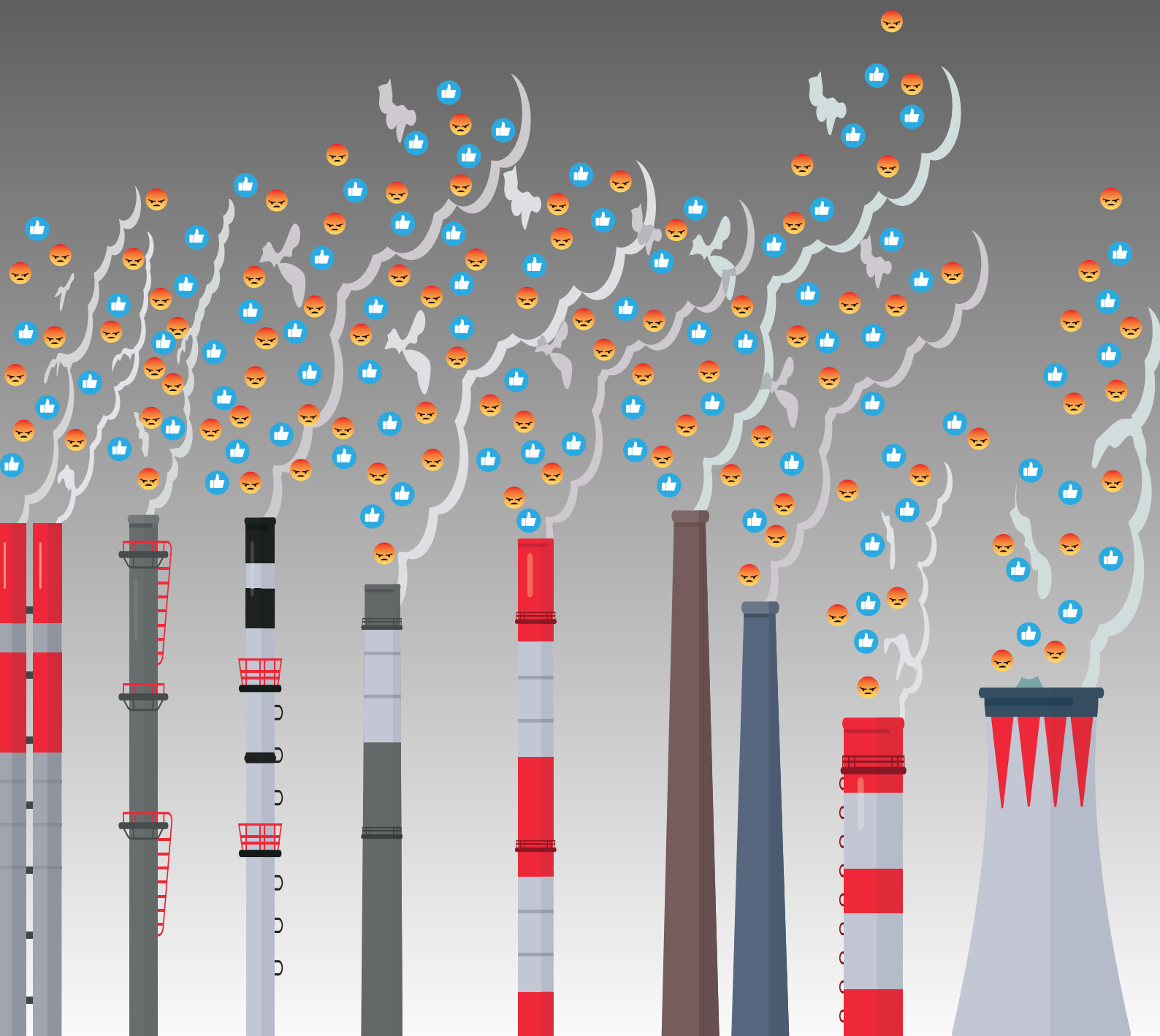


Center for  
Countering  
**DIGITAL  
HATE**

# THE TOXIC TEN

How ten fringe publishers fuel 69% of digital climate change denial



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## How ten fringe publishers fuel 69% of digital climate change denial

### Introduction

We are at a climate tipping point. Delayed action means humanity will be forced to endure continual and worsening surges in heat waves, droughts, typhoons and hurricanes, rising sea levels, and the degradation of our food supply.

It is the greatest crisis ever faced by our species. Through collective will, we can mitigate and avert the worst impacts of climate change. But, just as we've experienced recently with vaccine and COVID-19 disinformation, we continue to be up against vested interests with financial stakes, such as companies and autocrats dependent on hydrocarbon income, being aided and abetted by greedy platforms. Climate denial, like vaccine denial, obfuscates the truth by overwhelming us with claims and questions designed in bad faith to confuse the debate so action is delayed. The most potent tool of these self-serving parties is social media, a public forum where the most extreme, conspiratorial, and damaging content is rewarded with amplification.

It didn't take the revelations of Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen to show that the privileged and powerful executives of companies like Facebook and Google do not care about the majority of people, but rather their own pocketbooks. There may be rules, but the rules are just for show; no one is enforcing them. And the failure to enforce is not due to lack of resources; these are among the richest companies and the most powerful people there have ever been in the world. The failure to enforce is a calculated and deeply cynical decision, made at the top, and made to maximize profits. Social media companies even profit from the contrived "debate" over misinformation and denial because where else does it take place but on their platforms.

The Toxic Ten websites identified in our study are the main producers of content that sows climate change skepticism on social media platforms, creating the sense that there is a more extensive debate than there really is. They spread baseless, unscientific climate denial on their own websites but the real objective is to harness the power of social media platforms to spread this skepticism to the public and prevent consensus on facts and solutions - even though our lives depend on both.

**The Toxic Ten, we calculate, are responsible for up to 69% of Facebook users' interactions with this climate denial content.**

Despite Facebook's promises in March 2021 to begin labelling posts featuring climate denial with links to correct information, the platform has failed to follow through. Just 8% of the most popular posts on Facebook containing the Toxic Ten's misinformation carried labels.

The majority of the Toxic Ten are funded by Google Ad revenue, too. Together, the 10 generated up to \$5.3 million in Google Ads revenue in just six months. The Toxic Ten are part of an efficient climate denial disinformation industry, reaching 186 million followers on mainstream social media platforms.

Many have links to oil and gas companies. Two publications have links to the Russian state. As the world waits to see if international leaders gathering at COP26 will urgently address the climate crisis, social media companies with a profound global influence carry the exact same responsibility to act on the Toxic Ten.

We are calling on Facebook and Google to stop promoting and funding climate denial, start labeling it as misinformation, and stop giving the advantages of their enormous platform to lies and misinformation. As long as Facebook and Google carry on doing business with climate deniers, they cannot claim to be 'green.' They owe it to us and the planet we all share, to deliver.

