

Journalism 101: Misinformation and fact checking



Misinformation, doubt around
climate change, greenwashing,
and how to fact check.



Co-funded by
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News Decoder



TEHRA
The Environment and Human Rights Academy

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With special thanks to Enock Wanderema, Ruth Jepkemoi Singen, and Juan Pablo Arellano for their expertise throughout, and to all pilot school educators and students for their invaluable feedback.

The Empowering Youth through Environmental Storytelling is a collaboration between The Environment and Human Rights Academy (TEHRA), News Decoder and the Young Educators European Association (YEEA).

The purpose of these educational materials is to help young people understand the climate crisis on a systems level through engaging with the topics and foster agency through the skills and techniques of journalism.

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We cannot be held liable for how these materials are used in practice.

These educational resources have been developed to the best of our knowledge, using reliable and widely-recognized sources. While every effort has been made to ensure accuracy and clarity, we cannot guarantee that the materials are free from errors or omissions. Climate change is a field of knowledge that continues to evolve, and teachers and learners are encouraged to consult up-to-date scientific sources (e.g. IPCC, IPBES or national agencies) to complement and enrich these activities.

Published: November 2025



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1. What is misinformation?

The term “fake news” gets used a lot nowadays. But what does it really mean? In broad terms, it refers to information that is, in whole or in part, not accurate.

Fake news is used to refer to “misinformation”, which can include inaccurate, incomplete, misleading, or false information as well as selective or half-truths. So while it might not always be completely false, and while there might not always be an intent to deceive, it is at least misleading.

A 2019 playbook by the News Literacy Project and Facebook Journalism Project identifies seven common types of misinformation. These are four of them to watch out for:

- Misleading content: Information that frames an issue or individual in a misleading way by leaving out material information or context.
- Fabricated content: Content that is inaccurate, designed to deceive and do harm.
- False connection: Information that includes headlines, visuals or captions that frame a story in a misleading way.
- False context: Genuine content that is placed within a false context (for example, a story of a real attack is placed with an image of an attack from a different time and place).

As this list reveals, accuracy has a lot to do with context. What makes information true — or not — depends not only on the accuracy of the statements themselves, but also on the context in which the statements are situated, the information that surrounds the content (like images, headlines and captions) and references to outside sources.

So what is misinformation in regards to climate change?





2. The doubt about climate change

The basic science of climate change was already understood in the 19th Century. A French physicist called Joseph Fourier discovered the greenhouse effect in 1824 – where gasses in the atmosphere (like carbon dioxide) trap heat similar to the glass roof of a greenhouse. In 1856, an American scientist called Eunice Foot confirmed that more carbon dioxide in the atmosphere resulted in a warming planet. Anthropogenic climate change, where humans cause changes to the climate through burning fossil fuels such as coal, oil, and natural gas, was quite clear even in the early 20th century, and by 1990 it was categorically clear.

In 1988, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change was established by the United Nations Environmental Program, which provides governments with scientific information to use in developing climate policies.

So it seems pretty clear and universally understood.

The doubt, though, made its way into the media through conservative leaders, skeptical scientists, and the fossil fuel industry – those who make a profit by burning fossil fuels.

How does this get into the media?

2.1 *The pro vs cons lens*

Journalists are taught to seek multiple perspectives. This means that when a journalist interviews an expert about any given topic, they are encouraged to find another source with a different opinion to make it “fair” and “balanced”.

Journalists also know that conflict makes a story more interesting. Conflict can come in many forms, and one of these is the disagreement between sources. So when someone speaks out as a climate skeptic, journalists would become interested.

Scientists are averse to absolutes, meaning that they are hesitant to speak about the future with certainty. But journalists want to quote people who express certainty, and then the uncertainty gets exposed and spread.

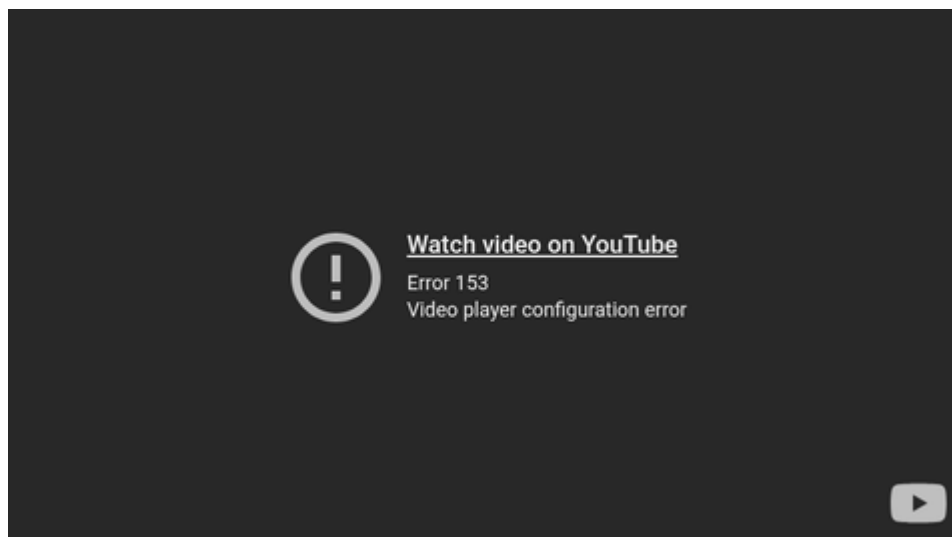
The fossil fuel industry practiced mass misinformation tactics with such certainty, to put out diverse perspectives about “if it was happening.” They poured money into creating organizations and funding research that would downplay the effect of industry on the climate.



