Submission to the Select Committee on Information Integrity on Climate Change and Energy

regarding

Information Integrity on Climate Change and Energy

September 2025

Who we are

Digital Rights Watch is a charity founded in 2016 to promote and defend human rights as realised in the digital age. We stand for privacy, democracy, fairness, and freedom. Digital Rights Watch educates, campaigns, and advocates for a digital environment in which rights are respected, and connection and creativity can flourish. More information about our work is available on our website: www.digitalrightswatch.org.au

Acknowledgement of Country

Digital Rights Watch acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and their continuing connection to land and community. We acknowledge the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the true custodians of this land that was never ceded and pay our respects to their cultures, and to elders past and present.

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tl;dr: 3 key actions to improve the quality of online information

1. Prevent the algorithmic promotion of disinformation
2. Resource and strengthen platform regulation
3. Require think tanks to disclose their funding sources.

Submission on The Senate Select Committee on Information Integrity on Climate Change and Energy

Climate change disinformation is pervasive, coordinated and highly damaging to democratic debate and urgent climate action. Disinformation creates confusion and splinters support for climate change action creating infighting and preventing meaningful support.[1] Due to their business models, based around "engagement" and advertising, big tech companies are directly contributing to the proliferation of disinformation on their sites. This is enabling the erosion of citizens' trust in legitimate climate science. Key vectors include astroturfing organisations, fossil-fuel-industry think-tanks, and privacy-invading social media algorithms, amplified by bots and generative AI.

A primary contributor to the disinformation ecosystem is 'bots'. 'Bots' are algorithm-operated accounts on social media that typically pose as legitimate accounts. 'Bots' algorithms are typically skewed towards a typical viewpoint and their posts will engage with the platform in ways that reflect this agenda, such as retweeting, sharing, or reposting misinformation from low-credibility sources, thereby amplifying its reach.[2] Despite 23 million social bots making up only 8.5% of all Twitter accounts,[3] 66% of tweeted links were shared by bots.[4] The bots can interact with one another to boost each other's content, giving the appearance of consensus and credibility to onlookers. Research

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[1] International Panel on the Information Environment (IPIE), *Synthesis Report SR2025.1: Information Integrity and the Climate Crisis* (Oxford: IPIE, 2025), 3, https://www.ipie.info/research/sr2025-1

[2] Wan, Herun, Minnan Luo, Zihan Ma, Guang Dai, and Xiang Zhao. "How Do Social Bots Participate in Misinformation Spread? A Comprehensive Dataset and Analysis." *arXiv*, August 2024. https://arxiv.org/abs/2408.09613.

[3] Carolina Alves de Lima Salge and Nicholas Berente, "Is That Social Bot Behaving Unethically? A Procedure for Reflection and Discourse on the Behavior of Bots in the Context of Law, Deception, and Societal Norms," *Communications of the ACM* (September 2017), Opinion section, https://cacm.acm.org/opinion/is-that-social-bot-behaving-unethically/

[4] Pew Research Center, "Q&A: How Pew Research Center Identified Bots on Twitter," *Pew Research Center*, April 19, 2018, Methodology section, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2018/04/19/qa-how-pew-research-center-identified-bots-on-twitter/

indicates that humans are almost as likely to post the content of a bot as they are a human.[5] Bots do not appear of their own volition, nor are their instructions to disseminate lies random. Human agents are creating these bots to change the information landscape around climate change and confuse Australians. When individuals are exposed to disinformation, they are more likely to adopt views based on a distorted version of reality.[6] By manufacturing this distortion at scale, bots weaken informed debate and ultimately undermine the democratic process.

In 2017, a US study showed that one in four tweets about the climate crisis originated from bots. The proportion was even higher on certain topics: bots produced 38% of tweets referencing 'fake science' and 28% of those mentioning Exxon.[7] By contrast, pro-climate action tweets contained relatively few bots, at around 5%.[8] According to the analysis, this indicates that bots were not only widespread, but concentrated in content supporting a US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement or casting doubt on climate science.[9] The findings highlight the significant role automated accounts play in amplifying climate denial narratives. It is important to recognise that past studies of Twitter activity were conducted under stricter platform rules on misinformation and before the widespread availability of generative AI.[10] As a result, the scale and sophistication of disinformation today may be even greater than what earlier research documented. As AI advances and becomes increasingly accessible, there are concerns regarding the volume of bot accounts, the detectability of bot accounts and the accessibility of bots.

While the orchestrators of these bot accounts remain unidentified, there are systemic actors which share in the blame, such as tech companies.

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[5] Chengcheng Shao et al., "The Spread of Low-Credibility Content by Social Bots," *Nature Communications* 9, no. 1 (2018), Discussion, https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-018-06930-7.
[6] Jinyi Ye, Luca Luceri, Julie Jiang, and Emilio Ferrara, "Susceptibility to Unreliable Information Sources: Swift Adoption with Minimal Exposure," in *Proceedings of the ACM Web Conference 2024* (Singapore: ACM, 2024), Discussion, https://doi.org/10.1145/3589334.3648154
[7] Thomas Marlow, Sean Miller, and J. Timmons Roberts, "Bots and Online Climate Discourses: Twitter Discourse on President Trump's Announcement of U.S. Withdrawal from the Paris Agreement," *Climate Policy* 21, no. 6 (2021): 765–77, https://doi.org/10.1080/14693062.2020.1870098.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Digital Society Blog, "Two Years after the Takeover: Four Key Policy Changes of **X** under Musk," HIIG, October 28, 2024, accessed September 9, 2025, *Digital Society Blog*

Despite record profits, tech companies are cutting budgets for combatting mis- and disinformation.[11][12][13] Instead, tech companies are preferring a "community-driven" approach, whereby good samaritans on the internet identify and report the mis/disinformation and add "context".[14] However the design here is flawed. A good samaritan and a bad samaratan hold equal weight in their reporting, meaning that without safeguards, other bots or their orchestrators could act to verify false information or flag correct information, contributing to confusion around climate change science.[15][16] Importantly, by the time the audience of the misinformation is large enough to have reached a good samaritan who has provided accurate context, the post will have already reached its peak impact. The misinformation will have embedded itself into the informational landscape and been propagated through subsequent smaller posts, unlikely to gain enough traction to obtain a community note. As a result, community notes are not effective in minimising user engagement with misinformation.[17] In the context of climate change disinformation, it is the climate that pays for these cost-cutting tactics.

