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THE CLIMATE **202**

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Election misinformation helped fuel the Jan. 6 Capitol attack. Now, climate misinformation threatens the planet.

By [Maxine Joselow](#)

with research by [Alexandra Ellerbeck](#)

Today at 8:16 a.m. EST



Good morning and welcome to The Climate 202! On the first anniversary of the Jan. 6 insurrection at the **U.S. Capitol**, **The Washington Post** is inserting copies of its investigative series “The Attack: Before, During and After” into the 2,700 copies of the print newspaper that are delivered to offices on Capitol Hill.

You can read the full investigation on The Post's website [here](#). But first:

Experts are warning of rampant climate misinformation online

One year after a mob of **President Donald Trump's** supporters stormed the Capitol, experts are sounding the alarm about a new threat not only to democracy, but to the planet: The spread of misinformation about climate change online.

Just as conservative and far-right activists took to social media over the “big lie” — that Trump won the 2020 presidential election — so they are jumping online to share false or misleading posts about climate science and climate policy.

If 2021 was the year of misinformation about the coronavirus pandemic, 2022 could be the year of misinformation about the climate crisis, according to experts who spoke to The Climate 202.

“What we have really seen is that reactions to covid generated new intersectional tribes online, including anti-vaccine influencers and far-right conspiracy theorists,” said **Ciaran O'Connor**, an analyst at the **Institute for Strategic Dialogue**, a nonprofit that seeks to combat extremism. “And now, climate change is becoming a new domain in which separate communities with their own distinct ideologies are merging and finding common cause.”

Kathie Treen, a PhD student at the **University of Exeter** in England who published a recent paper on climate misinformation, agreed with that assessment. “It's completely predictable who will reject climate science: It's the same people who reject vaccines and who reject the reality of covid,” she said.

John Cook, a postdoctoral research fellow at the Climate Change Communication Research Hub at **Monash University** in Australia, pointed to research showing that misinformation about climate solutions is on the rise and that climate misinformation can cancel out accurate information.

“I think there's a misconception that climate misinformation is not as dangerous as covid or election misinformation,” he said. “But it's an existential threat.”

Twitter and Facebook's approaches

Ahead of the COP26 climate conference in Scotland in November last year, Twitter rolled out a strategy to combat climate disinformation. Under the strategy, which the company calls “pre-bunking,” users are steered toward reliable climate information with more context.

But **Steve Milloy**, a climate change skeptic who served on Trump's transition team at the **Environmental Protection Agency**, currently has a verified Twitter account with more than 37,000 followers, from which he has shared false or unproven information about global warming and its effects.

On Tuesday, for example, Milloy tweeted that the record-breaking wildfire in Colorado last week was caused by “natural” drought. Scientists have said that the fire was intensified by climate change, which caused unnaturally warm and dry conditions for this time of year.

Cook of Monash University said he views Milloy as a “clear source of misinformation” who should not be “whitelisted” by the platform.

Reached by phone yesterday, Milloy said he thinks that Twitter and other social media companies have no business fact-checking users' posts about climate change.

“I am totally opposed to Big Tech censoring people from discussing issues,” Milloy told The Climate 202. “If people can show I'm wrong, they should shame me off Twitter.”

Twitter spokeswoman **Elizabeth Busby** said in an email: “We recognize more can be done on services like Twitter to elevate credible climate information. Our teams are thinking about ways to best serve the global climate crisis conversation, including through tools that surface and make reliable information and resources more readily available.”

Busby did not respond to a follow-up question about Milloy.

Kevin McAlister, a spokesman for **Facebook**, said in an email that the company seeks to “combat climate change misinformation by connecting people to reliable information from leading organizations through our Climate Science Center and working with a global network of independent fact checkers to review and rate content.”

Telegram and the 'climate lockdown' conspiracy

Beyond traditional platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, experts pointed to the growing popularity of **Telegram**, an encrypted messaging app that was used by the **Proud Boys** and other extremist groups to plan for the Capitol riot.

Last year, Telegram was flooded with messages blasting mask mandates, vaccine requirements and other measures designed to slow the spread of covid-19. More recently, some of the same Telegram users have pivoted to spreading a conspiracy theory about an impending “climate lockdown.”