Watch the video below to get a better understanding of how the fossil fuel industry understood climate science, but then decided to deny it in the name of profit.

The fossil fuel industry also painted environmentalists in a negative light. Environmentalists became "crazy radicals", "naysayers and complainers", "granola eating hippies", and "Stalinists" where they were given the "watermelon" accusation – thin green skin on the outside, deep communist red in the middle.

The framing of these individuals, of the "greenies" in a negative light, worked its way into the media and into society.





This is all combined with reporting under time pressures and other constraints.

Journalists in general have a difficult – whilst of course rewarding – job. They are increasingly short on time with tight deadlines, and so can easily fall into the trap of grabbing sources who will get back to them quickly, or turning to sources who are often quoted by journalists, knowing they will want to speak to them.

This means that there are many voices out there – groundbreaking scientists, people experiencing the damaging effects of climate change every day, individuals and groups working on systemic solutions – who are never (or very rarely) sourced by journalists. The perspectives that we find in the media are therefore limited. The problem here is that the sources can then shape the story.



2.2 So what is objectivity in journalism?

Historian of science Naomi Oreskes says that in the past, objectivity has been mistaken as, "I have to listen to Joe Spout lie for an equal amount of time as listening to Mike tell me the truth."

But she says, "That's an absurd notion of objectivity."

Her definition of objectivity is: "You try as much as you are humanly able to look at the evidence fairly."

Journalists have always been told to be objective and to tell both sides of the story and are taught to seek multiple perspectives. This means that when a journalist interviews an expert about any given topic, they are encouraged to find another source with a different opinion to make it "fair" and "balanced".

Journalists also know that conflict makes a story more interesting (conflict is a news value) which drives sales (remember, news organizations also have financial interests).

And as you research any topic and look for multiple perspectives you will find disagreements, among scientists, ecologists, business leaders, politicians and everyday people.



Throughout our units we have and will continue to discuss other and different ways to make a story compelling. You don't have to amp up disagreements to make that happen.

But we have to be careful of this. We have to be critical. So how do we handle conflict in climate journalism without creating false balance?

- Focus on facts not opinions and know the difference.

A fact can be verified through data and anecdotes of things that happened and that can also be verified.

You understand the science of climate change now, but maybe your sources will be giving you different ideas for what should be done about it. Ask your sources, "How do you know that?", "Do you have evidence to back that up?"

Perhaps they do have evidence to back it up, such as the fossil fuel industry did in order to support climate skepticism. So it is also good to find out what the source's financial interests are (how they make money, and who financially supports them or their data). If this information presents a conflict of interest, state it in your story or reconsider whether you should include their take.

- When seeking opinions or assessments, do so from people with actual expertise.

That's not the same as a level of education or a fancy title. Don't be afraid to ask people: How do you know this?

- Don't be afraid to challenge people's statements. Let them know that you have found contradictory information.

When you challenge people it is not a sign of disrespect. It is a sign that you have carefully listened to what they said, have thought about it and are now questioning it. Disrespect is to take something someone says without really listening or thinking about it.

- Use your own common sense. Does what they say go against what you have seen out there yourself?





Journalists don't just gather information through official data. In our unit on Interviewing, we discuss who you should talk to about your particular topic and what you should ask them.

We will explore the importance of finding out what is happening "on the ground" – talking to locals who are not interested in "facts" but who speak about things the way they see them.

For example, a census conducted in 2010 in Nabon, a rural area in Ecuador, found that 87.8% of the population was "poor".

That's an astounding figure, and if used as data in the media, paints a very particular picture.

However, a different study in 2013, conducted by the University of Quenca with the Nabon municipal government at the time found a significantly different figure – that 75.8% of the population reported to be highly satisfied with their lives when assessing "subjective wellbeing".

The difference in figures is due to what indicators were used to measure satisfaction. The "subjective wellbeing" survey by the University of Quenca was inspired by the Gross Happiness Index in Bhutan and measured people's control over their lives, satisfaction with their occupation, financial situation, their environmental surroundings, family life, leisure time, spiritual life, and food security. The census from 2010 however, looked at housing, access to health and education, and monetary income.

Do you see that the language used for measuring life satisfaction is therefore hugely important?

And do you see that "accurate" data is not always the only data to use? Always check what other data is out there.

Your job as a journalist is to present the information in such a way that your audience can recognise what is actually happening and why it's important.

