

Against Post-Pandemic Climate Denialism: Countering “Sugar-Coating” Narratives on Climate Change Through Online Social Movement

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ABSTRACT

Climate change is not only a material issue regarding the realization of sustainable climate projects but also involves the construction and dissemination of various ideas related to climate change itself. In the middle of a highly interconnected world, there is a dichotomy respecting the international community’s view towards climate change, making them split in two as “accepters” and “deniers”. Climate denialism among people is not new, but the trend has drastically shifted once COVID-19 strikes. It went from rejecting scientific evidence of climate crisis as an anthropogenic phenomenon into sugar-coating post-pandemic reality, a more subtle mechanism to convince people that the current climate crisis is inevitable and no one will be able to fix it due to dilemmatic situation between saving the earth or saving the economy. The “sweeten reality” narrative is disguisedly counterproductive, fostering logical fallacies and ultimately hindering the attainment of a global collective target to shut climate change down. Addressing this matter, this research aims to analyze how the online social movements could be an effective channel to counter climate denialism post-pandemic. Utilizing Singh and Tourrine New Social Movement theory, this study concluded that online social movement could generate a climate communication space to disseminating accurate and non-confrontational information, responding deniers questions and concerns, and promoting constructive climate discourse.

Keywords: Climate change, climate denialism, COVID-19

INTRODUCTION

The world has now successfully escaped the grip of the pandemic, right after the World Health Organization (WHO) officially announced that COVID-19 will no longer be a global health emergency, back in May 2023. In spite of disrupting the living order of the world’s social community - shifting towards intensified digitalization, the pandemic had caused another challenge. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to severe economic impacts; damage to human capital, and financial hardship (Mohammad & Pugacheva, 2022) among people since there was a social mobility restriction as an effort to prevent virus transmission. It caused a sharp decline in economic activity, including business closures, mass unemployment, and overall economic losses. According to the World Bank (2022), COVID-19 caused economic shock and dramatically increase inflation, debt and worsening inequality within and across countries. Experts also argue that the recovery from the economic crisis is predicted to be uneven as before. Developing countries and economically disadvantaged groups will need much more time to recover (World Bank, 2022).

Amidst the world's economic downturn, there is a glimmer of hope for alleviating the adverse impacts of climate change. Limiting human mobility and economic activity provides an opportunity to reduce the amount of greenhouse gas emissions and air pollution. NASA noted a 5.4% reduction in carbon emissions during the pandemic in 2020 (Rasmussen, 2021). However, prioritizing climate change mitigation amidst economic uncertainty would hamper efforts to improve global prosperity. However, spurring

economic growth in the context of a global economic recovery comes at the expense of environmental and climate stability. The need for economic growth can lead to increased industrial activity that negatively impacts ecosystems, through water pollution, deforestation and habitat destruction. Catalyzing the adverse impacts of climate change. Regarding to this matter, in the middle of a highly interconnected world, there is a dichotomy respecting the international community’s view towards climate change, making them split in two as “accepters” and “deniers”. Climate denialism among people is not new, but the trend has drastically shifted once COVID-19 strikes. It went from rejecting scientific evidence of climate crisis as an anthropogenic phenomenon into sugar-coating post-pandemic reality, a more subtle mechanism to convince people that the current climate crisis is inevitable and no one will be able to fix it due to dilemmatic situation between saving the earth or saving the economy.

Climate deniers are essentially individuals or groups who reject or doubt the scientific consensus on anthropogenic caused of climate change. They do not believe that increased emissions of greenhouse gases, such as carbon dioxide, resulting from the burning of fossil fuels and other human activities, are causing global warming and worsening climate change. Yet the majority of climate scientists from various disciplines and leading international organizations have unequivocally agreed that current climate change is caused by human activities and has serious impacts. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has produced a very in-depth report based on strong scientific evidence to support this consensus. YouGov reports that the United States and Indonesia have the greatest percentages of people who deny climate change (Buchholz, 2020). In a survey conducted in July and August, 19% of Americans and 21% of Indonesians disagreed that people were to blame for climate change. Only 3% of Indonesians believed that climate change was not occurring at all, compared to 5% of Americans. Several of the countries in the poll had just as many outright doubters, but having lower overall scores for climate change denial. Saudi Arabia and Egypt, two more nations dependent on fossil resources for export or domestic usage, also had high denialism rates. India shares position four. Another reason is because climate change warnings have traditionally focused on the long term, making it simple for skeptics to assert that short-term changes invalidate the entire theory: "See, it's cold today, so global warming is a hoax!" Since we are seeing fires and floods more frequently than they used to, this type of evasion has become more difficult (Krugman, 2021). But it made the situation more complex.

