

Many Fighting Climate Change Worry They Are Losing the Information War

Shifting politics, intensive lobbying and surging disinformation online have undermined international efforts to respond to the threat.



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By Lisa Friedman and Steven Lee Myers

Lisa Friedman reported from the climate talks in Belém, Brazil and Steven Lee Myers from San Francisco

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When nearly 200 nations signed the 2015 Paris agreement, acknowledging the threat of rising global temperatures and vowing action, many hoped that the era of climate denial was finally over.

Ten years later it has roared back, arguably stronger than ever.

As delegates wrapped the annual United Nations climate talks last Saturday, those who have campaigned to reduce the use of fossil fuels expressed growing alarm that forces arrayed against them are gaining ground in the information war.

The oil, gas and coal industries continue to downplay the scientific consensus that the burning of fossil fuels is dangerously heating the planet. It's a strategy that has been echoed by oil-rich countries such as Russia, Saudi Arabia and — under the Trump administration — the United States.

President Trump mocks global warming as a hoax, cheered on by a chorus of influencers online who regularly promote disinformation on social media platforms that once tried to curtail it. While such views have long been dismissed as conspiracy theories, their influence on the global policy debates has clearly grown.

The final statement of the U.N. talks, which were held in Belém, Brazil, did not even use the words “fossil fuels.”

“We thought that good ideas would get people to act,” J. Timmons Roberts, a researcher at Brown University and executive director of its Climate Social Science Network, lamented in a briefing on the eve of the talks.

“In fact there’s been a quite systematic campaign that’s been sophisticated and extremely well funded,” he said. “They have succeeded at undermining climate action globally.”

This year’s climate summit took place against a backdrop of increased drilling and mining — in Brazil, the host government recently granted a license to the state oil company to explore new sources of oil near the mouth of the Amazon River.

Just weeks before the summit came the news that Brazil's state-run oil company, Petrobras, will be allowed to drill near the mouth of the Amazon River for the first time. Andre Penner/Associated Press

Even so, Brazil's leader, President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, opened the talks by denouncing obstructionists who "reject scientific evidence and attack institutions."

"They manipulate algorithms, sow hatred and spread fear," he said, describing a surge in disinformation and propaganda aimed at blocking action to slow climate change.

The problem has become so acute that the summit, for the first time, put the issue on the agenda. A coalition of countries and international agencies issued a separate "Declaration on Information Integrity on Climate Change," calling on governments to address climate disinformation, promote transparency and protect journalists, scientists and environmentalists.

The initiative is light, however, on details about how governments should go about it. By Friday, only 21 of the nearly 200 countries that signed the Paris agreement had also signed the disinformation declaration.

Senator Sheldon Whitehouse, Democrat of Rhode Island, who was in Belém and has attended several climate summits, said the global embrace of the Paris agreement by most governments and major corporations for a time obscured the still-fierce opposition to ending fossil fuels.

"I think there was some confidence at the time that when governments got together, and everyone put forward their national commitments, everybody felt we were just going to sort of breeze past that," Mr. Whitehouse said. "Now, I

think, there is a better understanding of the true nature of the fossil fuel disinformation and corruption campaign.”

Mr. Lula said that this year’s summit would “deliver yet another defeat to denialism.” Instead, it struggled to build consensus.

The final conference statement did endorse the call to promote “information integrity” and provided more money for vulnerable countries hit by climate catastrophes. But it included only a voluntary agreement among nations to begin discussions on a “road map” to an eventual phaseout of fossil fuels. The modest outcome was only achieved after a bitter standoff with oil-producing countries from the Persian Gulf.

Critics blamed the meager results on oil, gas and coal interests that have been increasingly present at U.N. summits in recent years. One review of delegates by a group called the Kick Big Polluters Out coalition found 1,600 fossil fuel representatives participated in the Belém talks, a number that includes diplomats from countries with state-run oil companies.