Community-moderated internet fora are the perfect breeding ground for mis/disinformation. Big tech companies are aware of this and have created this petri dish as it best serves their advertising revenue goals. .

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[11] Michelle Cheng, "Big Tech Companies Had Big Layoffs. Then They Saw Big Profits," *Quartz*, updated February 2, 2024, sec. Tech & Innovation, https://qz.com/big-tech-companies-had-big-layoffs-then-they-saw-big-p-1851221293.

[12] The Associated Press, *"As social media guardrails fade and AI deepfakes go mainstream, experts warn of impact on elections,"* AP News, December 2023, Opinion/Analysis, https://apnews.com/article/election-2024-misinformation-ai-social-media-trump-6119ee6f498db10603b3664e9ad3e87e.

[13] Josh Taylor, "'Trolling Free-for-All': Australian Politicians and Experts Criticise Meta for Ditching Factchecking," *The Guardian*, January 8, 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2025/jan/08/australia-meta-ending-factchecking-facebook-misinformation-sarah-hanson-young.

[14] Mark Zuckerberg, *Zuckerberg Facebook video announcing end of fact-checking program*, video, January 7, 2025; transcript hosted by Marquette University e-Publications, https://epublications.marquette.edu/zuckerberg_files_transcripts/2065/.

[15] Sanusi A. Sanusi, "The Limits of Community Notes in the Fight Against Disinformation: Lessons for the West African Ecosystem," *Digital Tech, AI & Information Disorder Analysis Centre*, February 14, 2025, https://daidac.thecjid.org/the-limits-of-community-notes-in-the-fight-against-disinformation-lessons-for-the-west-african-ecosystem//.

[16] David Gilbert, "Elon Musk's Main Tool for Fighting Disinformation on X Is Making the Problem Worse, Insiders Claim," *WIRED*, October 17, 2023, Opinion section, https://www.wired.com/story/x-community-notes-disinformation//.

[17] Yuwei Chuai, Haoye Tian, Nicolas Pröllochs, and Gabriele Lenzini, *Did the Roll-Out of Community Notes Reduce Engagement With Misinformation on X/Twitter?* (preprint, arXiv, July 16, 2023), https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2307.07960.

Also to share in the blame are fossil fuel funded think tanks that create much of the information shared by climate exchange denying bots. Algorithms, automation, and bot networks are used to recycle think-tank content effectively manufacturing an illusion of grassroots support or consensus.[18] Research shows that key climate change denying think tanks are funded by fossil fuel companies.[19]

Social media platforms use micro-targeted advertising, automated search, active curation, and algorithmic recommendation systems to amplify the most engaging content regardless of its truthfulness or users' motivations for engaging with it.[20] The very fact that users might be engaging with content to point out its inaccuracy or falsity can contribute to the further algorithmic amplification of that content. Such engagement feeds the advertisement-driven business models of social media platforms. Furthermore, the ability of content creators to profit from engagement creates financial incentives towards the creation and sharing of engaging content including misinformation.

[18] Robert J. Brulle, "Institutionalizing Delay: Foundation Funding and the Creation of U.S. Climate Change Counter-Movement Organizations," *Climatic Change* 122 (2014): 681–94, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-013-1018-7.
[19] Robert J. Brulle, "Institutionalizing Delay: Foundation Funding and the Creation of U.S. Climate Change Counter-Movement Organizations," *Climatic Change* 122 (2014): 681–94, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-013-1018-7.
[20] Oana Barbu-Kleitsch, "Advertising, Microtargeting and Social Media," *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences* 163 (December 19, 2014), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.12.284.

Recommendations

1. Prevent the algorithmic promotion of disinformation

Recommendation: Take action to disincentivise social media companies from distributing misinformation at scale. This could involve:

- Stronger privacy protections for end-users, to prevent micro-targeting of advertisements
- Regulation of user-interface patterns that manipulate users into staying longer “on-device”, such as infinite scrolling, algorithmic feed creation, or promoted “content” that does not identify itself as an advertisement.

Rationale: Mis-information spreads rapidly because social media platforms are incentivised to distribute it to boost their revenues. Removing the business imperative to do this will reduce their desire to do so.

2. Resource and strengthen platform regulation

Recommendation: Require technology companies to have publishing responsibility, and be subject to advertising standards and regulations, for both advertised and promoted content on their platforms.

Rationale: Platforms are keen to push responsibility for content on their platforms onto users. In most cases of truly user-generated content, this is reasonable. However, with paid or promoted posts, the platform is directly monetising the content, is monitoring its popularity for billing purposes, and is using systems to target the content at specific users. This gives the platforms plenty of information to determine if advertisements or promoted posts are accurate.

3. Require think tanks to disclose their funding sources.

Recommendation: The financial structures of fossil fuel-funded think tanks and require disclosure of their donors.

Rationale: Some think tanks receive significant funding from fossil fuel companies to produce material which benefits such companies. Requiring

think tanks to disclose their sources of funding will allow individuals to apply appropriate levels of scepticism to said materials.