**Imran Ahmed**  
CEO, CCDH

# THE TOXIC TEN

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## How ten fringe publishers fuel 69% of digital climate change denial

### Executive Summary

- New analysis shows that posts linking to content from ten “superpolluter” publishers spreading climate misinformation account for up to 69% of Facebook interactions with climate denial content.
  - 1) **Breitbart**, the disinformation site once run by Steve Bannon
  - 2) **Western Journal**, whose founder claimed President Obama is Muslim
  - 3) **Newsmax**, a key promoter of election fraud conspiracies
  - 4) **Townhall Media**, founded by the Exxon-funded Heritage Foundation
  - 5) **Media Research Center**, a “think tank” that received funding from Exxon
  - 6) **The Washington Times**, founded by self-proclaimed messiah Sun Myung Moon
  - 7) **The Federalist Papers**, a site that has promoted Covid misinformation
  - 8) **Daily Wire**, one of the most engaged-with publishers on Facebook
  - 9) **Russian state media**, pushing disinformation via RT.com and Sputnik News
  - 10) **Patriot Post**, a secretive conservative site whose writers use pseudonyms
- The Toxic Ten have 186 million followers on mainstream social media platforms.

### The Toxic Ten account for 69% of interactions on climate denial Facebook posts

- CCDH analyzed 6,983 climate denial articles from the last year featured in Facebook posts with 709,057 interactions in total using the social analytics tool NewsWhip.
- This analysis shows that posts containing articles from just ten websites account for 69.69% of Facebook users’ interactions with the climate denial content in our study.

### Facebook failed to label 92% of posts containing Toxic Ten content

- Despite promising to start attaching information labels to posts about climate change, 92% of posts containing content from the Toxic Ten carried no labels.
- 99.05% of user interactions with posts containing Toxic Ten content were with posts that carried no information or fact-checking labels.

### The Toxic Ten earned \$3.6 million in advertising revenue from Google in the last six months

- The Toxic Ten’s websites have received nearly 1.1 billion visits in the last six months alone, earning those that are part of Google’s AdSense platform an estimated \$3.6m.
- This money is given to Google by brands such as Chevrolet, Capital One and the delivery company DHL International, whose Google AdSense ads have run on Toxic Ten sites.

### Recommendations

- **Stop monetizing climate denial.** Eight of the Toxic Ten are profiting from Google Ads. Google must remove these sites from their AdSense platform, in line with their new policy not to profit from ads on climate denial content.
- **Stop profiting from climate denial.** Eight of the Toxic Ten have paid Facebook to advertise their content to its users. Facebook should refuse to profit from publishers that are major spreaders of climate denial and other misinformation.
- **Comprehensively label climate denial.** 92% of the most popular Facebook posts promoting articles in our sample did not carry information labels. It has been six months since Facebook said it would mark posts about climate change - it must act.

# THE TOXIC TEN

## How ten fringe publishers fuel 69% of digital climate change denial

### The Toxic Ten have a huge digital footprint with 186 million direct followers

This report examines the disproportionate influence of the Toxic Ten, a group of digital publishers that are profiting from the spread of climate denial on social media.

Our new research reveals that Facebook posts featuring content from the Toxic Ten account for 69% of user interactions with climate denial content. With the help of Google Ads, these sites turn this engagement into traffic earning them \$5.3 million in the last six months alone.

- 1) Breitbart
- 2) The Western Journal
- 3) Newsmax
- 4) Townhall Media
- 5) Media Research Center
- 6) The Washington Times
- 7) The Federalist Papers
- 8) The Daily Wire
- 9) Russian State Media
- 10) The Patriot Post

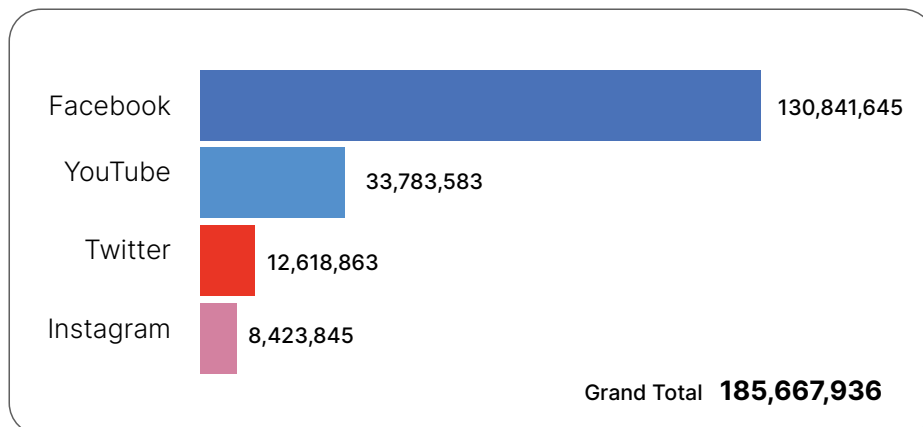
### Members of the Toxic Ten have links to the oil industry and foreign governments

Tech giants are allowing groups with links to the fossil fuel industry and even foreign governments with vested interests to spread climate denial on their platforms.

At least two of the Toxic Ten - Townhall Media and Media Research Center - have historic links to funding from oil giant ExxonMobil. Russia Today is the foreign disinformation arm of the Russian state, which refuses to attend COP26 as it insists on sanction relief for its state-run fossil fuel giant Gazprom.<sup>1</sup>

### The Toxic Ten are reaching 186 million followers on social media

Analysis of the Toxic Ten's social media accounts reveals that they are reaching up to 186 million followers with their climate denial content. The Toxic Ten are particularly influential on Facebook, where eight of them have paid the platform to advertise their content to its users.<sup>2</sup>



# THE TOXIC TEN

## How ten fringe publishers fuel 69% of digital climate change denial

### The Toxic Ten account for 69% of interactions with climate denial on Facebook

Just ten “superpolluter” publishers feature in Facebook posts that account for up to 69% of Facebook user interactions with climate denial content.