Based on this description, climate-denialism is a threat to the realization of climate goals. However, the author sees the potential to counter the climate-denialism narrative. By using the understanding of New Social Movement, the author believes that utilizing social media as an online social movement tool can suppress climate-denialism which is increasing post-pandemic.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

In compiling this research, the author used a type of qualitative research. According to Maso’ed (1994), this type of research seeks to explain reality and understand that reality by paying attention to the process of events and intensity. This aims to get a sharper analysis based on existing facts and dynamics. To help answer the

question of how online social movements can be a medium for post-pandemic climate-denialism resistance, the author reviews a number of relevant literatures.

In their article entitled *The Association Between Climate Change Attitudes and COVID-19 Attitudes: The Link is More than Political Ideology*, Latkin et.al (2022) explain the relationship between individual perceptions of COVID-19 and climate change as two global phenomena that are currently happening, specifically in the United States. The prominent factor that influences individual beliefs about COVID-19 and climate change is political ideology. This study found that people with liberal ideologies believe that climate change is a crisis caused by human activities, are more concerned about the adverse effects of climate change and COVID-19 and are more serious in their efforts to fight climate change and COVID-19 when compared to conservative people (Latkin et al., 2022). On the other hand, conservatives tend to ignore the adverse impacts of climate change due to conservative leaders and mass media who also downplay the adverse impacts of climate change and the severity of the pandemic. Finally, a common link between the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change is the prevalence of conspiracy theories surrounding both crises (Latkin et al., 2022).

Another article entitled *Climate Change Knowledge and Social Movement Theory* written by Jamison (2010). Climate change knowledge is now in dispute, with fundamental disputes on the causes and acceptable responses. Related to this, Jamison found that there are three types of community characteristics regarding their knowledge of climate change, namely dominant, oppositional and emergent. The dominant position is associated with those who have been most active in raising political awareness about climate change over the last decade, and who have advocated for a significant reduction in carbon dioxide emissions into the atmosphere and a transition to what has been dubbed a "low-carbon society" (Jamison, 2010). The opposing viewpoint is connected with self-proclaimed 'skeptics' who, for various reasons, dispute the significance of addressing climate change over other issues. They have actively contested the dominant perspective, primarily by questioning the veracity of scientific knowledge claims made on its behalf (Jamison, 2010). The emerging perspective is connected with those who are certain that climate change is real and will have major effects if not addressed, but who emphasize the need of dealing with climate change in ways that take problems of justice and fairness seriously (Jamison, 2010). According to Jamison, the presence of oppositional groups is due to the degradation of the neutrality of science, whose boundaries are increasingly blurred with politics and business. In other words, science is used as a tool to achieve interests in the policy formulation process.

According to Singh (2002), New Social Movement is an extra-institutional or anti-institutional forms of collective activity that aim to bring about or prevent social change. The goals and values of these movements are essentially universal. Their actions are directed towards defending the essence and protecting the human condition for a better life. New social movements generally involve grassroots politics that often initiate micro-movements. They give birth to horizontally organized democratic associations that are interwoven in loose federations at the national level as well as at the global level. New social movements generally respond to issues around the demoralization of the structures of everyday life and focus on forms of communication and collective identity, rather than targeting the domains of the economy and the state. New Social Movements

