TRUTH AND LIES

Four Days of Texas-Sized Disinformation:

Social Media Companies Threaten Action on Climate Change

I. SUMMARY

The fossil fuel industry has spent millions over decades to sow doubt and prevent action on the climate crisis. This narrative campaign largely failed to sow doubt, as it is no longer credible to deny climate change entirely, and most Americans are demanding action on the issue.[1] However, social media companies have given the fossil fuel industry's public relations campaigns a new lease on life, as they offer a safe space for the worst climate disinformation. Despite warnings from environmental groups about the threats posed by rampant climate denial on social media, Facebook, Twitter, Google/YouTube, and other tech companies have refused to effectively moderate this extreme content or take action against repeat offenders of climate change disinformation.

The following report is a case study of the disinformation event following the February 2021 storm-related blackouts in Texas. Just one month after the disinformation-fueled January 6 riot, an extreme winter storm caused rolling blackouts in Texas. Again, social media platforms were the site of mass disinformation about the cause of the power outages, pushing the false narrative that this was caused by the failure of wind energy and sharing a viral image that alleged that wind power companies were using helicopters and chemical spray to de-ice wind turbines. While mainstream and local media debunked the myth that renewable energy was to blame for the outages, right-wing outlets and fossil fuel-funded interests exploited social media to spread disinformation. **Our disinformation analysis found that only 0.9% of the interactions with the analyzed posts carried a fact-checking label.[2]** The case reveals how Facebook and the other platforms' fact-checking programs are at best ineffective, at worst a deflection from a real solution. The incident illustrates how right-wing extremists and fossil fuel interests weaponized social media to deride climate solutions. The campaign rapidly expanded into mainstream media and subsequently the political arena, providing false talking points for politicians to blame renewable power and climate solutions at large for the failures of fossil fuels in Texas.

Our research reviewed the misleading content on social media and in right-wing news outlets following the storm and then catalogued total interactions (likes, comments, and shares) of high-performing social media posts that amplified the falsehood. We conclude with recommendations for Facebook, Twitter, Google, and other platforms on the simple steps that could stop them from being the last forum for climate denial, along with other forms of disinformation.

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1   Alec Tyson, Brian Kennedy, "Two-Thirds of Americans Think Government Should Do More on Climate," Pew Research Center, June 23, 2020 https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2020/06/23/two-thirds-of-americans-think-government-should-do-more-on-climate/
2   Analyzed posts from Crowdtangle research from Avaaz including the 10 highest-performing posts promoting the narrative that renewable energy failures caused the blackouts and the 10 highest-performing posts containing the windmill image. See chart on page 8.

II. RESEARCH

A. A STORM IN TEXAS: ENERGY BLACKOUTS & ONLINE LIES

During the extreme winter storm that hit Texas in February 2021, users in right-wing echo chambers sought to blame the widespread power outages on the failure of wind turbines. This was despite the fact that only 7% of forecasted capacity was projected to come from wind power sources at that time of year, according to the seasonal assessment by the agency that manages Texas's electrical grid, ERCOT.[3] In fact, the energy losses from natural gas outages were several times that of wind generation failures.[4] However, in just four days, this misleading claim against renewable energy rapidly proliferated on social media platforms and right-wing outlets, reaching millions of viewers. Below is the day-by-day account of how the lies spread, along with the resulting engagement numbers.

February 1-12

Texas is hit by a series of three winter storms and record low temperatures, causing rolling blackouts and leaving more than 5 million people without power for days.

