

Australia bushfires spark 'unprecedented' climate disinformation

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Australia's bushfire emergency has sparked an online disinformation campaign "unprecedented" in the country's history, researchers told AFP

Friday, with bots deployed to shift blame for the blazes away from climate change.

The fires have claimed at least 26 lives and destroyed more than 2,000 homes across Australia.

And they have also prompted misleading online claims about the extent of the blazes and a concerted campaign to blame the crisis on arson, rather than climate change, drought or record high temperatures.

One hashtag in particular, #arsonemergency, has gained traction rapidly and conservative-leaning newspapers, websites and politicians across the globe have promoted the theory arson is largely to blame.

Timothy Graham, a digital media expert at the Queensland University of Technology, told AFP his research showed half of the Twitter users deploying the hashtag displayed bot- and troll-like behaviour.

Those accounts were created very recently, often without profile pictures. Twitter handles were sequences of numbers or characters, sometimes a meaningless combination of both.

Their tweets focused on one subject, in this case #arsonemergency; their tweets were often repetitive, and some of the accounts interacted solely with each other.



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"Our findings show a concerted effort aimed to misinform the public about the cause of the bushfires," Graham said.

"The campaign is nothing on the scale of what we have been seeing in other countries, such as the 2016 US election, but this amount of disinformation in Australia is unprecedented."

Of the 300 Twitter accounts and 1,200-plus tweets Graham and his team examined, half of the users were assessed to be genuine individuals and they tended to hold [conservative views](#).

'God Bless Australia'

False claims that 180 people have been charged with arson in relation to the bushfires appeared to give the theory credence and have been shared widely on [social media](#), including by Donald Trump Jr, son of the US president.

"Truly Disgusting that people would do this! God Bless Australia. More than 180 alleged arsonists have been arrested since the start of the bushfire season," Trump's son falsely tweeted.



Many of the factors exacerbating have been linked to climate change

The claim appears to have sprung from a New South Wales police announcement of legal action against 183 people for bushfire-related offences.

In fact, only 24 of those people were charged over alleged deliberately-lit bushfires, many more were accused of unsafely discarding cigarettes or breaking bans on the use of equipment like barbecues or angle grinders during periods of high fire risk.

Authorities in fire-hit Australian states have denied arson is linked to some of the most serious blazes.

"There is currently no intelligence to indicate that the fires in East Gippsland and the North East have been caused by arson or any other suspicious behaviour," a Victoria Police spokesperson told AFP.

Statistics from previous bushfires show some are suspected of being started by arson, but it is one among several causes—like lightning strikes, embers blowing from other fires, or accidents.

Scientists believe that this year's bushfire season has been more severe because of a prolonged drought, and climatic conditions in the Indian Ocean and Antarctica that have brought hot, dry, windy weather to Australia.



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Many of these factors have been linked to climate change or made more pronounced because of carbon emissions that have raised global temperatures.

"This is a global campaign with the purpose to discredit scientific evidence of climate change, it's much bigger than the bushfires in Australia," said Graham.

"These are accounts that appear to make a coordinated effort to push the idea that [climate change](#) is not real because it is something they want to discredit."

The "[bushfire](#) emergency gave them the opportunity to jump on board and drag Australia onto the world stage of global disinformation."

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