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Climate change communication in the Romanian online sphere in the age of disinformation: discourses, myths, and response strategies

ABSTRACT

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Introduction

Technological developments and transformations in the digital communications environment over the last two decades have radically changed how information is created, distributed, and consumed. Information overload and the intensification of online communication have created unprecedented visibility for climate change, while simultaneously fostering the proliferation of disinformation, conspiracy theories, and climate denial(ism). Climate change is a matter of global concern, grounded in the consensus of the international scientific community, yet online debates often reflect polarized opinions and antagonism among social actors rather than a contest of evidence-based arguments (Dunlap & Brulle, 2020; Hulme, 2009).

In Romania, the specific socio-political context and a relatively low level of digital literacy combine with high internet penetration (over 90% of the population), creating fertile ground for disinformation (Cheval et al., 2022). Lack of trust in public institutions and traditional media has driven audiences to seek alternatives online, where the plurality of voices – and the lack of effective verification mechanisms – has increased the visibility of false narratives (Cinelli et al., 2021). This phenomenon is especially dangerous given that climate change necessitates public policy decisions with major long-term impacts; challenging these decisions through disinformation can erode societal resilience and adaptability.

In this context, the thesis proposes an integrated analysis of online communication about climate change, aiming to identify the discursive types circulating in Romania, the actors promoting them, the mechanisms of disinformation and dominant myths, and the response strategies needed to strengthen informational resilience. The research is both theoretical – developing an interdisciplinary framework that links communication studies with environmental studies and the analysis of disinformation – and practical – offering proposals for counter-disinformation strategies and strategic communication campaigns adapted to Romanian realities (Bushell et al., 2017; Oreskes & Conway, 2010).

Research Objectives

Given that the flow of climate disinformation cannot be completely stopped and that existing regulations have not reduced its effects, the central objective of the research was to identify the types of online discourse on climate change and the mechanisms through which they influence public perceptions and attitudes. The study sought to determine how social,

institutional, and informal actors contribute to the construction, distortion, or contestation of climate change topics in the Romanian online space.

Table 1 summarizes the structure of the research process, presenting the objectives, associated research questions, methods used, and the expected results. Overall, the five objectives aim to comprehensively explore how climate change is communicated in Romania's digital space, as well as the dominant perceptions of it. The research integrates qualitative methods (qualitative content analysis and semi-structured interviews) and automated analysis (using the social listening/media intelligence platform Talkwalker), aiming not only to describe the phenomenon of disinformation but also to identify relevant actors, channels of propagation, and effective countermeasures. This approach is intended to inform conclusions relevant to strengthening scientific communication on climate.

Semi-structured interviews are a primary method of data collection for all research questions, providing in-depth understanding of the perceptions, motivations, and experiences of the actors involved. This method is systematically complemented by qualitative and automated content analysis, where necessary, to ensure validation and triangulation of results. The research benefits from a mixed approach that draws on both participants' perspectives and the systematic analysis of large-scale online datasets.

Table 1. Presentation of the research process

No.	Research objective	Research question	Methods used	Expected results
1	Investigate online communication on climate change in the Romanian context by identifying predominant discursive typologies and evaluating experts' perceptions.	What are the main types of discourse on climate change present in the Romanian digital space, and how are they interpreted by experts familiar with these issues?	Semi-structured interviews	Classification of online climate discourse, identification of relevant actors, and evaluation of experts' opinions on these issues.
2	Identify the key actors involved in shaping public debate on climate change and analyze the mechanisms they use to	Who are the main actors shaping public discourse on climate change, and what mechanisms do they	Qualitative content analysis; semi-	Identification of significant actors and description of the mechanisms through which