Saturday, February 13

An image of a helicopter de-icing a wind turbine is posted on Twitter by a user named @Oilfield_Rando, along with a caption suggesting that the failure of green energy caused the blackouts, and receives 2k likes. The photo was actually from 2014 and was taken in Sweden.[5]

Sunday, February 14

The helicopter image spreads to more prominent social media accounts, like Luke Legate where it receives 89,000 likes, and is eventually shared over 30,000 times on Twitter. The image receives over 9,000[6] Facebook interactions. The *Austin American-Statesman* publishes an article headlined, "Frozen wind turbines hamper Texas power output, state's electric grid operator says."[7]

Monday, February 15

The narrative of failing wind turbines is used by conservative news outlets and shared to millions of viewers on social media as the primary explanation for the blackouts. Outlets such as Breitbart, The Daily Wire, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *Forbes* publish articles attributing the Texas grid failures to clean energy and warning of the "perils" of an electric grid and a Green New Deal. These articles collectively garnered at least 300,000 interactions on social media (see chart below). That night, Fox News pundit Tucker Carlson repeats the false "wind turbine narrative" to his viewers and the clip receives over 4.4 million views on Facebook, while the YouTube video receives over 600,000 views.

Luke Legate @lukelegate — Follow

A helicopter running on fossil fuel spraying a chemical made from fossil fuels onto a wind turbine made with fossils fuels during an ice storm is awesome.

Climatism

7:05 PM · 14 Feb 2021

30,741 Retweets   89,720 Likes

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3   Energy Reliability Council of Texas, Seasonal Assessment of Resource Adequacy for the ERCOT Region (SARA), Winter 2020/2021, November 2020 http://www.ercot.com/content/wcm/lists/197378/SARA-FinalWinter2020-2021.pdf
4   Erin Douglas, "Wind power a smaller contributor to Texas electricity crisis than initially estimated, ERCOT analysis shows," The Texas Tribune, April 28, 2021 https://www.texastribune.org/2021/04/28/texas-power-outage-wind/
5   https://gizmodo.com/viral-image-claiming-to-show-a-helicopter-de-icing-texa-1846279287
6   Preliminary research from civic organization Avaaz
7   https://www.statesman.com/story/news/2021/02/14/historic-winter-storm-freezes-texas-wind-turbines-hampering-electric-generation/4483230001/

The wind turbine narrative is embraced by climate-denying and conspiracy-minded elected Republicans opposed to climate action. Texas Governor Greg Abbott states on Fox News that "This shows how the Green New Deal would be a deadly deal for the United States of America ... it shows that fossil fuels is [sic] necessary." Representatives Dan Crenshaw (R-TX), Lauren Boebert (R-CO), and Jim Jordan (R-OH) and Senators Steve Daines (R-MT) and John Cornyn (R-TX) all repeat the windmill narrative on social media.

Lauren Boebert ✔ @laurenboebert · Feb 16
You know how you unfreeze frozen windmills?

By sending up a helicopter that shoots out chemicals onto the blades.

You need fuel for the helicopter.

Keep that in mind when thinking how "green" windmills are.

💬 3.6K   ⟲ 4.8K   ♡ 19.2K   ⬆

Dan Crenshaw ✔ @DanCrenshawTX · Feb 16
With blackouts across Texas, many are wondering: what happened?

Leftists are cheering a "red state" having energy problems.

Here's the truth about what happened. THREAD

💬 2.7K   ⟲ 4.2K   ♡ 11.7K   ⬆

Senator John Cornyn ✔ @JohnCornyn · Feb 16
Frozen wind turbines hamper Texas power output, state's electric grid operator says statesman.com/story/news/202... via @statesman

Frozen wind turbines hamper Texas power output, state's electric gri...
Texas grid operators urge conservation as frozen wind turbines freeze up electric generation.
🔗 statesman.com

💬 536   ⟲ 137   ♡ 154   ⬆

🐦   ←   **Tweet**

\#   Rep. Jim Jordan ✔
        @Jim_Jordan

⚙   Democrats:

