such as AFP Factual has debunked the circulation of images purporting to show solar farms in Spain, when in fact they had been taken in China in 2018 (Salvadó, 2025). These disinformation narratives have often been amplified through their association with the UN's 2030 Agenda, contributing to a distorted perception of the Sustainable Development Goals.

5. Mitigation strategies

Against this backdrop, multifaceted responses are required that combine education, fact-checking and regulation.

Firstly, Education in media and scientific literacy constitutes the first line of defence, equipping citizens to identify biases, verify sources and cross-check claims. The European Union's Code of Practice on Disinformation (2022) emphasises the importance of 'empowering users' through improved tools to recognise, understand and report disinformation, as well as through media literacy initiatives.

In this sense, Research in Spain has demonstrated the strategic role of fact-checking journalism in the fight against climate disinformation. A study of 479 news articles published in 2023 by EFE Verifica, Maldito Clima and Newtral – platforms accredited by the *International Fact-Checking Network* – revealed significant but uneven coverage of climate change, with fact-checking reports and the debunking of viral hoaxes being the most common types of content (Sendra Duro, 2025). The study highlights the rigour in source management, characterised by extensive use of official, expert, media and digital sources (Sendra Duro, 2025).

Similarly, an analysis of 114 climate change hoaxes verified by the same Spanish agencies since 2022 revealed that the shared hoaxes are linked to environmental disasters occurring as a result of climate change (Sánchez Sahelices, 2024).

Initiatives to regulate digital platforms, in particular the European Union's Code of Practice on Disinformation, constitute a fundamental instrument. This code, which was strengthened in 2022, includes 44 commitments and 128 specific measures in areas such as the demonetisation of disinformation, transparency in political advertising, the integrity of services, user empowerment, support for research and the strengthening of the *fact-checking* community (European Commission, 2022).

The Code establishes a reinforced monitoring framework that includes service-level indicators to measure its implementation across the EU, and a Transparency Centre accessible to the public that provides an overview of how the measures are being implemented (European Commission, 2022). In addition, a Permanent Working Group

has been set up to review and adapt the commitments in line with technological, social, market and legislative developments (European Commission, 2022).

So, collaborative fact-checking initiatives, such as those promoted by the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN), are a crucial element in the fight against disinformation. The EU Code of Practice aims to extend fact-checking coverage to all Member States and languages, ensuring that platforms make more consistent use of fact-checking in their services (European Commission, 2022).

Despite these advances, significant challenges remain. The policies of major tech companies to combat climate disinformation remain inadequate. During COP26, a small group of just 16 'super-spreaders' of climate disinformation accumulated more than 500,000 *likes* and *retweets*, whilst Facebook's fact-checking policies were inadequately enforced (DeSmog, 2022). Furthermore, it has been documented that Facebook's algorithm drives greater exposure to climate disinformation than to its own Climate Science Centre (BBC News, 2022; Institute for Strategic Dialogue & Climate Action Against Disinformation, 2022).

All in all, environmental disinformation represents a systemic obstacle to the transition towards sustainability, operating through multiple forms and channels that exploit the vulnerabilities of contemporary information ecosystems.

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