	influence public opinion in Romania.	use to exert influence?	structured interviews	they influence climate discourse.
3	Identify and classify the main myths and misleading narratives about climate change circulating in the Romanian online environment.	What are the most common myths and misleading narratives about climate change circulating in the Romanian digital environment?	Qualitative and automated content analysis; semi-structured interviews	Classification of dominant myths and narratives and analysis of the contexts and factors that favor their propagation.
4	Investigate perceptions of the impact of disinformation narratives on public trust in the scientific community and climate policies, identifying the most vulnerable social groups.	What is the perceived impact of disinformation narratives on the Romanian public's trust in scientific information and climate policies?	Semi-structured interviews	Assessment of experts' perceptions of the impact of disinformation on public opinion and identification of social groups susceptible to these narratives.
5	Identify effective strategies to combat climate disinformation and formulate recommendations applicable to online climate communication in Romania.	What current communication strategies effectively counter climate disinformation, and what recommendations can optimize communication in the Romanian context?	Semi-structured interviews	Identification of effective communication strategies and formulation of specific recommendations for improving online climate communication.

Thus, the research questions address both the descriptive dimension – what kinds of discourse circulate and who produces them – and the explanatory dimension – what dominant myths and disinformation exist, through which channels they are propagated, and what impact they have on the public. At the same time, the research also addresses a normative question: what strategies can be developed to counter disinformation and strengthen informational resilience at the societal level?

Structure of the paper

The paper is structured in nine chapters, progressing from the delineation of the theoretical and conceptual framework to the presentation of empirical results and the formulation of general conclusions. The first chapter outlines the general context of digital communication and how climate change is addressed in the international and Romanian public spheres. It discusses communication theories in the digital age and how the online environment shapes issues with scientific and political significance, while emphasizing the need for an interdisciplinary approach that correlates perspectives from communication studies, climatology, and the social sciences.

The second chapter defines and classifies the types of online climate discourse, analyzing in detail political and institutional discourse, scientific and popularization discourse, news/media (mass-media) discourse, and activist discourse. Each category is described by its dominant characteristics, the actors that support it, and the mechanisms of propagation in the digital environment.

The third chapter focuses on the phenomenon of climate disinformation, treated as a distinct category of online disinformation. It presents the main myths and false narratives, such as the idea that climate change is an exclusively natural phenomenon, the conspiracy theory that the climate crisis is orchestrated by global elites, and the perception that climate policies lead to economic decline. The chapter details the motivations and strategies of the actors who fuel these discourses, as well as the contextual factors that favor their spread.

The fourth chapter discusses strategies for responding to climate disinformation, reviewing both reactive measures – such as fact-checking and debunking campaigns – and preventive strategies, among which media literacy and inoculation (prebunking) play central roles. It also analyzes the role of European and national regulations and the importance of using strategic communication through influencers and social platforms.

The fifth chapter contextualizes the Romanian case, describing the specific features of the local digital environment: high internet penetration combined with low digital skills and

low trust in state institutions and the media. The chapter presents local actors involved in the climate debate, emerging discursive forms, and dominant myths circulating in the Romanian online space.

The sixth chapter presents the methodological framework of the research. It outlines the research objectives and questions, the selected methods – automated analysis, qualitative content analysis, and expert interviews – as well as data selection procedures, tools used, and ethical considerations such as anonymization and data protection. This chapter provides the empirical foundation for the subsequent stages and explains the methodological choices.

The seventh chapter presents the results of the content analysis of materials collected from the online environment, both through automated methods and through qualitative examination. It identifies dominant narrative patterns, mechanisms for amplifying myths, the level of polarization of discourses, and differences in visibility between messages based on scientific consensus and conspiracy narratives.

The penultimate chapter brings together results from interviews with experts in climatology, communication, and environmental public policy, from academia and nongovernmental organizations. These provide a complementary perspective on the phenomenon, highlighting specialists' perceptions of the actors involved, the vulnerability of the Romanian public to climate disinformation, and potential counterstrategies.

Finally, the ninth chapter formulates the general conclusions of the thesis, summarizes the theoretical and applied contributions, and proposes concrete recommendations for strengthening informational resilience and developing coherent climate narratives in the Romanian online space. Future research directions are also presented, which can extend and deepen the results obtained.