-Closed schools
-Frozen wind turbines
-Illegal immigration

Republicans:
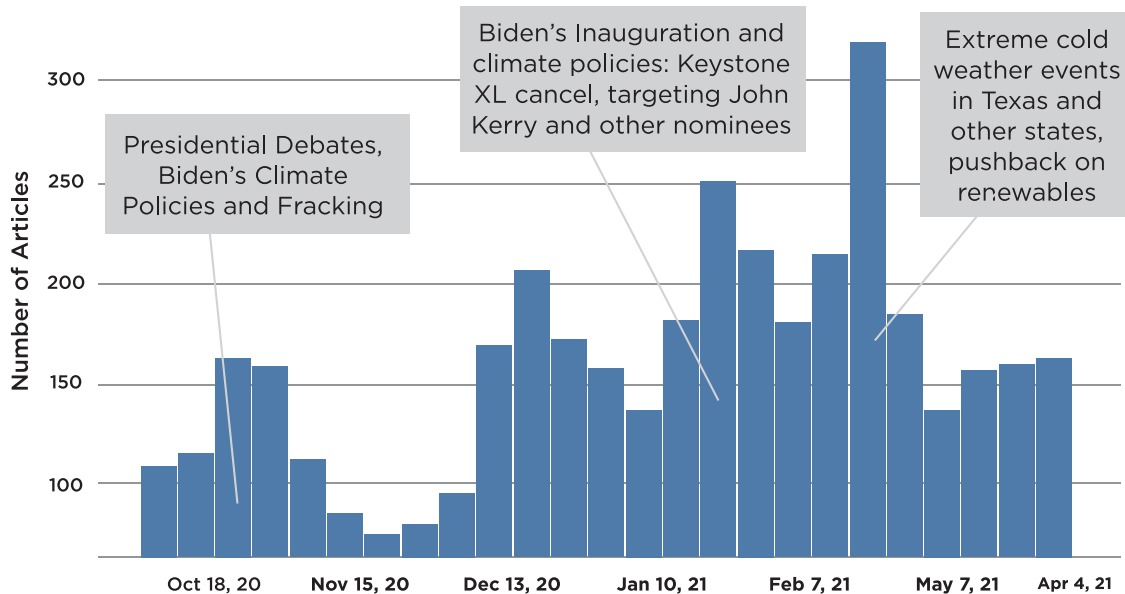
-Open schools
-Keystone Pipeline
-American jobs

1:28 PM · Feb 18, 2021 · Twitter for iPhone

9,170 Retweets   **480** Quote Tweets   **44.3K** Likes

B. REACH OF SOCIAL MEDIA DISINFORMATION ON TEXAS BLACKOUT

Number of unique climate change denial articles shared by members of the Climate Change Denial, U.S. Conservative, and INT Conservative groups of the Climate Combined map.[8]

Key Figures:

- Posts with fact-check labels accounted for only 0.9% of interactions with high-performing Facebook posts spreading the windmill narrative (the 10 highest-performing posts containing the falsehood and the 10 highest-performing posts containing the windmill image were analyzed).[9]

- On Twitter, the most popular post during this period (Luke Legate, Swedish Helicopter Image) had 89,000 likes and 30,000 retweets.

- In the two days following the initial blackouts, Fox News and Fox Business falsely blamed renewable energy for Texas's blackouts 128 times.[10]

- At least five elected officials used the wind turbine narrative to reinforce their bias against climate solutions.

