

Sociologist suggests corporate disinformation at root of climate change polarization

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Credit: Charles Rondeau/public domain

(Phys.org)—Justin Farrell, a sociologist with the School of Forestry & Environmental Studies at Yale University, has conducted a study looking into the question of why there is so much polarity regarding the opinions of Americans regarding global environment change and has found that it can be very strongly tied to corporate disinformation campaigns. In his

paper published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, he describes his study of publicly available written and verbal texts on the topic over the past two decades and why what he found led him to believe that a few key players in the U.S. have managed to muddle the debate in the minds of voters.

Many in the science community have been baffled by many Americans (and others) refusal to believe that the planet is heating up and that it is almost certainly due to man-made greenhouse gas emissions. Suspecting that it might have something to do with the information that Americans receive on the topic, he poured over 20 years worth of data that included 40,785 texts and other medium. In so doing he was able to identify 164 organizations that he categorizes as "actors," such as oil companies and others with something to lose if alternatives to oil use are promoted.

He then used computational data methods to extract information from the dataset which he says revealed two major findings. The first was that organizations with corporate funding were more likely to have sent out messages that were meant to polarize than were those that were publicly funded. The second thing was that corporate funding influenced the content of the polarizing efforts and led to more digression from what could be termed, actual science. Messages meant to polarize, he notes, generically tended to amplify contrarian views on the topic—clear attempts to causes readers or listeners to question scientific evidence.

In short, he suggests that contrarian efforts by some actors seeking to mislead the public have caused so much confusion that many Americans are no longer able to figure out who to listen to or believe. He suggests that his research also highlights the needed for more information dissemination from publicly funded sources to counter those that are backed by corporations.

More information: Justin Farrell. Corporate funding and ideological

polarization about climate change, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2015). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1509433112](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1509433112)

Abstract

Drawing on large-scale computational data and methods, this research demonstrates how polarization efforts are influenced by a patterned network of political and financial actors. These dynamics, which have been notoriously difficult to quantify, are illustrated here with a computational analysis of climate change politics in the United States. The comprehensive data include all individual and organizational actors in the climate change countermovement (164 organizations), as well as all written and verbal texts produced by this network between 1993–2013 (40,785 texts, more than 39 million words). Two main findings emerge. First, that organizations with corporate funding were more likely to have written and disseminated texts meant to polarize the climate change issue. Second, and more importantly, that corporate funding influences the actual thematic content of these polarization efforts, and the discursive prevalence of that thematic content over time. These findings provide new, and comprehensive, confirmation of dynamics long thought to be at the root of climate change politics and discourse. Beyond the specifics of climate change, this paper has important implications for understanding ideological polarization more generally, and the increasing role of private funding in determining why certain polarizing themes are created and amplified. Lastly, the paper suggests that future studies build on the novel approach taken here that integrates large-scale textual analysis with social networks.

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