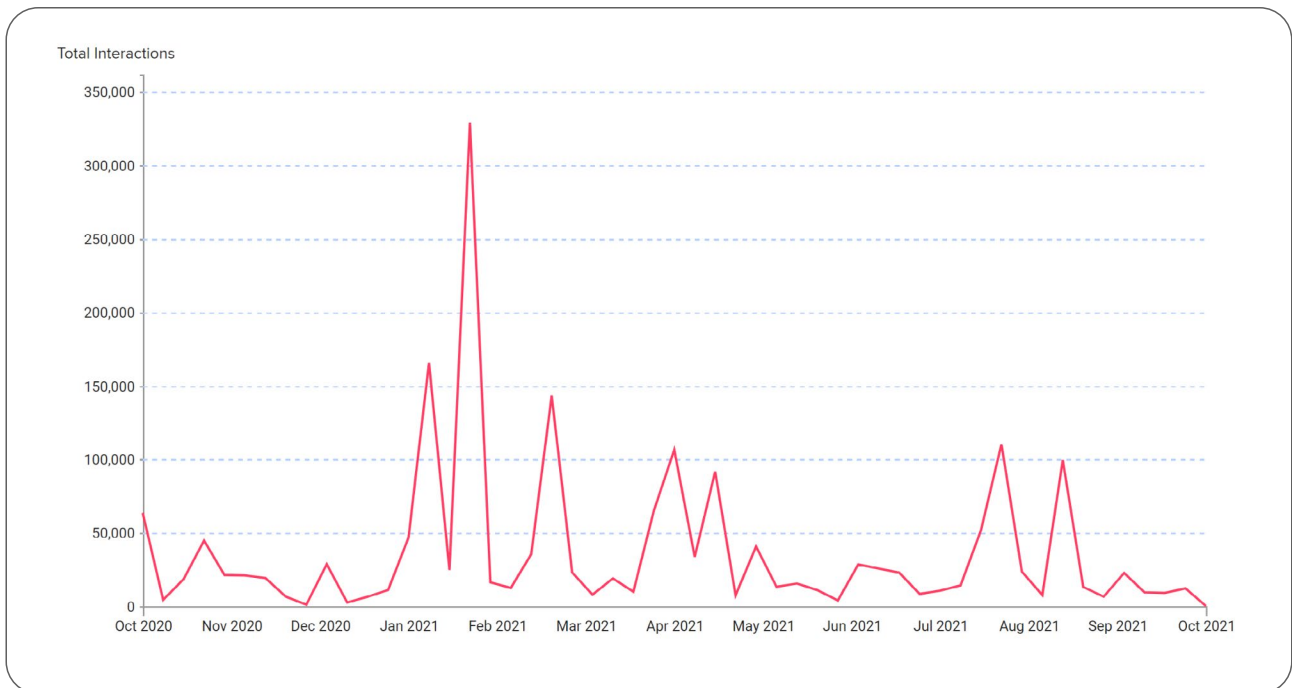
This analysis is based on a sample of 6,983 climate denial articles published between 12 October 2020 and 11 October 2021 that featured in posts that received a total of 709,057 Facebook interactions, which includes likes, comments and shares.

These articles were indexed by the social analytics tool NewsWhip, which monitors articles posted by millions of websites and uses the Facebook API.<sup>3</sup> NewsWhip then records data on how many interactions that posts featuring those articles have received across Facebook pages, groups and profiles, including posts shared privately.

CCDH researchers designed a NewsWhip query that could identify articles containing phrases associated with climate denial, such as “climate fraud”. The full query is available as an appendix to this report.

Researchers cleaned the resulting data by removing articles that did not promote climate denial and grouping websites belonging to the same publisher.

The resulting data revealed that the top ten publishers, ranked by the number of Facebook user interactions that posts featuring their articles received, were responsible for 69.69% of all interactions with content in our sample.



Analysis of our sample of climate change denial articles extracted from NewsWhip shows that interactions with climate denial content peaked between February 15-21 this year, with posts receiving 328,906 user interactions in that period.

## THE TOXIC TEN

### How ten fringe publishers fuel 69% of digital climate change denial

The table below shows the number of interactions that articles from a given publisher received across Facebook, and as a proportion of all interactions across our sample of 6,983 articles. Where a single publisher operates more than one website, the publisher's websites are listed below its entry in italics.

More detail on these publishers, their funding and the content they typically produce is available later in this report.

Publisher	Facebook Interactions	% of Total Interactions
1 Breitbart	121,465	17.13%
2 The Western Journal	111,232	15.63%
3 Newsmax	70,460	9.90%
4 Townhall Media	46,729	6.57%
<i>PJ Media</i>	<i>24,913</i>	<i>3.50%</i>
<i>Townhall</i>	<i>20,349</i>	<i>2.86%</i>
<i>Red State</i>	<i>1,339</i>	<i>0.19%</i>
<i>Twitchy</i>	<i>128</i>	<i>0.02%</i>
5 Media Research Center	43,887	6.17%
<i>NewsBusters</i>	<i>39,648</i>	<i>5.57%</i>
<i>CNS News</i>	<i>4,238</i>	<i>0.60%</i>
<i>MRCTV</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>0.00%</i>
6 The Washington Times	43,170	6.07%
7 The Federalist Papers	17,443	2.45%
8 The Daily Wire	14,869	2.09%
9 Russia Today	13,005	1.83%
<i>RT.com</i>	<i>12,790</i>	<i>1.80%</i>
<i>Sputnik News</i>	<i>215</i>	<i>0.03%</i>
10 Patriot Post	11,867	1.67%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>494,127</b>	<b>69.69%</b>

# THE TOXIC TEN

## How ten fringe publishers fuel 69% of digital climate change denial

### Facebook failed to label 92% of Toxic Ten posts

Analysis of the most popular Facebook posts featuring Toxic Ten articles from our sample shows that 92.16% of those articles did not carry information labels. None of the articles carried fact-checking labels.

Facebook announced in February that it would begin attaching “informational labels” to posts about climate change, directing users to the platform’s new “Climate Science Information Center”.<sup>4</sup> By May, the feature had been rolled out to a number of countries including the US.<sup>5</sup>

In order to assess Facebook’s use of labels, CCDH researchers identified public Facebook posts featuring articles from the Toxic Ten in our sample of 6,983 articles by using Facebook’s CrowdTangle analytics tool.

Researchers recorded whether or not the post with most interactions carried an information or fact-checking label, and how many interactions - likes, shares or comments - that post had received. Researchers excluded posts that CrowdTangle had identified as not having featured in any public posts.

This revealed that 92.16% of these posts featuring climate denial articles from the Toxic Ten did not carry information labels, and none of them carried fact-checking labels.

Across this sample of posts with 410,135 user interactions in total, 99.05% of interactions were with posts that carried no information or fact-checking labels. This analysis of user interactions also shows that posts without information labels received an average of 4,322 interactions, compared to 485 for those with labels.



This post from The Federalist Papers suggests that climate change is a “scam”. Facebook has not added an information label to the post despite it containing the phrase “climate change”.<sup>6</sup>



## THE TOXIC TEN

### How ten fringe publishers fuel 69% of digital climate change denial

#### The Toxic Ten have generated \$5.3 million in Google Ads revenue

Eight of the Toxic Ten examined by this report carry Google Ads, generating up to \$5.3 million in ad revenue in the last six months alone.