8   https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1jnROWkz0df0hN2rT4DdZ6RURVxfPwd0s?usp=sharing
9   Analyzed posts from Crowdtangle research from Avaaz. See chart on page 9.
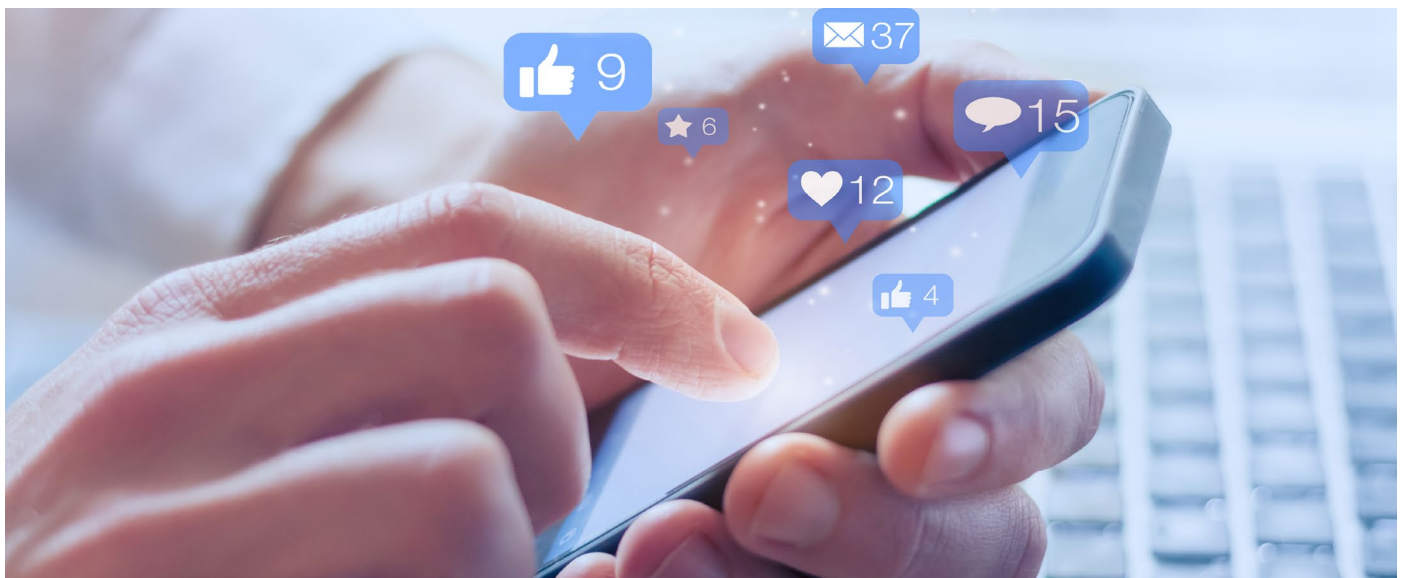10   Allison Fisher, "What do The Wall Street Journal, Tucker Carlson, Rep. Lauren Boebert, Steve Bannon, and an online troll called 'Catturd' all have in common?" Media Matters for America, February 19, 2021 https://www.mediamatters.org/fox-news/what-do-wall-street-journal-tucker-carlson-rep-lauren-boebert-steve-bannon-and-online

facebook

Facebook: As of July 8, none of the posts or articles listed below have fact-check labeling.[10]

Content	Engagement (Likes, Comments, Shares)
The Western Journal: "Tucker Carlson: The Texas Green Energy Disaster Is Coming to You Next"	276,285*
Daily Wire: "Nearly Half of Texas' Wind Turbines Frozen In Winter Storm, Limiting State's Power Output"	265,055*
Rep. Dan Crenshaw: "Renewables don't work well in extreme weather" (Personal FB, Congressional FB)	159,300
Fox News: "Tucker Carlson Slammed the Green New Deal"	156,000
Fox News: "Green energy inevitably means blackouts"	118,000
Fox News: "Tucker: Elites pushing green energy are out of touch with America"	109,000[11] (plus 4.4 million video views)
Breitbart: "Half of Texas Wind Turbines Freeze, Hurting Electricity Output"	81,547*
Texas Scorecard: "Wind Turbines Freeze as Rolling Blackouts Are Implemented Throughout the State"	73,809*
Texas Commissioner of Agriculture Sid Miller: "We should never build another wind turbine in Texas"	34,300
Sean Hannity: "TX GOV on BLACKOUTS: 'This shows how the Green New Deal would be a deadly deal for the United States...'"	14,600
TOTAL	**1,287,896**

*Total article interactions across highest-performing Facebook shares

twitter

Twitter: As of July 8, none of the posts listed below have fact-check labeling.

