

Supplementary written evidence submitted by the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment

1. This is a supplementary submission to the inquiry by the Sub-committee on Online Harms and Disinformation of the House of Commons Select Committee on Digital, Culture, Media and Sport on 'Misinformation and trusted voices'. This submission has been produced by Bob Ward, Policy and Communications Director at the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). The Institute was established by LSE in 2008 to create a world-leading multidisciplinary centre for policy-relevant research and training on climate change and the environment, bringing together international expertise from across LSE and beyond, including on economics, finance, geography, the environment, science, law, international relations, development and political science. The Institute's mission includes promoting better informed decision-making about climate change and the environment by engaging with a wide range of key stakeholders and audiences around the world. It has, throughout its existence, challenged concerted efforts to mislead decision-makers through misinformation about climate change and the environment. Further information about the Institute can be found at: <https://www.lse.ac.uk/granthaminstitute/>.
2. This submission focuses on the role of the research community in combatting misinformation about climate change. It is well-established that audiences consider the credibility and trustworthiness of messengers when they evaluate messages (see for example Corner and Clarke, 2017, and references therein). Expert voices have an important role to play in promoting informed discussion and debate between decision-makers, including the public, but there are limitations to what they can achieve. In particular, it should be noted that the trustworthiness of a messenger depends on more than just their perceived professional expertise.
3. It is clear from public opinion surveys that scientists, for instance, are trusted by the vast majority of the public. For example, the most recent 2021 survey by Ipsos MORI on trust in professions shows that 83 per cent of respondents said they trust scientists to tell the truth. However, audiences often also take into account whether a messenger is suspected of having vested interests, or is aligned with their values, which can include political views. Polls show lower levels of public trust in 'government scientists' and 'company scientists' than in 'university scientists' (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, 2020).
4. National academies and learned societies should be important sources of accurate and authoritative information about climate change. For instance, the websites of the Royal Society, Royal Meteorological Society and Geological Society all currently provide concise and accurate summaries of scientific knowledge about the causes and potential consequences of climate change. However, these institutions have often found it difficult to engage in the cut and thrust of public discussion and debate about climate change. For instance, in 2010, the Royal Society found itself under attack from a small number of its Fellows because it was promoting the consensus position

on climate change (Travis, 2010). The reluctance of some scientific institutions to challenge misinformation has meant that a relatively small number of individual scientists have been left to carry out the task. This has created serious risks. It is well-known that some climate change deniers respond to challenges to their misinformation campaigns by attempting to isolate prominent scientists and to subject them to personal and professional attacks. For instance, Professor Phil Jones, who had pushed back against attempts by climate change deniers to use the Freedom of Information Act to disrupt the work of the Climatic Research Unit at the University of East Anglia, found himself under personal attack in November 2009 after hacked emails were used to make false allegations about him and his work. Professor Jones said that the abuse he and his family received led him to contemplate suicide (Girling, 2010). There has been an example of an oil company attempting in the UK to discredit those who have challenged their misinformation campaign about climate change (Ward, 2009). Similar tactics are used by the promoters of misinformation about other issues, such as COVID-19 (Ward, 2020). Many researchers complain about a lack of support from institutions, including universities, for individuals who are subjected to targeted abuse. In response, the Science Media Centre has produced 'Advice for researchers experiencing harassment'.

5. Many scientists and university researchers find it difficult to engage with the promoters of misinformation, particularly in public debates. It is a bedrock of the natural and social sciences that disagreements are settled by reference to observations and other evidence but this is based on the assumption that opponents are bound by a common respect for scientific standards. Controversial work is subjected to peer review and scrutiny by other experts through publication in scholarly journals. Such standards do not operate in public debate. Climate researchers can find it a frustrating experience to deal in public debate with an opponent who makes claims about, for instance, technical aspects of the climate system that are inaccurate but sound plausible to a lay audience that are unable to carry out their own fact-checks. In such cases, audience members assess claims based on the perceived credibility of the messenger, which may not be limited to their professional credentials. Many of the proponents of misinformation about climate change, while lacking in scientific expertise, are skilled communicators who are capable of constructing convincing arguments to justify their false claims. But few climate researchers receive professional training in, for instance, debating skills, and can struggle in a setting where being right is not the sole criteria for winning over an audience.
6. Trust in scientists and other messengers varies among the public. For instance, research by Climate Outreach (Wang et al., 2020) shows that 'disengaged traditionalists', 'loyal nationals' and 'backbone conservatives', together constituting about half of the British public, have less trust in climate scientists than other groups. This research also shows that almost every group now uses social media more than traditional media, including TV news and newspapers. Other research shows that those with strong views on climate change tend to engage in social media 'echo chambers' with others who share their views (Williams et al., 2015).