Research results

The empirical research conducted in this thesis aimed to analyze in detail how climate change is addressed in the Romanian online space and to identify how disinformation and conspiracy narratives influence public perceptions and attitudes. The results from content analysis of digital platforms, supplemented by interviews with experts in communication, climatology and environmental public policy, both from the academia and NGO fields, reveal a complex picture characterized by narrative fragmentation, pronounced polarization, and high vulnerability to disinformation.

The automated analysis confirms what interviews revealed: polarization is not merely an opposition between truth and falsehood but manifests as competition between narrative

frames. On the one hand, institutional and scientific discourse remains constant but is perceived as distant, inaccessible, and lacking emotional appeal. On the other hand, conspiracy narratives exploit ambiguous and pseudo-analytical rhetorical techniques, using insinuating vocabulary and themes recognizable to the public, which increases their virality and impact. This disproportion – between the low visibility of messages grounded in scientific consensus and the dissemination power of conspiracy narratives – is a constant across both sets of results.

From the perspective of discourse typologies, findings converge: the dominant myths identified through qualitative analysis – the idea of climate change as an exclusively natural phenomenon, the global-elite conspiracy theory, and the economic narrative of impoverishment through green policies – appear explicitly in the automated analysis of digital content. They do not appear in isolation but combine and renew themselves through connections with current events and through the excessive personalization of the climate topic, where international figures such as Bill Gates, Klaus Schwab, or Ursula von der Leyen become symbols of an alleged global conspiracy. These results confirm experts' observations that the hybridization of discourses – political, media, and conspiratorial – produces a confusing information environment in which the public encounters contradictory messages simultaneously and struggles to discern their veracity.

Social media algorithms, mentioned in both the automated and qualitative analyses, play a central role in amplifying this polarization. Quantitative indicators and expert perceptions alike suggest that digital platforms favor emotional, negative, and controversial content, which explains the predominance of anger and fear in identified posts. In this context, positive or neutral messages associated with climate solutions and scientific consensus remain marginal, often confined to niches of more educated users who are inclined to verify information. This structural asymmetry translates into collective vulnerability, exacerbated by low media literacy and distrust of institutions – patterns also confirmed in recent literature (Cheval et al., 2022).

Correlating the two perspectives yields a coherent picture: climate disinformation in Romania is not peripheral but central to shaping public perceptions. It benefits from a structural advantage conferred by digital mechanisms, fertile ground due to social and cultural mistrust, and an adaptive capacity through hybridization with political and media discourse. The consequence is the undermining of public policies for energy transition and climate adaptation, since conspiracy and denialist messages reduce social support for green measures – confirming the risk that disinformation can directly impair governance capacity (Dunlap & Brulle, 2020).

In conclusion, both the automated and qualitative analyses of digital content and the interview-based analysis depict the same picture: online climate discourse in Romania is dominated by a tension between marginalized scientific consensus and conspiracy narratives. The resilience of some population segments – especially young, highly educated urbanites – does not negate the overall impact of disinformation, which remains disproportionately strong. This convergent finding supports the need for concerted climate communication strategies that combine rigorous information with positive emotions and build alternative narratives capable of resonating with the public and counteracting the force of false narratives.

Limitations of the research

This study offers a nuanced picture of climate disinformation in the Romanian online space, but one limited by the incomplete nature of the sample and the deliberate focus on relevant cases, which may induce confirmation bias. The results do not reflect the full diversity of conversations about climate change, but only the segments analyzed – certain social networks and alternative websites – and the exclusive focus on Romanian-language content excluded international narratives that had not yet found a local echo. In addition, the short time frame (2022-2025) gives the results the status of a time-bounded snapshot, not fully representative of broader discursive dynamics.