Content	Engagement (Likes, Comments, Shares)
Texas oil & gas adviser Luke Legate: Swedish wind turbine image	119,740
Rep. Jim Jordan: Criticizing Democrats over "frozen wind turbines"	30,800
Oil & gas pundit Alex Epstein: "the root cause of the TX blackouts is unreliable wind/solar"	28,500
Rep. Lauren Boebert: "You know how to unfreeze windmills?"	28,100
Rep. Dan Crenshaw: "Renewables don't work well in extreme weather"	18,900
Breitbart: "Half of Texas wind turbines freeze, hurting electricity output"	7,800
Fringe account @Oilfield_Rando: Swedish wind turbine image	2,840
Sen. Steve Daines: "This is a perfect example of the need for gas and coal"	1,250
Sen. John Cornyn: "Frozen wind turbines hamper Texas power output"	835
TOTAL	**238,765**

You Tube

Youtube: As of July 8, none of the posts listed below have fact-check labeling.

Content	Views
Tucker Carlson, Fox News: "Elites pushing green energy are out of touch with America"	633,000
Gov. Greg Abbott, Fox News: "This shows how the Green New Deal would be a deadly deal"	191,000
Conservative Political Commentator Steven Crowder: "Texas power outage: Green energy fails America!"	1,025,016
TOTAL	**1,849,016**

C. MAINSTREAM MEDIA'S RESPONSE

The false narratives of wind turbine failures were quickly debunked by Facebook's fact-checking partners (Politifact, *USA Today*, The Dispatch), who specifically referenced content spread by high-level influencers Tucker Carlson, Sean Hannity, and Sid Miller. The Swedish wind turbine image was also discredited by Reuters, Check Your Fact, and Climate Feedback.

Local media outlets also made a concerted effort to debunk these claims, highlighting the fact that renewable energy actually overperformed expectations during the storm and calling for an upgrade to renewables to prepare for the challenges of climate change. In the days following the storm, articles from *The Texas Tribune*, *the Austin American-Statesman*, *The Dallas Morning News*, and *the Houston Chronicle* rebutted the Republican attacks on renewables, detailing how fossil fuel-powered energy sources were mainly to blame for the outages. Texas TV outlets, including WAOI's News 4 San Antonio and KHOU 11 News, also attempted to set the record straight.

The strong response from mainstream and local media outlets debunking the wind turbine narrative throws social media platforms into sharp relief as the only home for the worst disinformation.[13]

D. FACEBOOK'S FACT-CHECKING FAIL

Our analysis found that fact-checked posts accounted for only 0.9% of the total interactions of high-performing social media posts observed spreading the windmill narrative, but due to Facebook's refusal to show site-wide ecosystem metrics, more or less could exist. Public researchers can't report on what Facebook conceals.

In most cases, widely shared, false narratives associated with the incident either 1) blamed renewable energy failures for the blackouts or 2) amplified an image of a helicopter de-icing a wind turbine and claimed that image was taken during the Texas extreme weather event. The 10 highest-performing posts blaming renewable energy, including posts specifically referenced by fact-checkers, lack a fact-check label. These posts garnered 673,300 total interactions.

Facebook *did* take some action on the posts that amplified the windmill image. Ninety percent of the 10 highest-performing posts containing the wind turbine image had fact-checking labels; however, these posts had only 6,293 interactions combined. The failure to fact-check the most viral posts associated with major news outlets and influencers sharply illuminates how ineffectual Facebook's fact-checking process is across influential accounts, in addition to its lack of transparency about what content justifies fact-checking.

The disinformation didn't stop at reaching millions of people online. Within days of @Oilfield_Rando sharing the first post, one of the most important voices in the crisis, Texas Governor Greg Abbott, repeated it in an interview on prime-time television. Other conservative politicians used the narrative and the timeliness of the storm to fortify their anti-renewable, pro-fossil-fuel agenda: Rep. Dan Crenshaw (R-TX) opined on a Twitter thread that "A mix of over-subsidized wind energy and under-investment in gas power means we didn't have enough base load energy for a massive spike in demand," a statement that feeds directly into policy decisions about energy infrastructure in the state.[14] Montana Senator Steve Daines used the opportunity to buttress what advocates are calling the new climate denial, in the form of painting renewables as unreliable. "This is a perfect example of the need for reliable energy sources like natural gas & coal," Daines tweeted.[15] All five elected officials touting the windmill narrative have received extensive fossil fuel contributions.[16] [17]