is a term developed by French sociologist Alain Touraine in 1975. New social movements claim to be different from the conventional social movement paradigm. What is new about this movement is that the issues they fight for are not only focused on economic redistribution or social class movements. The issues fought by this social movement include: the struggle for human rights, the struggle for the rights of gay people, women's rights, the impact of globalization, and so on. The agenda of the new social movements covers a wider range of interests and they act outside the political mainstream.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In the context of climate change, the emergence and existence of social movements and climate change networks have long existed. Among them are Extinction Rebellion, Fridays For Future and Climate Justice Networks. Their demands are the same, namely to encourage real action from stakeholders to be more serious about addressing the increasingly worrying adverse effects of climate change. In addition, they are also disseminating knowledge that climate change is real and not an illusion. However, the massive use of the internet, especially post-pandemic, which shifts the order of people's lives towards digital transformation, creates a new trend of social movements, which is then referred to as online social movements. Social movements no longer require activists to be physically present to take action at certain moments and places. According to the author, the use of the internet and social media as online social movement tools can be effective in countering climate-denialism narratives.

How does it work? First, social media can be used as a climate communication space for disseminating accurate and non-confrontational information and empirical-scientific knowledge about climate change and its impacts. Second, becoming a space to respond the climate-deniers questions and concerns related to climate change. Third, being an arena to promote a constructive climate discourse. Social media allows users concerned about climate change to connect and form a strong community. Within this community, they can share information, experiences and ideas to overcome climate denialism. By amplifying awareness of climate change and showing that there are many people who care and are committed to action, social media can help change the overall view of the public. Not everyone has an interest in accessing scientific information and knowledge to prove the impacts of climate change, but many people have and like to surf on their social media. By 2022, social media users worldwide will have reached 4.59 billion, and are predicted to continue increasing until 2027 to reach almost 6 billion people (Statista, 2023). Call it Fridays For Future, which has just been established since 2019. Besides being actively present in various moments to voice their demands, this movement has maximally utilized their social media; Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube and Fridays For Future Website to disseminate information and knowledge about climate change and its impacts on humanity. In addition to disseminating scientific facts, they also build narratives by showing short videos from their activists scattered around the world to illustrate to the world the current reality felt by communities that disproportionately experience the more severe impacts of climate change. The scientific facts can be ignored by climate-deniers, but the reality on display will not be denied by anyone.

Social media can also harness the power of narrative and emotional factors to

counter climate denialism. By using powerful stories, images and videos, online social movement activist can illustrate the real impacts of climate change on people and the planet. Engaging emotions and personal experiences can help overcome indifference or disbelief in climate change caused by denialism. Most importantly, these stories prove to climate-deniers that the economic cost of focusing on saving the planet is not worth the human cost of ignoring climate efforts. Social media can also help strengthen the reputation of experts and scientific institutions competent in the field of climate change. Through these platforms, trusted scientists and organizations can share their research, clarify false claims, and provide objective information. In this way, social media can help build their authority and reduce the influence of climate change deniers. Finally, in order for the online social movement through social media to fight climate-denialism to achieve its goals maximally, its continuity must be carried out consistently, persistently and sustainably.

CONCLUSION

In the middle of a highly interconnected world, there is a dichotomy respecting the international community's view towards climate change, making them split in two as “accepters” and “deniers”. Climate denialism among people is not new, but the trend has drastically shifted once COVID-19 strikes. It went from rejecting scientific evidence of climate crisis as an anthropogenic phenomenon into sugar-coating post-pandemic reality, a more subtle mechanism to convince people that the current climate crisis is inevitable and no one will be able to fix it due to dilemmatic situation between saving the earth or saving the economy. Climate deniers are essentially individuals or groups who reject or doubt the scientific consensus on anthropogenic caused of climate change. They do not believe that increased emissions of greenhouse gases, such as carbon dioxide, resulting from the burning of fossil fuels and other human activities, are causing global warming and worsening climate change. Therefore, utilizing social media as an online social movement tool can suppress climate-denialism which is increasing post-pandemic. First, social media can be used as a climate communication space for disseminating accurate and non-confrontational information and empirical-scientific knowledge about climate change and its impacts. Second, becoming a space to respond the climate-deniers questions and concerns related to climate change. Third, being an arena to promote a constructive climate discourse.

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