The automated analysis tools were keyword-based, which may have omitted subtle forms of communication – such as sarcasm or irony – that algorithms struggle to capture, especially in Romanian. Constraints imposed by GDPR, platform restrictions, and the lack of access for the Talkwalker platform to certain networks and content (e.g., TikTok and discussions in private Facebook groups) further reduced sample completeness. Consequently, the data should be understood as a fragmentary, indicative picture of the phenomenon, not an exhaustive portrait of online discourse on climate change.

Qualitatively, interpretation of content and expert interviews inevitably involves a degree of subjectivity, influenced by the researcher's beliefs and sensitivity to disinformation. Although triangulation methods were used to mitigate the risk of distortion, personal influences or tendencies toward overinterpretation cannot be completely eliminated. The interviews were conducted with a small sample aligned with the scientific consensus, which intentionally excluded conspiracy theorists and left room only for an indirect analysis of their views.

Overall, the research is strongly anchored in the Romanian context, marked by socio-cultural particularities such as low trust in science and media polarization, which makes direct extrapolation to other national contexts difficult. Recognizing these limitations does not

diminish the value of the study; rather, it delineates the boundaries within which the conclusions can be interpreted and provides starting points for future research – either by extending the observation period or by including larger and more diverse samples that more accurately capture the complexity of climate disinformation.

Theoretical and practical relevance

This thesis proposes a solid theoretical and practical architecture at the intersection of digital communication, climate change studies, and research on disinformation, providing an integrated framework for analyzing how climate-related narratives circulate and consolidate online. Theoretically, its contributions extend the existing conceptual framework by bringing cognitive, affective, and technological dimensions together in an interdisciplinary synthesis. On this basis, communication about climate change is explained as a complex phenomenon in which the public's cognitive vulnerability to the illusory truth effect and confirmation effects (Lewandowsky et al., 2013; Saunders, 2017), the dynamics of emotions and collective identities (Hulme, 2009; Bushell et al., 2017), and the architecture of the online environment (Klinger & Svensson, 2014; Cinelli et al., 2021) converge to explain the resilience of climate myths. The tripartite model demonstrates that these narratives persist not only because malicious actors propagate them but also because they satisfy fundamental psychological needs for simplicity and coherence, trigger strong emotional reactions, and are amplified by algorithmic mechanisms and recommender systems. In this way, the thesis goes beyond unilateral approaches and offers a comprehensive picture of the phenomenon, specifically adapted to the digital context.

A second major contribution is the conceptualization of climate narratives as contemporary mythologies and the introduction of narrative conflict as a tool for reading public discourse. Around climate change there has emerged a narrative ecosystem composed of myths, metaphors, and contradictory frames that function similarly to mythological structures (Hulme, 2009; Milkoreit, 2017). The public's climate imagination is shaped by confrontation between divergent narratives – climate apocalypse, climate denial, green utopia – which, although different in meaning, can produce similar effects of complacency or paralysis. Identifying the types of climate myths – naturalist denialism, conspiracy theories, and apocalyptic myths – and systematizing their social functions provide a valuable conceptual vocabulary. Furthermore, the thesis develops the idea of a conspiracy metanarrative on climate change – an ideological framework that subsumes diverse theories, from chemtrails to an EU eco-dictatorship, integrating into illiberal populist rhetoric (Krange et al., 2021). This

perspective links the analysis of climate communication to theories of political communication, showing how climate disinformation becomes a field of ideological confrontation between liberal and illiberal paradigms (Cook, 2020).

A third contribution lies in exploring the central role of emotions and social identities in climate communication. The thesis shows that emotions can be more persuasive than strictly rational arguments (Moezzi et al., 2017; Zak, 2015), and that integrating narrative theory with the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) helps explain why the public processes climate messages predominantly via the peripheral route, based on affective and heuristic cues. This interpretation supports the strategic use of positive, solution-oriented stories capable of inducing hope, empathy, and civic pride, thereby strengthening resilience to negative rhetoric. In addition, adapting messages to the cultural identity and values of the target audience (Fløttum & Gjerstad, 2017; van der Linden et al., 2017) becomes a central principle: an internal messenger, credible to a social group, has greater persuasive power than an outsider (van der Linden et al., 2015). Overall, the thesis proposes a theoretical paradigm that treats digital climate communication as a competitive, emotional, technologically mediated narrative process, laying the foundations for a possible theory of emotional inoculation in scientific communication.