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13 Zachary Pleat, "Texas media outlets are aggressively debunking right-wing misinformation about the winter storm power outages," Media Matters for America, February 19, 2021 https://www.mediamatters.org/local-news/texas-media-outlets-are-aggressively-debunking-right-wing-misinformation-about-winter
14 Dan Crenshaw, https://twitter.com/DanCrenshawTX/status/1361810434282704898
15 Steve Daines, https://twitter.com/stevedaines/status/1361711788493074432
16 Jamie Henn, Duncan Meisel, "Why on earth would right-wing people with connections to the fossil fuel industry lie about 'frozen wind turbines' in Texas?" The Independent, February 18, 2021 https://www.independent.co.uk/climate-change/opinion/texas-frozen-wind-turbines-john-cornyn-b1803193.html
17 Open Secrets Campaign finance profiles on Representatives Dan Crenshaw (R-TX), Lauren Boebert (R-CO), Jim Jordan (R-OH), Senators Steve Daines (R-MT) and John Cornyn (R-TX)

Blaming Renewables for Blackouts[18]

POST	INTERACTIONS	FACT-CHECK?
Fox News	184,000	No
Fox News	154,000	No
Fox News	115,000	No
Sean Hannity	13,000	No
Sid Miller	33,500	No
The Western Journal	15,700	No
The Western Journal	35,800	No
Conservative Tribune by WJ	32,400	No
Mike Huckabee	49,400	No
Mike Huckabee	40,500	No
Total Interactions	**673,300**	

Sharing Windmill Image[19]

POST	INTERACTIONS	FACTCHECK?
Tracy Hickman Wimer	1,173	Yes
Brett Lehocky	1,079	Yes
Tamie Keton Joeckel	874	Yes
Rob Quirk	567	Yes
Anna Paulina Luna	3,289	No
Insufferable Turds (post removed)	656	Yes
President Trump Fans	1,281	Yes
Merissa Hamilton	408	Yes
Cowlitz Regional News	128	Yes
Dirty.ru	109	Yes
Total Interactions	**9,582**	

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18   Analyzed posts from Crowdtangle research from Avaaz, snapshot from February 23, 2021
19   Analyzed posts from Crowdtangle research from Avaaz, snapshot from February 23, 2021

Who bought the lie?

Analysis from the research firm Graphika showed that the tweets promoting the false Texas claims received higher engagement totals than those debunking them. This happened in an echo-chamber fashion, with a number of conservative groups engaging with these tweets. The tweets debunking these claims reached a wider audience but had lower engagement totals. These figures imply that the posts further radicalized conservatives in a bubble, leading to further polarization which prevents bipartisan action at the policy level.

Polling from Data for Progress confirms these findings in the breakdown of public belief around the wind turbines. Only 50% of Republicans accurately identified the cause of the blackouts. Among Republicans, 41% believed that renewable energy was to blame, a group that equals 28% of the total electorate. Forty-three percent of Fox viewers attributed blackouts to renewables, while 52% of Republicans who watched OANN or Newsmax blamed renewables for the blackouts.[20] The percent of Independent voters who identified the cause as frozen wind turbines and an overinvestment in wind and solar energy was 28%, and Democrats were 17%

