

# As extreme weather increases, climate misinformation adapts

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In this Feb. 17, 2021, file photo, people wait in line to fill propane tanks in Houston. As the impact of climate change becomes more apparent, misinformation about it is shifting to focus more and more on extreme weather. The storm that walloped Texas in February and last year's wildfires in California both led to a wave of false claims seeking to link the events to energy regulation or politics.(AP Photo/David J. Phillip, File)

Climate scientists have warned for years that a warming planet would cause more extreme storms, like the one that walloped Texas in February, knocking out power and leaving millions in a deep freeze.

Yet as the snow fell and the wind howled, some looked for other explanations for the storm and its resulting power outages. The conservative website The Gateway Pundit made the false claim that President Joe Biden's energy policies somehow prevented Texas plants from generating the power the state needed and "led to Texans literally freezing to death."

The next day, the conspiracy theory website Infowars published a similarly untrue story that was shared 70,000 times on Facebook and Twitter. Four days later, U.S. Rep. Lauren Boebert, R-Colorado, tweeted to her 100,000 followers that Biden's energy policies were "leaving millions of Texans freezing to death."

All those claims were false. In fact, an emergency request granted by the Biden administration gave the state authority to exceed federal environmental limits in order to provide enough power to Texans.

To [climate scientists](#) and misinformation researchers, claims like these mark an important shift: Instead of focusing on denialism, climate misinformation is getting local, focused on [extreme weather events](#) tied to a changing climate—such the Texas storm or recent wildfires that ravaged California and Australia.

"It just isn't credible to deny climate change or the impacts it's having. People see it with their own two eyes," said Penn State University climate scientist Michael Mann. "So there's a shift in tactics. Now it's softer forms of denial, and efforts to diminish the impacts of climate change."



In this Feb. 2, 2020, file photo, firefighters control a spot fire near Bredbo, south of the Australian capital, Canberra. As the impact of climate change becomes more apparent, misinformation about it is shifting to focus more and more on extreme weather, such the Texas storm or recent wildfires that ravaged California and Australia. (AP Photo/Rick Rycroft, File)

That evolution is evident online. Media intelligence firm Zignal Labs analyzed millions of social media posts, news stories and other online content and found that overall, conversations about climate change in the past 12 months peaked during high-profile natural disasters, including the Texas storm and the California wildfires. Overall, online mentions of natural disasters and their relationship to climate change also increased by 27%, Zignal found.

Surveys also show that extreme weather is changing people's thinking about climate change. According to a 2019 poll by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research and the Energy Policy Institute at the University of Chicago, nearly 75% of Americans said their opinions about climate change have been influenced by extreme weather in the previous five years.

With about 7 in 10 Americans saying they believe climate change is happening, misinformation has now shifted from denialism to focus on its real world impacts. In some ways, that's a positive, as it demonstrates increased public understanding of the problem. But it also creates new opportunities for those who would spread bogus claims.

"We still see claims that global warming doesn't exist, but we also see misinformation about specific areas—such as the wind turbines in Texas," said Emmanuel Vincent, director of Science Feedback, a global network of scientists based in France who work to debunk inaccurate claims about climate change. "A lot of the misinformation is more subtle."

Those who still dispute a connection to a changing climate are grasping for increasingly far-fetched explanations. Following the Texas storm, for instance, some claimed the snow was fake and wouldn't burn, or that it was the result of [weather control technology](#) used by Biden. Recent California wildfires? While experts say dry and hot conditions are to blame, some, including U.S. Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, R-Georgia, have speculated it might be the work of [space lasers](#).

Such misinformation persists online, despite stated attempts by [online platforms](#) to stamp it out. While Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have all removed content spreading misinformation about COVID-19 or the recent U.S. election, critics say they've been less aggressive when it comes to climate information.



In this Dec. 3, 2020, file photo, Bruce McDougal watches embers fly over his property as the Bond Fire burns through the Silverado community in Orange County, Calif. As the impact of climate change becomes more apparent, misinformation about it is shifting to focus more and more on extreme weather. The storm that walloped Texas in February and last year's wildfires in California both led to a wave of false claims seeking to link the events to energy regulation or politics. (AP Photo/Noah Berger, File)

A spokesman for Facebook said the platform is doing more than ever to connect users with accurate information about climate change. Its Climate Science Information Center, created last year, is now available in 16 countries and nine languages, and has a new section dedicated to dispelling climate change myths.

YouTube, owned by Google, was singled out as a leading source for climate misinformation by the U.S. House Select Committee on the Climate Crisis. In a [letter](#) to Google, the committee urged the tech giant to do more to combat falsehoods on its platforms.

In an emailed statement, YouTube acknowledged the challenge of "drawing the lines between misinformation, political speech, legitimate debate, and opinion."

U.S. Rep. Kathy Castor, D-Florida, chairwoman of the House climate committee, told the AP in a statement that groups who oppose meaningful responses to [climate change](#)—including fossil fuel companies—use misinformation to confuse the public. But she said many people aren't buying it.

"It's becoming harder for polluters and their allies to keep standing in the way of [climate](#) solutions, which is why they resort to false and harmful [misinformation](#)," she said.

"Most Americans, and particularly young Americans, are demanding their representatives take this crisis seriously."

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