This estimate is based on website traffic figures provided by the analytics tool SimilarWeb that show these sites received 1 billion visits in the last six months alone, and Google's own stated estimates of how much publishers can expect to earn by carrying Google Ads.<sup>7</sup>

Google provides its own "calculator" that allows publishers to estimate how much advertising revenue they would make from hosting Google Ads on their websites. According to this calculator, a news website with visitors primarily based in North America could expect to earn \$404,000 in annual revenue if it received 120 million annual page views.<sup>8</sup>

This represents the publisher's share of Google Ad revenue, which Google has stated represents 68% of the total revenue, with Google retaining 32%.<sup>9</sup>

The table below records the number of visits received by each of the eight Toxic Ten sites that carry Google Ads from 1 April - 30 September 2021. The table applies Google's own methodology to estimate the Google Ad revenue that each of these sites generated in that period. Where a publisher has multiple websites, a breakdown of figures for each website is listed in italics beneath the publisher's name.

The Toxic Ten have received nearly 1.1 billion visits in the last six months, generating \$5.3 million in Google Ads revenue. This revenue is split between eight of the Toxic Ten and Google itself, earning the sites \$3.6 million and Google \$1.7 million.

Publisher	Visits	Google Revenue	Site Revenue	Total Revenue
Breitbart	299,670,000	\$475,241	\$1,009,888	\$1,485,129
Townhall Media	255,524,195	\$405,231	\$861,117	\$1,266,348
<i>Townhall</i>	<i>109,025,702</i>	<i>\$172,902</i>	<i>\$367,417</i>	<i>\$540,319</i>
<i>PJ Media</i>	<i>58,600,000</i>	<i>\$92,933</i>	<i>\$197,482</i>	<i>\$290,415</i>
<i>Red State</i>	<i>55,797,213</i>	<i>\$88,488</i>	<i>\$188,037</i>	<i>\$276,524</i>
<i>Twitchy</i>	<i>32,101,280</i>	<i>\$50,909</i>	<i>\$108,181</i>	<i>\$159,090</i>
Newsmax	198,700,000	\$315,115	\$669,619	\$984,734
The Western Journal	148,019,814	\$234,742	\$498,827	\$733,569
The Daily Wire	124,600,000	\$197,601	\$419,902	\$617,503
The Washington Times	31,500,000	\$49,955	\$106,155	\$156,110
Media Research Center	15,390,000	\$24,407	\$51,864	\$76,271
<i>NewsBusters</i>	<i>8,450,000</i>	<i>\$13,401</i>	<i>\$28,477</i>	<i>\$41,877</i>
<i>CNS News</i>	<i>5,560,000</i>	<i>\$8,818</i>	<i>\$18,737</i>	<i>\$27,555</i>
<i>MRCTV</i>	<i>1,380,000</i>	<i>\$2,189</i>	<i>\$4,651</i>	<i>\$6,839</i>
The Federalist Papers	2,850,000	\$4,250	\$9,605	\$14,124
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1,076,254,009</b>	<b>\$1,706,812</b>	<b>\$3,626,976</b>	<b>\$5,333,788</b>

# THE TOXIC TEN

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## How ten fringe publishers fuel 69% of digital climate change denial

### Platforms must either stop doing business with climate deniers or stop claiming to be “green”

Social media’s Toxic Ten are repeat offenders that have spread disinformation about climate change for years. It’s time for social media to stop powering their pollution for profit.

#### Stop monetizing climate denial

Eight of the Toxic Ten profit by featuring ads that are placed on their site by Google’s AdSense platform. Google must stop placing their clients’ ads on these sites. Google has already acknowledged this is an important issue, having promoted its supposed new policy to no longer profit from ads on climate denial content.<sup>10</sup>

This new policy should be implemented immediately, not after COP26 on November 8th as planned, to ensure that Google does not profit from climate misinformation during the critical COP26 summit.<sup>11</sup>

#### Stop profiting from climate denial

Eight of the Toxic Ten have also paid Facebook to advertise their content to its users. Facebook should refuse to profit from publishers who are major spreaders of climate denial and other misinformation that seeks to obstruct action to halt climate change. Facebook should introduce a policy to refuse payment for ads if a publisher has repeatedly spread clear climate change misinformation.

#### Comprehensively label climate denial

Facebook failed to apply information labels to 92% of the most popular posts featuring the Toxic Ten’s articles. This failure meant that more than 99% of user interactions in this sample were with unlabeled posts. It has been six months since Facebook said it would start marking posts about climate change.<sup>12</sup> Facebook must keep its promises and label climate denial posts.

# THE TOXIC TEN

## How ten fringe publishers fuel 69% of digital climate change denial

### Appendix: The Toxic Ten

The following profiles set out some key details about each of the Toxic Ten publishers examined by this report, including:

- The websites associated with the publisher
- How many followers the publisher has on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube across all of the accounts they operate
- The publisher's revenue, based on the most recent available public filings or estimates from Dun & Bradstreet
- The publisher's average number of website visits over the last six months, based on figures provided by the SimilarWeb traffic analytics tool
- Whether the publisher generates revenue from displaying Google Ads
- Other ad services used by the publisher to generate revenue
- Whether the publisher has paid for Facebook ads

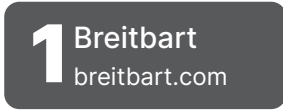
Some of this information is collated below, showing that every publisher either displays Google Ads or has paid for Facebook ads.

The Toxic Ten have a total of nearly 186 million followers on mainstream social media platforms, and have an estimated annual revenue of \$638 million.

Publisher	Facebook Ads	Google Ads	Other Ads	Social Reach	Annual Revenue
Breitbart	No	Yes	RevContent	8,606,181	\$3,690,000
The Western Journal	Yes	Yes	RevContent	34,703,828	\$3,130,000
Newsmax	Yes	Yes	Netizen	8,480,609	\$127,960,000
Townhall Media	Yes	Yes	RevContent	6,240,048	\$249,263
Media Research Center	Yes	Yes	Amazon	12,915,630	\$11,382,900
The Washington Times	Yes	Yes	Outbrain	1,354,493	\$39,070,000
The Federalist Papers	No	Yes	RevContent	2,388,098	Unknown
The Daily Wire	Yes	Yes	No	27,410,856	\$65,000,000
Russian State Media	Yes	No	Taboola	82,821,786	\$390,799,500
The Patriot Post	Yes	No	No	746,407	\$1,331,315
<b>TOTAL</b>				<b>185,667,936</b>	<b>\$638,922,978</b>

# THE TOXIC TEN

How ten fringe publishers fuel 69% of digital climate change denial



Followers	8,606,181	Annual Revenue	\$3.69 million <sup>13</sup>
Facebook	5,267,281	Monthly Visits	49.9 million
Instagram	1,479,900	Google Ads	Yes
Twitter	1,510,000	Others ads	RevContent
YouTube	349,000	Facebook Ads	No <sup>14</sup>

