

Facebook says it's cracking down on climate change misinformation. Scientists say it's not doing enough.

September 15 2020, by Jessica Guynn



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Facebook says it's moving aggressively to counter climate-change misinformation with a Climate Science Information Center launching Tuesday that will connect users with science-based facts.

"Climate change is real. The science is unambiguous and the need to act grows more urgent by the day," the company said.

The announcement comes just days after emergency responders in the Pacific Northwest had to fight [misinformation](#) on Facebook along with catastrophic wildfires and ahead of Climate Week, a conference run by international nonprofit the Climate Group, in association with the United Nations and the city of New York.

"Our goal is to help people get authoritative information about climate change, and we are taking it seriously," Facebook's chief product officer Chris Cox told USA TODAY. "This is one step, and there will be many more."

But [climate scientists](#) and [environmental groups](#) said the new effort does too little to rein in climate-change falsehoods and conspiracy theories.

For years, Facebook has allowed forces that reject [climate science](#) have pushed false, misleading or disputed information about climate change on the platform, such as the government is using "chemtrails" to manipulate the weather, the Earth's solar orbit, not [human activity](#) or is causing climate change, they said.

"The consequences are that the public is far less informed about climate change than they need to be," Michael E. Mann, director of Penn State University's Earth System Science Center, told USA TODAY. "It is very convenient for polluting interests who don't want to see climate policies move forward."

Mann says all social media companies must do more to combat rampant climate change misinformation and disinformation on social media, but he singled out Facebook.

"Facebook is particularly problematic as they have taken very few steps to deal with it, making it easy for bad actors to promote misinformation," he said.

Friends of the Earth, the Sierra Club, Greenpeace and other environmental organizations also accused Facebook of taking "half measures" to crack down on climate science misinformation.

"This new policy is a small step forward but does not address the larger climate disinformation crisis hiding in plain sight," the groups said in a joint statement.

If anything, the success of Facebook's COVID-19 Information Center which has directed more than 2 billion people to information from health authorities shows that the company has not been limited by technology but by a lack of will, according to John Cook, a research assistant professor at the Center for Climate Change Communication at George Mason University.

"At best, they have been slow to react to climate misinformation," Cook said in an email. "At worst, they have actively reversed fact-checking efforts by climate experts, consciously enabling climate denial organizations to continue to publish their misinformation."

Distrust from the climate science community grew in September 2019 when the CO2 Coalition, which claims that carbon dioxide from humans is beneficial for the planet, succeeded in getting a fact-check removed from a post that Facebook then labeled as "opinion."

Cox says Facebook roots out misinformation, working with 70 independent fact-checking organizations to identify and reduce the reach of falsehoods about climate change.

Now when bogus claims threaten public safety, such as rumors that Oregon wildfires were being set by the far-right group the Proud Boys or leftist activists known as antifa, Facebook takes down these posts, Cox said.

"We are very aggressively removing content that could lead folks into harm's way, and we are surfacing more content that can get them the help and support that they need," he said. "During any weather-related or disaster-like event, we have teams pay a lot closer attention to what's going on in those areas to understand what's happening to the information ecosystem. And that's just part of the work we do to make sure the platform is providing the right information in times of crisis."

The Climate Science Information Center will begin appearing at the top of news feeds Tuesday. It will offer up authoritative [information](#) on [climate](#) change internationally and in your backyard, plus tips on what you can do to help fight [climate change](#).

It will also encourage Facebook users to join the #OurPlanetChallenge to show their communities what they're doing to help the environment and nominate friends and family to do the same. When 100,000 people join the challenge, Facebook will donate \$100,000 to the Arbor Day Foundation.

©2020 USA Today

Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

Citation: Facebook says it's cracking down on climate change misinformation. Scientists say it's not doing enough. (2020, September 15) retrieved 21 September 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-09-facebook-climate-misinformation-scientists.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--