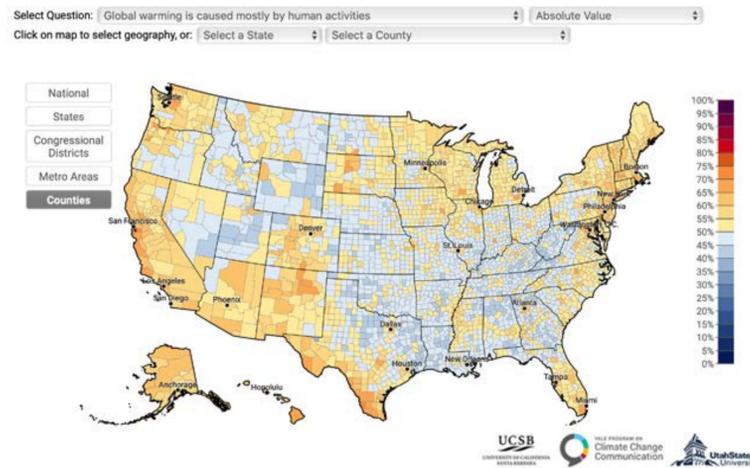


# Climate Change & Coronavirus: Skepticism and Misinformation in the Digital Age

Estimated % of adults who think global warming is mostly caused by human activities (57%), 2020 <sup>(1)</sup>



## WHY IS TRACKING CLIMATE SKEPTICISM IMPORTANT?

Despite the growing consequences of human-produced Climate Change, many Americans continue not to believe the scientific community, indirectly preventing meaningful and sustainable political change. One prominent explanation for the divergence between scientific knowledge of climate change and the public's understanding of it is the prevalence of climate skeptics that dominate right-wing media and continue to testify in environmental hearings on both state and federal levels.

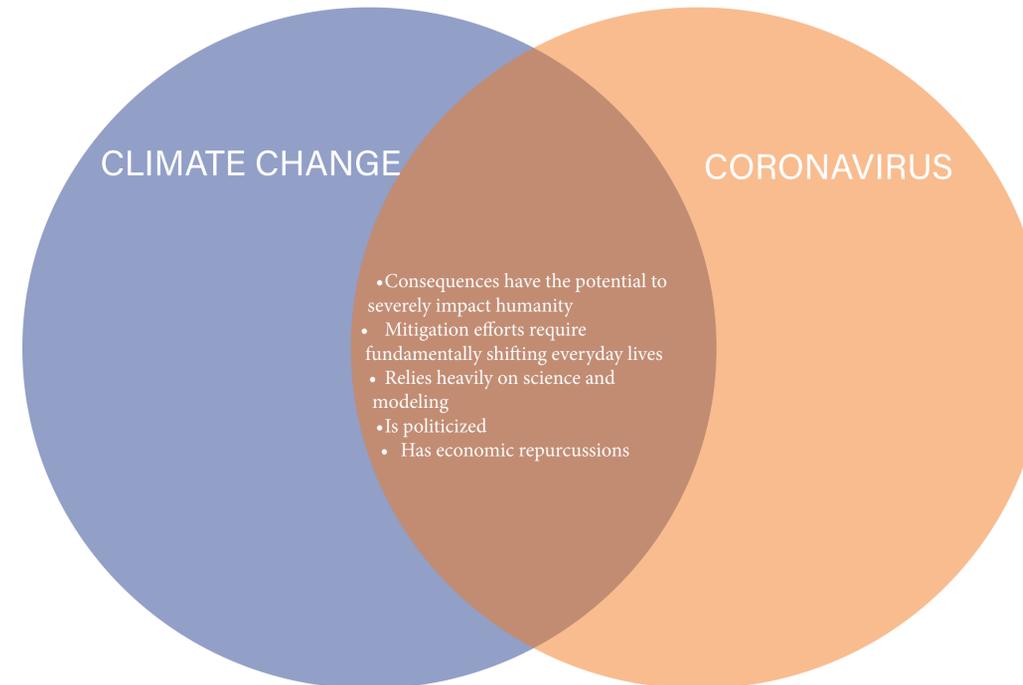
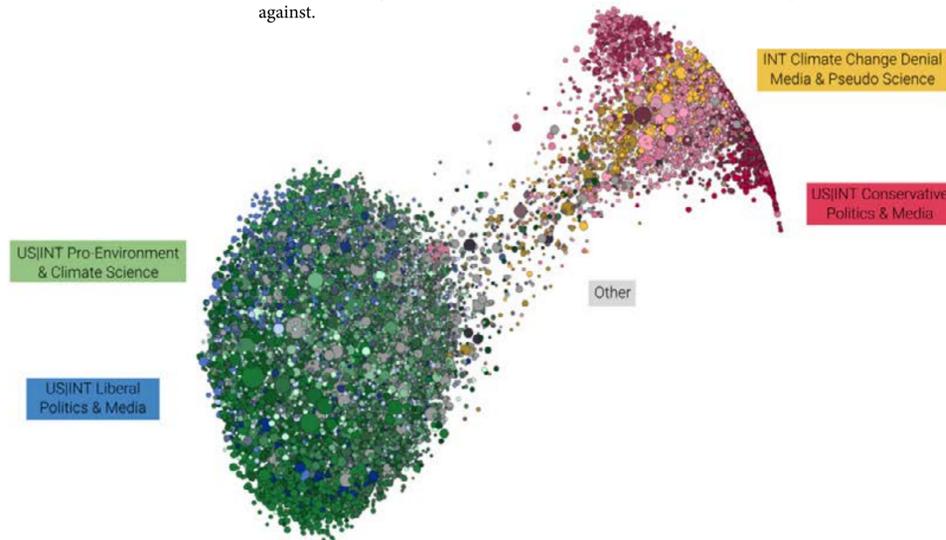
## WHAT EXACTLY IS CLIMATE SKEPTICISM?