Breitbart News was once described as a “platform for the alt-right” by its former chairman, the ex-Trump adviser Steve Bannon.<sup>15</sup>

Launched in 2007, the site has long published false and misleading claims about women and minority groups as well as conspiracy theories about Barack Obama’s status as a US citizen. Breitbart’s writers are, according to NBC: “nationalistic, often linking immigrants and refugees with violence and the degradation of Western values.”<sup>16</sup>

The site regularly publishes climate change denial, with US contributor John Nolte and Breitbart London’s executive editor James Delingpole both having repeatedly referred to climate change as a “hoax” pushed by so-called “climate alarmists.”<sup>17</sup>

In 2011, the family of hedge fund billionaire and Republican donor Robert Mercer purchased nearly half of Breitbart for \$10 million.<sup>18</sup> Mercer has a record of funding groups that challenge the scientific consensus on climate change, such as the Heartland Institute, the Heritage Foundation and the Media Research Center, a member of the Toxic Ten.

In 2016 alone, Mercer is reported to have given nearly \$4 million to such groups.<sup>19</sup> He also co-founded and invested in Cambridge Analytica, which came under fire for collecting the data of up to 87 million Facebook users.<sup>20</sup>

This Breitbart article in our sample stokes fears of pro-climate policies. It promotes a conspiracy theory about “the leftist connections between ostensibly public-health-related lockdown decrees, the Great Reset, and ‘climate change’ advocacy”.<sup>21</sup> Google ads for a conference on “environmental, social and governance (ESG)” issues for energy companies were being promoted next to the article.<sup>22</sup>

# THE TOXIC TEN

## How ten fringe publishers fuel 69% of digital climate change denial

**2** The Western Journal  
westernjournal.com

Followers	34,703,828	Annual Revenue	\$3.1 million <sup>23</sup>
Facebook	34,345,344	Monthly Visits	24.7 million
Instagram	67,152	Google Ads	Yes
Twitter	106,332	Others ads	RevContent
YouTube	85,000	Facebook ads	Yes <sup>24</sup>

The Western Journal was founded in 2009 by political activist Floyd Brown, who has falsely claimed Obama “hates Christianity” and “is a Muslim”.<sup>25</sup> The Western Journal is funded by paid advertising, digital subscriptions and donations and is owned by Liftable Media, a business founded by Brown’s son Patrick.<sup>26</sup>

The Western Journal deploys an army of large Facebook pages to reach tens of millions of users.<sup>27</sup> Described by the New York Times as “a potent online disinformation mill”, the site has a record of publishing false or misleading stories. As well as misinformation about Muslims and immigrants, it has also touted hydroxychloroquine, an anti-malaria drug, as potentially effective in combating Covid.<sup>28</sup>

In 2017, Facebook curtailed the site’s reach after being publicly alerted to its misinformation.<sup>29</sup> In 2018, Google News blacklisted the publication for alleged misleading business practices.<sup>30</sup>

In an effort to restore its reach, the Western Journal removed old misinformation articles, set up a corrections page and published editorial standards. The site also un-anonymized dozens of its Facebook pages in a bid to show transparency.<sup>31</sup> The site has returned to Google News, runs Google Ads and continues to reach millions of readers on Facebook.

This Western Journal article claims that a recent study on natural disasters contradicts “the conventional wisdom that climate change threatens the whole of mankind unless drastic governmental action is taken that threatens Western economies and living standards.”<sup>32</sup> This article has carried a Google ad for Chevrolet under its headline.

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## How ten fringe publishers fuel 69% of digital climate change denial



Followers	8,480,609	Annual Revenue	\$127.96 million <sup>33</sup>
Facebook	4,262,724	Monthly Visits	33.1 million
Instagram	1,200,000	Google Ads	Yes
Twitter	1,027,885	Others ads	Netizen
YouTube	1,990,000	Facebook ads	Yes <sup>34</sup>

Newsmax is a Florida-based website and cable TV channel that has promoted misinformation about US elections, Covid and climate change.

Self-described friend of President Donald Trump Christopher Ruddy founded NewsMax Media and owns a 60% stake in the company.<sup>35</sup> The remaining 40% belongs to 535 Media LLC, publisher of the Pittsburgh Tribune-Review.<sup>36</sup>

Newsmax often lends credence to conspiracy theories. One post scaremongers about chemtrails made up of “a mixture of barium and nano-sized aluminium” designed to propel “more of the sun’s heat into outer space”.<sup>37</sup> The site has also promoted a conspiracy theory about the assassination of the late president John F. Kennedy, suggesting that it was a “hit” ordered by the mafia.<sup>38</sup>

Newsmax was forced to apologize after spreading misinformation about the 2020 US election, which it claimed that George Soros had influenced the election outcome.<sup>39</sup>

During the pandemic, Newsmax published an op-ed describing the anti-malaria drug hydroxychloroquine as a “lifesaver” for people infected with Covid, despite it being an ineffective and potentially unsafe treatment for the disease.<sup>40</sup>

The screenshot shows a Newsmax article page. The article title is "Joe Biden Needs a Climate History Lesson" by Larry Bell, dated Friday, October 22, 2021. The article text discusses the Medieval Climate Optimum and the Little Ice Age. A Life Storage advertisement is visible on the right side of the page, featuring the text "Need Storage? up to 15% off storage & free truck rental" and a "Find Storage Now!" button.

This Newsmax article included in our sample questions man-made climate change and tells readers to not “worry too much about CO2 baking the planet.”<sup>41</sup> Google ads for Life Storage, a self-storage business that promises to “actively work to protect the environment”, have been displayed alongside the article.<sup>42</sup>

# THE TOXIC TEN

## How ten fringe publishers fuel 69% of digital climate change denial

**4** Townhall Media  
 townhall.com  
 pjmedia.com  
 redstate.com  
 twitchy.com

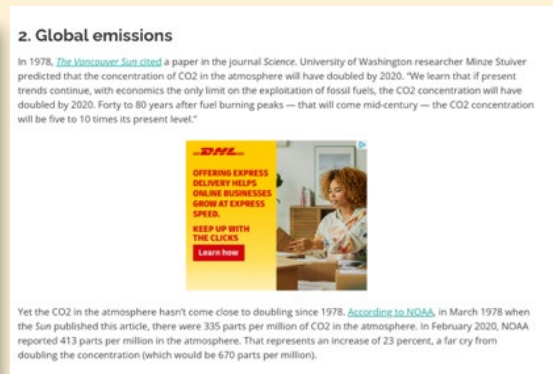
Followers	6,240,048	Annual Revenue	\$249,263 <sup>43</sup>
Facebook	5,300,740	Monthly Visits	38.2 million
Instagram	26,843	Google Ads	Yes
Twitter	640,465	Others ads	RevContent
YouTube	272,000	Facebook ads	Yes <sup>44</sup>

TownHall Media is a publishing group that operates Townhall.com, Red State, PJ Media and Twitchy, all of which share misinformation with a total audience of 6.2 million followers.