“Once again, fossil fuel lobbyists outnumbered many delegations from the countries most affected by the climate crisis,” Brice Böhmer, climate and environment director for Transparency International, a Berlin-based nonprofit group, said in a statement.

1,600 fossil fuel representatives, including diplomats from countries with state-run oil companies, participated in COP30, according to a review by the Kick Big Polluters Out coalition. Jared Hamilton for The New York Times

For critics of the environmental movement, the shifting sentiment on display in Brazil was a victory after years of pressure on energy industries.

“There’s a lot of reality that has hit,” said Steven J. Milloy, the founder of JunkScience.com, a website that has disputed the scientific consensus on climate change. “People are realizing now that we need fossil fuels. Fossil fuels are here to stay.”

Polls consistently show that a majority of adults globally and in the United States consider climate change to be a serious threat.

At the same time, a growing body of research is warning that climate misinformation — from misleading claims from Mr. Trump that wind turbines “kill all the birds” to viral hashtags proclaiming clean energy is a scam — is steadily growing, amplified by social media.

The strategy is not subtle, a recent study found. Climate skeptics present their position as “projecting rationality, authority, and masculine self-control” while those who acknowledge global warming “are depicted through emotionally charged, feminized, and irrational imagery,” and labeled “alarmists” who propose radical solutions.

Political campaigns deploy the same playbook. Republicans frequently claimed the Biden administration was trying to “emasculate” American drivers by forcing them into electric vehicles. Lee Zeldin, Mr. Trump’s Environmental Protection Agency administrator, has labeled climate change a “religion” instead of what it is: a matter of physics.

Taylor Rogers, a White House spokeswoman, said that Mr. Trump was pursuing “energy addition, not energy transition.”

“The President has set a strong example for the rest of the world by reversing course on the Green Energy Scam and unleashing our natural resources, like beautiful, clean coal and natural gas, to strengthen our grid stability and lower energy costs,” she said, citing arguments that many economists dispute.

Still, Mr. Trump’s policies threaten more than 500 solar and energy storage projects in the U.S. that were set to provide 116 gigawatts of capacity. His administration also terminated a \$4.9 billion loan guarantee for an 800-mile transmission line that would have carried mostly wind power from the Great Plains to some of the most strained parts of the nation’s power grid.

Social media platforms, podcasts and other forms of media regularly amplify climate misinformation.

A recent example: When delegates were evacuated after a fire broke out at a pavilion during COP30, a blog that promotes climate denial suggested — with no evidence — that a battery “touted as clean tech” was the cause. The item was shared dozens of times including by prominent opponents of climate science, though Brazil’s tourism minister said the fire was believed to have been caused by a short circuit in electrical wiring.

A fire broke out at the Pavilion of Countries at COP30. Douglas Pingituro/Reuters

While critics have called on social media platforms to do more, they have instead retreated from efforts to fight climate disinformation. “It’s easier now for climate skeptics to get their message out,” said Mr. Milloy, who previously served as an adviser on Mr. Trump’s transition team for the Environmental Protection Agency.

On the eve of Trump’s inauguration in January, Mark Zuckerberg, the chief executive of Facebook’s parent company, Meta, announced fewer restrictions on political topics, ending a fact-checking program in the United States that routinely called out those who disputed climate science.

YouTube prohibits promoters of climate disinformation from monetizing their accounts or buying ads, but a number of studies have argued that it does not enforce its rules vigorously.

“A lot of people are making a lot of money off this clickbait stuff,” said Rachel Cleetus, a senior policy director for climate and energy at the Union of Concerned Scientists, which advised on the information integrity declaration. “This is not just some neutral space where information is flowing.”

Mr. Whitehouse said profits will always be the bottom line for the fossil fuel industry and others opposed to meaningful efforts to fight climate change.

“At one level we’ve been losing the climate disinformation war all along,” Mr. Whitehouse said. “We are where we are because we were completely ineffectual in fending off a decades-long disinformation bombardment.”

Lisa Friedman is a Times reporter who writes about how governments are addressing climate change and the effects of those policies on communities.

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