Climate Skepticism is in part a rebranding effort of the previously categorized "climate deniers," who counter the environmental movement by clouding the scientific reality of climate change to cause doubt in the public. Climate skeptics call themselves "skeptics" or "climate realists" in part to gain more reliability, claiming that they do not deny the climate is changing, but instead are "skeptical" that change is due to anthropogenic reasons.

## WHO ARE CLIMATE CHANGE SKEPTICS?

While there are a diverse array of climate skeptics, many of the most influential ones are in some way affiliated with conservative think tanks, which provide material support, credibility, pseudo-science climate change conferences, and platforms with which to disseminate climate skepticism <sup>(2)</sup>. The Public Citizen analyzed Fox News transcripts for climate change information and identified 10 of the most popular climate skeptic contributors for the network, and of those 8 are related directly to the Heartland Institute, a conservative think-tank that has been directly tied to the Koch Foundation and Exxon Mobile <sup>(3)</sup>.

This is a network map built by the analytical company Graphika used to track the online community of climate denial accounts. The map demonstrates the polarization of the climate change issue and the monitoring ended up revealing the connection between those that spread climate change misinformation and QAnon. The dots illustrate social media networks, showing how distanced pro-environment users are from Climate Change Denial users, and also demonstrates the connection between that denial and conservative media. US stands for United States and INT stands for international. <sup>(6)</sup>



## CLIMATE SKEPTICISM IN THE CONTEXT OF THE PANDEMIC

The first event I saw scheduled by people in the climate skeptic sphere was a "Truth Talk," a joint webinar hosted by Marco Morano and the Heartland Institute <sup>(4)</sup>. At this event, the speakers discussed the "truth" of the coronavirus and climate change, claiming that the government is using alarmism about the pandemic and environment to take away American freedom.

By the beginning of May, climate skeptics were capitalizing on the similarities between climate change and COVID. The Heartland Institute hosted University of Alabama professor to talk about "Model Madness," the "Parallels between Failed Climate Models and Failed Coronavirus." Shortly after, they published "The Tale of Two Panics: COVID & Climate," discussing the similarities in alarmism between the two issues. <sup>(5)</sup>

Between June and August, popular climate skeptic website ClimateDepot.com posted 28 stories with COVID in its title, which I went through to examine the content. Of those stories, 70% either downplayed the risks of COVID or presented misinformation regarding the pandemic. None of those stories accurately described the risks of COVID, unless presented as a quote that the author argued against.