Townhall Media’s sites have published false or misleading claims on Covid and vaccines, including unproven allegations about dangerous side effects of vaccines and the efficacy of horse-dewormer ivermectin as a treatment.<sup>45</sup> Climate denial content also regularly features on Townhall Media’s websites, where columnists refer to it as a “hoax”.<sup>46</sup>

Founded in 1995, Townhall.com was originally a publication of the Heritage Foundation, which has received significant funding from the fossil fuel industry including \$870,000 from ExxonMobil.<sup>47</sup> The Heritage Foundation was also, along with ExxonMobil and the Koch Brothers, an early member of the ‘Cooler Heads Coalition’ that has lobbied against climate policy and promoted climate denial for decades.<sup>48</sup>

Although Townhall Media is estimated to have relatively modest annual revenue of \$249,263, it was acquired in 2006 by Salem Media Group which has an annual revenue of \$236 million.<sup>49</sup>



This article from our sample by PJ Media, one of Townhall Media’s properties, questions the severity of global warming and suggests “there is little concrete evidence” that carbon emissions have an impact on global climate.<sup>50</sup> It has carried ads for the delivery company DHL, whose CEO Dr Frank Appel has promised to “commit to a science-based target and reduce our emissions by 2030”.<sup>51</sup>



# THE TOXIC TEN

## How ten fringe publishers fuel 69% of digital climate change denial

**5** Media Research Center  
 newsbusters.org  
 mrctv.org  
 cnsnews.com

Followers	12,915,630	Annual Revenue	\$11.4 million <sup>52</sup>
Facebook	11,792,741	Monthly Visits	2.6 million
Instagram	71,500	Google Ads	Yes
Twitter	841,546	Others ads	Mediavine, Amazon
YouTube	209,843	Facebook ads	Yes <sup>53</sup>

The Media Research Center (MRC) is a think tank founded in 1987 by political activist Brent Bozell.<sup>54</sup> It bills itself as “America’s Media Watchdog” and attacking “leftist bias in the news media and popular culture.”<sup>55</sup> The group has attacked media coverage of climate science.<sup>56</sup>

MRC’s revenue comes from contributions, gifts, and ad revenue. According to tax documents, it earned over \$11 million in revenue in 2019, including \$604,000 from ads.<sup>57</sup>

Between 2010 and 2017, MRC received nearly \$19 million from hedge fund billionaire and Republican donor Robert Mercer according to tax documents.<sup>58</sup> In 2017, MRC sponsored a conference by climate denier think tank the Heartland Institute, which was also attended by Robert Mercer.<sup>59</sup> Other funders include fossil fuel giant ExxonMobil, which has a record of donating to climate sceptic organizations.<sup>60</sup>

MRC uses its NewsBusters website to criticize media coverage of climate science.<sup>61</sup> The site often uses the phrase “climate alarmist” to refer to people who highlight the threat of climate change.<sup>62</sup> MRC also operates the media outlets CNSNews.com and MRCTV.<sup>63</sup>

This NewsBusters article brands climate science as “alarmism” and promotes the suggestion that “so-called ‘hottest year’ claims... are political statements designed to persuade the public that the government needs to take action on man-made climate change.”<sup>64</sup> This article has carried Google ads for the tech giant’s own Chrome web browser.



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## How ten fringe publishers fuel 69% of digital climate change denial

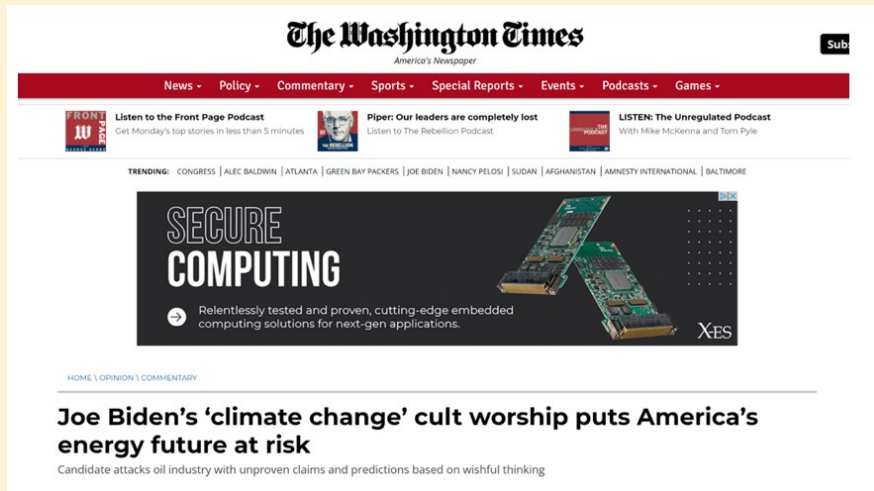
**6** The Washington Times  
washingtontimes.com

Followers	1,354,493	Annual Revenue	\$39.1 million <sup>65</sup>
Facebook	906,331	Monthly Visits	5.3 million
Instagram	23,713	Google Ads	Yes
Twitter	415,379	Others ads	Outbrain
YouTube	9,070	Facebook ads	Yes <sup>66</sup>

The Washington Times is a daily newspaper that bills itself as “a trusted counterweight to the mainstream media”<sup>67</sup>

Founded in 1982 by Unification Church leader and self-proclaimed “messiah” Reverend Sun Myung Moon, the site regularly posts misinformation including conspiracies about President Obama’s religion and nationality and the claim that Covid is a media hoax.<sup>68</sup>

Climate denial content on the site includes claims that scientists are “crying wolf” and misrepresenting data on climate change.<sup>69</sup> The Washington Times also published an “Energy and Environment 2021 special report” featuring sponsored content from oil and gas industry executives. Its editorials included an article titled “There is no climate emergency” written by the director of the climate denier CO2 Coalition.<sup>70</sup> Outside of The Washington Times, Moon has also funded the Science and Environmental Policy Project, a coalition which challenges scientific consensus on climate change.<sup>71</sup>



This Washington Times article included in our sample claims there is a “cult of ‘climate change’” and that its “worship” risks people’s future because it is based on unproven claims and predictions.<sup>72</sup> The article has carried Google ads for X-ES, a computer hardware manufacturer.