Percent of voters who identified the cause as frozen wind turbines and an overinvestment in wind and solar energy:
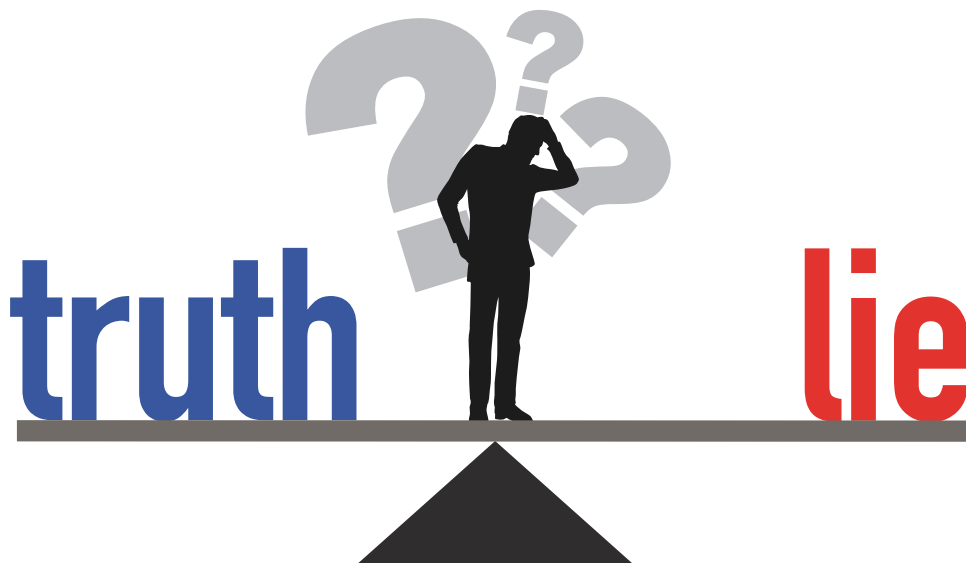
Topline: 28%

Republicans: 41%

Democrats: 17%

Independents: 28%

In cases like Texas, lies are not wholly fabricated but distorted from elements of truth. Following the Texas outages, conservatives relied on the fact that a small number of wind turbines were the *first* energy source to fail, and they repurposed this story into a false claim that renewables were the primary source of the energy outages and are therefore unreliable compared to oil and gas. That this lie is built upon a kernel of truth makes it much more believable to a wider audience. Offering a fig leaf of credibility makes it difficult to determine "true" or "false."

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20   Danielle Deiseroth, Marcela Mulholland, "Most Voters Didn't Believe Disinformation About the Texas Power Outages — Except Conservative News Watchers," Data for Progress, March 5, 2021 https://www.dataforprogress.org/blog/2021/3/5/voters-reject-disinformation-texas-blackouts

III. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Facebook, Twitter, Google/YouTube, and other platforms must stop driving climate disinformation. The platforms' current strategy to counter lies with facts is like bringing a knife to a gunfight. We will not protect public speech by treating platform-based disinformation like a game of whack-a-mole. The platforms should repeat the rare strategies they have taken that have proven effective in the past: The deplatforming of Trump and QAnon in January, for example, caused a 73% drop in election-related disinformation. This is why disinformation must also be addressed based on who is spreading it, not the claims themselves. As each alone is perhaps arguable, the pattern of behavior evidenced by these users and networks shows a clear intention to deceive. This phenomenon necessitates a policy that short-circuits the social media-conservative propaganda feedback loop, instead of trying to catch up afterward by fact-checking individual posts. Additionally, our research has documented the new marriage of climate deniers and QAnon, which shows that an intersectional content framework must be adopted that incorporates hate speech, harassment, and white supremacy. Specifically, and in conjunction with other allied social movements, we recommend the following actions:

- Disallow climate change disinformation and hate -speech in organic and paid posts and groups.

- Create a two-strike policy for repeat disinformers, removing viral functions as a first step.

- Commit to monitoring climate change and identity-based hate disinformation and releasing regular, third-party, independent, and transparent ecosystem-wide reports detailing labeled and removed content and actors.

- Ensure disinformation content from known disinformers is transparently reviewed by expert teams on climate denial and identity-based hate and harassment.

- Adopt a correct-the-record program that shows a retroactive correction to each user who viewed, interacted with, or shared a piece of misleading content.

- Establish and empower permanent infrastructure for civil rights, climate denial, misogyny, and violence-against-women issues, including a C-Suite executive with relevant expertise.

Friends of
the Earth