~70%

Of articles published on prominent climate skeptic website that mentioned COVID in their title either downplayed or presented misinformation regarding the coronavirus.

**"Why is the U.S. enduring a far more severe virus outbreak than any other rich country? There are multiple causes, but one of them is the size and strength of right-wing media organizations that frequently broadcast falsehoods. The result is confusion among many Americans about scientific facts that are widely accepted, across the political spectrum, in other countries."**

David Leonhardt, New York Times columnist

## The Coronavirus Infodemic

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, people across the world have turned to the internet to learn more about the virus, but unfortunately accurate information is matched by a sea of misinformation that makes it difficult to parse through fact and fiction. In June, the WHO called its first "Infodemiology Conference," responding to the need for a coordinated effort to fight the "Infodemic." <sup>(7)</sup>

**An infodemic is an overabundance of information - some accurate and some not - occurring during an epidemic. It makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it. Even when people have access to high-quality information, there are still barriers they must overcome to take the recommended action. Like pathogens in epidemics, misinformation spreads further and faster and adds complexity to health emergency response."**

## INFODEMIC CASE STUDY

Many different coronavirus conspiracy theories floated around the internet this summer: the virus was made in a lab in China, Bill Gates actually made the it in the lab so he could sell the vaccine for profit, drinking bleach will kill the virus, the WHO is overexaggerating the death count, wearing a mask does not help the spread, wearing a mask makes it worse, and the list goes on and on.

Following the precedent set by some of the recent studies of coronavirus misinformation, I decided to choose only one conspiracy theory and track it to see how it spread and grew to fruition.

## BREITBART CORONAVIRUS VIDEO FEATURING DR. STELLA IMMANUEL

In late July, Breitbart live streamed the press conference of a group claiming to be "America's Frontline Doctors," outside the U.S. Supreme Court. Among other misleading statements, the video claimed that hydroxychloroquine is a coronavirus "cure" and that masks are ineffective protection against it. Facebook, Google, Youtube, and Twitter censored the video, explaining that it shared "false information about cures and treatments for COVID-19," according to Facebook representative Andy Stone. <sup>(8)</sup>



But, before the video was taken down, it went viral online, was posted on conspiracy theory groups like QAnon, amassed over 17 million views, Madonna shared it, Trump Jr. uploaded it, and President Trump retweeted parts of it. When covering the video, Fox used it as an opportunity to boast about the fact it has more followers than CNN, instead of debunking the dangerous disinformation perpetuated in the video.

The video followed the same patterns identified by a recent Harvard study looking into coronavirus misinformation spreading on social media <sup>(11)</sup>. The study found that while most conspiracy theories come from alternative or low-credit news sources, such as personal blogs or social media posts or sites like Breitbart. But, the information coming from high-credibility news sources such as New York Times, Fox News, or say, our President, result in much higher levels of shares. What this means is that when Trump and Fox News shared the Breitbart video instead of debunking it, the misinformation was able to spread much faster. The study also found that "it took seven days for debunking tweets to equal the quantity of misinformation tweets, a delay that provided opportunity for misinformation to spread on social networks."

## SO WHAT?

The extent of the consequences of coronavirus misinformation may never be fully known, but as the infodemic progresses more studies and stories are coming to light that demonstrate the danger of the conspiracy theories.

Harvard's Misinformation Review linked higher social media use, and thus exposure to misinformation, to less compliance with social distancing measures <sup>(9)</sup>. A study from the American Journal of Tropical Medicine found that globally around 800 people died from misinformation about treatment of the coronavirus, and almost 6,000 have been hospitalized <sup>(10)</sup>. Coronavirus misinformation quite directly has the potential to harm the public and many believe the problem to be worse in the United States.

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