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## How ten fringe publishers fuel 69% of digital climate change denial

**7** The Federalist Papers  
thefederalistpapers.org

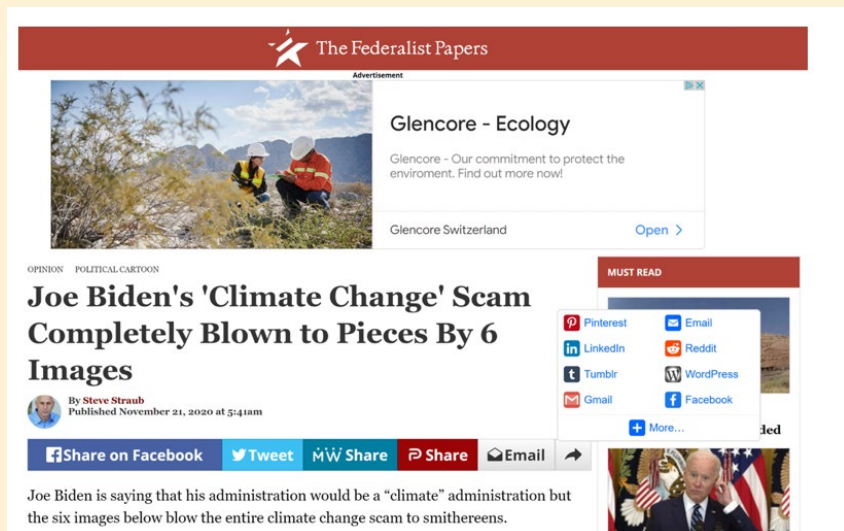
Followers	2,388,098	Annual Revenue	Unknown
Facebook	2,379,322	Monthly Visits	475,000
Instagram	0	Google Ads	Yes
Twitter	8,776	Others ads	RevContent
YouTube	0	Facebook ads	No <sup>73</sup>

The Federalist Papers has pushed misinformation about the US elections and Covid, including unproven claims about anti-malaria drug hydroxychloroquine being an effective treatment for Covid.<sup>74</sup>

The Federalist Papers frequently syndicates content from The Western Journal, another of the Toxic Ten identified by this report.<sup>75</sup> The publication also comments on or publishes content from various other outlets, with some stories treating social media posts as their primary sources.<sup>76</sup>

The site claims its mission is to “use social media to educate Americans on... what’s going on with government today, and how to push back.”<sup>77</sup>

The Federalist Papers, whose domain was registered in 2011, generates revenue from advertising and is owned and operated by Steve Straub.<sup>78</sup> According to his LinkedIn page, Straub is also CEO at a processing solutions company which offers “success secrets of the fastest growing companies.”<sup>79</sup>



This Federalist Papers article included in our sample claims that leftists “use climate change to scare people into submission” and that their predictions have been “wrong every time.”<sup>80</sup> The article has carried Google ads for the mining company Glencore which state the business’s “commitment to protect the environment.”<sup>80</sup>

## THE TOXIC TEN

How ten fringe publishers fuel 69% of digital climate change denial

**8** The Daily Wire  
dailywire.com

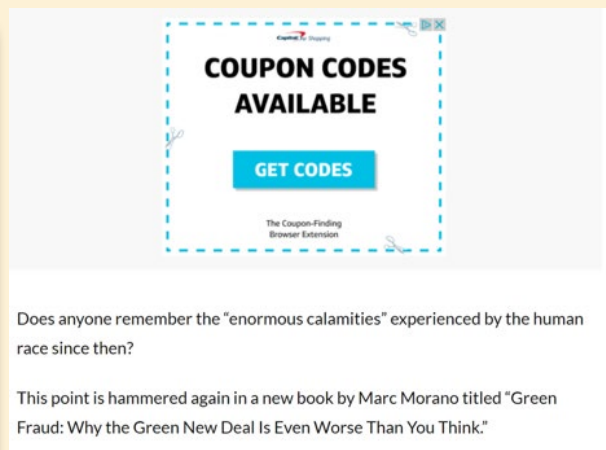
Followers	27,410,856	Annual Revenue	\$65 million <sup>82</sup>
Facebook	11,438,510	Monthly Visits	20.8 million
Instagram	4,517,039	Google Ads	Yes
Twitter	4,324,307	Others ads	None
YouTube	7,131,000	Facebook ads	Yes <sup>83</sup>

The Daily Wire is the most popular publisher on Facebook and in May 2021 its articles received more engagement on Facebook than *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *NBC News* and *CNN* combined.<sup>84</sup>

Founded in 2015 by commentator Ben Shapiro and fracking billionaire Farris Wilkes, The Daily Wire earned \$65 million in annual revenue in 2020 last year through advertisements and subscriptions and is reportedly expanding into the entertainment sector.<sup>85</sup>

The site has published many misleading and false claims, on topics ranging from Covid to immigration.<sup>86</sup> It also publishes misleading climate content, including the debunked claim that after the winter storm of February 2021, wind turbine failures led to power outages across Texas. The site has also posted claims that “there is no evidence that [climate change] will pose any problems for humans.”<sup>87</sup>

Ben Shapiro has used his platform of over 11 million followers across Facebook and Twitter to reject scientific consensus on climate change and has tweeted that “climate change is not an existential threat to humanity.”<sup>88</sup>



This Daily Wire article included in our sample alleges that “the Left never really relies on the scientific method” when it comes to climate change and green policies, but rather “intimidates its opponents into silence.”<sup>89</sup> The article has carried ads for Capital One, the credit card company, whose website states “we believe addressing climate change is fundamental to ensuring our world has a healthy and prosperous future... it’s our duty to limit the environmental impact of our entire value chain.”<sup>90</sup>

# THE TOXIC TEN

## How ten fringe publishers fuel 69% of digital climate change denial

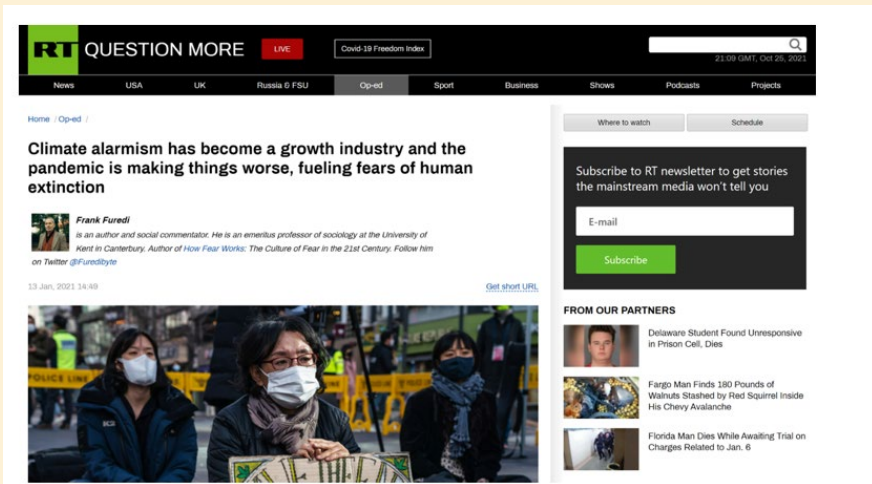
**9** Russian State Media  
rt.com  
sputniknews.com