The theory goes that in the future, governments will impose similar restrictions on their citizens to reduce the carbon emissions that contribute to climate change. For example, governments could limit people's ability to eat red meat, drive gas-powered vehicles or fly in airplanes.

Take a Telegram user named **Christian Westbrook**, who goes by “Ice Age Farmer” and has more than 82,000 followers. After extensively criticizing vaccines, Westbrook began evangelizing about a potential climate lockdown in September 2020.

“It all makes sense now in terms of why we have the deployment of the police state in this pandemic. ... They are getting people acclimated to the complete police state that is needed for a climate lockdown,” Westbrook said in a **YouTube** video that was shared with his Telegram followers and viewed more than 96,000 times.

“We've already seen the appropriation of the contact tracing ideas that were pushed out in covid-19 and applied now to carbon emissions and cow farts,” he said, noting that former vice president **Al Gore** had recently launched an initiative called **Climate Trace** that used satellites and sensors to monitor emissions.

Telegram's press team did not respond to a request for comment.

Extreme events

More than 40 percent of Americans live in counties hit by climate disasters

More than 4 in 10 Americans live in a county that was affected by a climate-related weather disaster last year, according to a Post analysis of federal disaster declarations, and more than 80 percent experienced a heat wave.

Americans saw mudslides, blistering heat, droughts, hurricanes and wildfires in 2021, The Post's Sarah Kaplan and Andrew Ba Tran report. The extreme weather damages topped \$104 billion and at least 656 people lost their lives.

“In the country that has generated more greenhouse gases than any other nation in history, global warming is expanding its reach and exacting an escalating toll,” our colleagues write.

Pressure points

Youngkin taps former Trump EPA chief for secretary

of natural resources

Virginia Gov.-elect **Glenn Youngkin** (R) yesterday announced the nomination of **Andrew Wheeler**, a former coal lobbyist who rolled back regulations while leading Trump's **Environmental Protection Agency**, to serve as his secretary of natural resources, The Post's **Laura Vozzella** reports.

The nomination drew swift condemnation from environmental activists and Democratic lawmakers in Richmond and Washington. However, it's unclear whether Wheeler could be confirmed by the state Senate, where Democrats have a slim majority.

Youngkin previously said he would take Virginia out of the **Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative**, a cap-and-trade program in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic.

Rep. **Don Beyer** (D-Va.):

Volkswagen, Toyota are coming for Tesla, speed up with \$170B investment in EVs

Volkswagen and **Toyota**, the world's two biggest automakers, unveiled \$170 billion in investments in electric vehicles aimed at challenging **Tesla's** dominance, **Bloomberg's** River Davis and Craig Trudell report.

Meanwhile, the smaller **Chrysler** has announced plans to become all-electric by 2028, **the Wall Street Journal's** Nick Kostov reports. The company, which has faced declining sales in recent years and currently sells just two vehicle models, introduced the Chrysler Airflow, a concept EV that can travel 400 miles on a single charge.

The global climate

France says car ads will soon have to encourage environmentally friendly travel

In March, car advertisements in France are set to begin carrying a newly mandated caveat: Walk, bike, carpool or take public transit when possible, The Post's **Claire Parker** reports.

Under the regulation, cars will join junk food and cigarettes in the pantheon of advertising topics that come with admonitions. Environmental groups in the country have campaigned for a full ban on car ads.

“Decarbonizing transportation does not only mean switching to an electric motor. It also means using public transportation or cycling when possible,” French Ecological Transition Minister **Barbara Pompili** wrote on Twitter last week, commenting on the new rules.

Agency alert

The EPA added to its list of hazardous air pollutants for the first time in 30 years

The addition of 1-bromopropane marks the first time in 30 years that the agency has added to its list of hazardous air pollutants, and it comes after decades of prodding by environmentalists, The Post's **Dino Grandoni** reports.

Researchers, bureaucrats and even many chemical makers have long viewed the solvent, which is used by dry cleaners and auto shops on fabrics and greasy metal, as a dangerous airborne pollutant that can cause cancer and nerve damage.

Viral

Thanks for reading!