7. While print and broadcast news media are usually governed by journalistic standards that require, at least notionally, a respect for accuracy, social media generally operates without such safeguards. Social media users are particularly exposed and vulnerable to ‘fake news’ and other misinformation. Some of the most potent misinformation on social media originates from lapses in journalistic standards in the news media. For instance, BuzzFeed investigated the rapid spread of an inaccurate and misleading story about climate change that was published in February 2017 by *The Mail on Sunday* (Hirji and Vo, 2017). The newspaper was eventually forced several months later to publish an adverse adjudication by the Independent Press Standards Organisation, which was set-up and funded by a group of newspapers. *The Mail on Sunday* had to admit its story was untrue but this received very little attention on social media.
8. It is clear that social media now makes it easier for those who wish to filter their intake of information about issues such as climate change so that it is more aligned with their preferences. This has created circumstances in which it is easier for misinformation to circulate unchecked and unchallenged, and has become a feature of many polarised issues, including political elections and even the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is thus no surprise that some of the most prolific sources of misinformation about climate change have also been responsible for spreading falsehoods about COVID-19. For instance, Piers Corbyn is both one of the UK’s most prominent deniers of man-made climate change (and was even cited on this issue in newspaper columns by Boris Johnson during his period as Mayor of London [Ward, 2016]), and has led a campaign of misinformation about COVID-19 vaccines (Quinn 2021).
9. Good research has been carried out on how to help the public to distinguish between fact and fiction in the information they receive about climate change (van der Linden et al., 2017). This has included the concept of ‘inoculating’ individuals to help them to identify misinformation. However, it is not clear to what extent members of the public, or indeed other decision-makers, recognise the need to make themselves less vulnerable to the corrosive harm caused by misinformation.

References

- Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (2020) *Public attitudes to science 2019*. Main report. BEIS Research Paper Number 2020/012. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/905466/public-attitudes-to-science-2019.pdf
- Girling R (2010) I thought of killing myself, says climate scandal professor. *The Sunday Times*, 9 February. Available at: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/i-thought-of-killing-myself-says-climate-scandal-professor-q8td7pfrmr>
- Hirji Z, Vo LT (2017) Here's Why Debunking Viral Climate Myths Is Almost Impossible, In One Animated Chart. *BuzzFeed News*, 3 October. Available at: <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/zahrahirji/how-climate-myths-spread-online>

- Ipsos MORI (2021) *Ipsos MORI Veracity Index 2021: Trust in professions survey*. Technical note. Available at: https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2021-12/trust-in-professions-veracity-index-2021-ipsos-mori_0.pdf
- Quinn B (2021) Piers Corbyn investigated over Covid leaflets likening vaccination to Auschwitz. *The Guardian*, 2 February. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/feb/02/piers-corbyn-investigated-covid-leaflets-vaccination-to-auschwitz>
- Science Media Centre (2019) *Advice for researchers experiencing harassment*. Available at: <https://www.sciencemediacentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Advice-for-Researchers-Experiencing-Harrasment-2019.pdf>
- Travis J (2010) Royal Society Fellows Question Body's Climate Change Statements. *Science*, 28 May. Available at: <https://www.science.org/content/article/royal-society-fellows-question-bodyys-climate-change-statements>
- Van der Linden S, Leiserowitz A, Rosenthal S, Maibach E (2017) Inoculating the Public against Misinformation about Climate Change. *Global Challenges* 1. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1002/gch2.201600008>
- Wang S, Corner A, Nicholls J (2020). *Britain Talks Climate: A toolkit for engaging the British public on climate change*. Oxford: Climate Outreach. Available at: <https://climateoutreach.org/reports/britain-talks-climate/>
- Ward RET (2009) Why ExxonMobil must be taken to task over climate denial funding. *The Guardian*, 1 July. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/cif-green/2009/jul/01/bob-ward-exxon-mobil-climate>
- Ward RET (2016) London's mayor seems to struggle with science. Time for a chief scientific adviser. *The Guardian*, 11 January. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2016/jan/11/londons-mayor-boris-johnson-time-for-a-chief-scientific-adviser>
- Ward RET (2020) It's not just Neil Ferguson – scientists are being attacked for telling the truth. *The Guardian*, 6 May. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/may/06/neil-ferguson-scientists-media-government-adviser-social-distancing>
- Williams HTP, McMurray JR, Kurz T, Lambert FH (2015) Network analysis reveals open forums and echo chambers in social media discussions of climate change. *Global Environmental Change* 32: 126-138. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0959378015000369>