Followers	82,821,786	Annual Revenue	\$390.1 million <sup>91</sup>
Facebook	54,432,455	Monthly Visits	131.8 million
Instagram	918,898	Google Ads	No
Twitter	3,737,173	Others ads	Taboola
YouTube	23,733,260	Facebook ads	Yes <sup>92</sup>

RT.com is part of a Russian state-controlled news network. Founded in April 2005 as Russia Today, RT is “publicly financed from the budget of the Russian Federation”, with additional revenue from advertising and sponsored content.<sup>93</sup> Sputnik.com was founded in November 2014 “by the Russian media group **Rossiya Segodnya**”, another state-funded broadcaster.<sup>94</sup>

According to a 2020 report from the Oxford Internet Institute, RT.com “is one of the most important organizations in the global political economy of disinformation.”<sup>95</sup> A 2016 NATO report alleged that Sputnik spread a “fake story” regarding asylum seekers in Germany.<sup>96</sup>

Disinformation campaigns waged by RT.com include coverage ahead of the US 2020 election that “amplified voices of chaos” with headlines such as “The term ‘American democracy’ needs to be retired” and “election teeters on the verge of chaos”.<sup>97</sup> RT has also propagated so much vaccine misinformation that YouTube took the rare step of suspending RT’s German account following its posting of anti-vaccine misinformation.<sup>98</sup> According to King’s College London research, both RT and Sputnik played an instrumental role in spreading misinformation about the poisoning of Sergei Skripal, incorporating the views of a “parallel commentariat” and amplifying Russian government sources.<sup>99</sup>



This Russia Today article claims that the pandemic provided a convenient opportunity for professional “doom-mongers” to spread fear by linking the virus to climate change and overpopulation. It calls on people to not pay attention to the “alarmist predictions for the planet.”<sup>100</sup> Articles on RT.com carry digital ads from Taboola, a “discovery platform” that typically promotes content at the bottom of news articles and that states it has a commitment to “minimizing [its] environmental impact.”<sup>101</sup>

## THE TOXIC TEN

How ten fringe publishers fuel 69% of digital climate change denial

**10** The Patriot Post  
patriotpost.us

Followers	746,407	Annual Revenue	\$1.3 million <sup>102</sup>
Facebook	716,197	Monthly Visits	785,000
Instagram	18,800	Google Ads	No
Twitter	7,000	Others ads	None
YouTube	4,410	Facebook ads	Yes <sup>103</sup>

The Patriot Post has published false and misleading content since its 1996 launch. The site also publishes a newsletter that has hundreds of thousands of subscribers.<sup>104</sup>

Over the course of the pandemic, the site repeatedly touted anti-malaria drug hydroxychloroquine, as an effective Covid treatment, and claimed that those opposing the drug's unproven use as a treatment for Covid "have a lot of blood on their hands."<sup>105</sup>

In one of several ad campaigns run on Facebook, The Patriot Post linked LGBT+ people to Neanderthals and chimps.<sup>106</sup>

Staff and contributors' identities are obscured through the use of pseudonyms, however the site's publisher and executive editor, who uses the alias "Mark Alexander" has been identified as Mark Caldwell.<sup>107</sup>

The Patriot Post, which is run by Publius Press Inc, claims to not accept advertising, instead generating revenue from donations and the sale of merchandise.<sup>108</sup>



This Patriot Post piece included in our sample aims to "debunk the climate apocalypse" and promotes the claim that "the notion that man-made global warming poses an existential threat must come to be seen as ridiculous."<sup>109</sup> The Patriot post does not carry advertising, but promotes options to donate or buy merchandise on every page.

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## How ten fringe publishers fuel 69% of digital climate change denial

### Appendix: Defining “climate disinformation” and “climate denial”

Disinformation about climate change can take many forms, from denying the existence of climate change to promoting ‘solutions’ that in fact contribute to global warming.

The Center for Countering Digital Hate has joined a coalition of other organizations working to counter climate disinformation in support of the following definition of the problem.

Climate disinformation and misinformation refers to deceptive or misleading content that:

1. Undermines the existence or impacts of climate change, the unequivocal human influence on climate change, and the need for corresponding urgent action according to the IPCC scientific consensus and in line with the goals of the Paris Climate Agreement;
2. Misrepresents scientific data, including by omission or cherry-picking, in order to erode trust in climate science, climate-focused institutions, experts, and solutions;
3. Falsely publicises efforts as supportive of climate goals that in fact contribute to climate warming or contravene the scientific consensus on mitigation or adaptation.

### This report’s definition of “climate disinformation” and “climate denial”

Throughout this report, the terms “climate disinformation” and “climate denial” should be read as referring to content that fits the following, narrow definition that accords the first part of the broader definition outlined above:

Deceptive or misleading content that undermines the existence or impacts of climate change, and the need for corresponding urgent action, typically by referring to climate science using phrases such as “climate alarmism” or “climate fraud”.

As such, this report focuses on some of the most aggressive and clearly identifiable forms of climate disinformation. The queries that were used to search for and identify this content are available in this report’s appendix.

Using these definitions, the remainder of this report exposes the disproportionate role of just ten superpolluter websites in promoting climate denial.

## THE TOXIC TEN

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### How ten fringe publishers fuel 69% of digital climate change denial

#### Appendix: Climate denial query

This Boolean query was used to build a sample of matching climate denial articles using the social media analytics tool NewsWhip.

The query was intended to identify articles that use words or phrases typically associated with climate denial, such as “climate fraud” or “climate change hoax”, as well as conspiracies linking climate change to supposed Marxist plots or figures such as George Soros.

Articles containing the phrases “climate denial” or “climate denier” were excluded by the query in order to remove articles that used climate denial terms in the process of analyzing or debunking them

After researchers manually cleaned the data to remove articles that did not promote climate denial, the final sample contained 6,983 articles featured in Facebook posts that received a total of 709,057 user interactions.

```
(climate OR "global warming" OR "climate change") AND (alarmism OR alarm OR alarmist OR fraud OR hysteria OR hoax OR panic OR climategate OR realism OR hypocrite OR hypocrisy OR cult OR scare OR manipulation OR manipulated OR scam OR lie OR marx OR marxism OR soros OR "solar minimum" OR "agenda 21" OR "climate lockdowns" OR "agenda 2030" OR "new world order") AND NOT("climate denial" OR "climate denier")
```



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