

Climate science deniers at forefront of downplaying coronavirus pandemic

[theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/25/climate-science-deniers-downplaying-coronavirus-pandemic](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/25/climate-science-deniers-downplaying-coronavirus-pandemic)

Fringe climate science deniers who spread online disinformation are now downplaying the seriousness of the Covid-19 pandemic, according to a new analysis.

DeSmog, a blog and organization that tracks the culprits behind false information about the climate crisis, identified about 70 individuals and groups questioning the deadliness of the coronavirus and pushing for an end to social distancing, along with protesters who have been encouraged by Donald Trump.

From the conservative conspiracy theorist Alex Jones to the US-based Heartland Institute and UK-based James Delingpole, the review concludes that the same influencers trying to make the public question the severity of global heating are also discounting the science surrounding Covid-19.

“The climate war has largely been about confusing the public and making people trust in science and government less,” said DeSmog’s executive director, Brendan DeMelle. “And here we are in a pandemic where science and global cooperation are critical, and that’s a threat to the ideology of a lot of these ... organizations.

“You end up with this conspiracy theory about big government taking over our lives, taking away our freedoms, subjecting us to stay-at-home orders that we have to liberate ourselves from,” DeMelle said.

DeSmog also identified fossil fuel and chemical industry aligned interests touting single-use plastics in personal protective gear, food packaging and grocery bags.

John Cook, who studies climate denial at the center for climate change communication at George Mason University, said he expected the overlap but was surprised by the extent of the parallels.

“People who are politically conservative and who value individual rights over collective responsibility are less supporting of social distancing policies and also just have a lower understanding of the dangers of Covid-19,” Cook said, citing emerging polling data.

Cook outlines five techniques of science denial that people should watch for, including the cherry-picking of data.

“The latest argument that we should relax social distancing because the curve [of cases] is flattening is very much an example of cherry-picking,” Cook said.

In the US, some of the same groups that have petitioned the Trump administration to debate human-caused climate disruption and to roll back climate standards are sowing distrust of epidemiological research.

Jay Lehr, science director of the Heartland Institute, on 30 March said people have been “barraged on the 24/7 news cycle for years” about climate change and now “face a more realistic fear of the most contagious virus any of us have ever experienced” but “both, however, suffer from questionable statistics and predictions that make us wonder what is real and what is someone’s best guess.”

Heartland’s communications director, Jim Lakely, in a podcast about the “Wuhan virus” on 15 March compared the virus to a bad flu season and said that while “the panic is definitely more dangerous than the flu – this has to be put in perspective.

“We have to think about the economic damage this is doing to the country. This is incalculable,” Lakely said.

The Heartland Institute also posted a piece by economics professor Daniel Sutter arguing that alternative strategies to social distancing – like sheltering vulnerable populations – “could have mitigated the human toll at a significantly lower economic and social cost”.

The Manhattan Institute, which calls itself a free-market thinktank, ran an article from Heather MacDonald in which she wrote: “Even if my odds of dying from coronavirus should suddenly jump ten-thousand-fold, from the current rate of 0.000012 percent across the U.S. population all the way up to 0.12 percent, I’d happily take those odds over the destruction being wrought on the U.S. and global economy from this unbridled panic.”

The Media Research Center in a video said: “This is exactly how they incite mass panic: through lies and deception and exploiting ignorance. It’s how they convince people that we’re all going to die because Trump doesn’t believe in science or something.”

Conspiracy theorist Alex Jones, who founded Infowars, has called the virus a “hoax” and appeared at a “You Can’t Close America” rally in Austin on Saturday, where he shook hands with unmasked supporters.

Fossil fuel supporters have also capitalized on the pandemic to warn of the costs of climate action.

Alex Epstein, the founder of the Center for Industrial Progress which DeSmog cites as associated with various groups connected to the rightwing billionaire brothers Charles and David Koch, called the current recession a “mild preview of the Green New Deal”, and said that “our biggest ally in the fight against coronavirus is the fossil fuel industry.”

The links between climate science denial and Covid-19 downplaying reach outside the US. In the UK, Delingpole, a rightwing commentator, has reposted calls to rapidly return to regular life.

In a recent podcast, he called doubters of quarantining measures “lockdown skeptics”, and referred to those who support social distancing as “hysterical bedwetters”. He accused the media of promoting panic in “hysterical tabloids”.