Practically, the thesis formulates a consistent set of recommendations. It advocates shifting from reactive debunking to preventive inoculation/prebunking approaches designed to develop mental antibodies against climate myths (van der Linden et al., 2017; Cook et al., 2017). At the same time, media, digital, and scientific literacy are presented as long-term structural solutions to be systematically implemented in schools through curriculum design, culturally adapted teaching materials, and teacher training programs, accompanied by innovative initiatives such as Green Week or online educational platforms. Other recommendations target the press and NGOs, which are encouraged to produce accessible guides for verifying information, as well as digital platforms, which must assume responsibility for combating disinformation through local fact-checking partnerships, algorithmic transparency, and the elimination of bots, in line with European regulations (European Commission, 2022). Emphasis is also placed on the proactive role of public institutions, which should adopt a transparent communication style, anchored in citizens' realities, capable of defusing suspicions and conspiracy theories (Supran & Oreskes, 2021; Țugulea & Florea, 2024). NGOs and civic initiatives, such as InfoClima, are considered key mediators between science and the public, able to formulate constructive, mobilizing counternarratives. The thesis underscores the importance of positive narratives, non-polarizing messages, and strategic

national campaigns that involve government, experts, and relevant influencers to deliver messages tailored to different audience segments. Communication must be sustained, honest, and inclusive, focused not on immediate effects in the digital space but on concrete transformations in policies, behaviors, and social practices.

In conclusion, the research provides both an original, interdisciplinary theoretical framework adapted to the digital ecosystem and a set of practical recommendations aimed at strengthening communication resilience in the face of climate disinformation. This dual contribution – conceptual and applied – creates the conditions for more effective climate communication capable of supporting the transition to a sustainable future through knowledge, engagement, and mobilizing narratives.

Future research directions

The results obtained in this research, as well as its methodological and conceptual limitations, open several promising avenues for future investigations in digital communication on climate change. The first concerns the accelerated impact of emerging technologies – particularly artificial intelligence – on the shaping and transmission of climate discourse. Phenomena such as deepfakes – hyperrealistic audiovisual content generated by deep neural networksraise major questions about the future of the information ecology (Chesney & Citron, 2018). The possibility that fake but plausible material could portray a public figure denying the reality of climate change has disruptive potential, exploiting cognitive vulnerabilities and traditional trust in images. At the same time, algorithmically controlled bot networks, capable of reproducing apparently authentic interactions at scale, can manufacture the appearance of consensus, multiplying and amplifying distorted climate narratives (Broniatowski et al., 2018). This raises immediately relevant research questions: to what extent do these automated networks participate in the proliferation of climate myths; how can climate-themed deepfakes be detected and countered; and what role will new automated fact-checking tools play in the information architecture of the future? Advances in artificial intelligence also open beneficial opportunities – from fact-checking algorithms capable of quickly identifying climate fakes to natural language processing tools that can track narrative evolution in real time – providing communication experts with an expanded arsenal. This outlines an interdisciplinary field of research at the intersection of communication, computer science, and ethics, increasingly important in the era of AI-generated content.

A second direction is international comparative research, in which analysis of Romania's online climate discourse is mirrored against other national and international

contexts. The present study focused on the Romanian space, highlighting its specificities – relatively low public concern, the influence of translated content, and the role of local media vectors. Comparisons with Western European countries, where awareness is higher, or with other Central and Eastern European countries with similar profiles, could clarify the extent to which these features are generalizable or strictly contextual. The methods used – content analysis and interviews – can be replicated to capture cultural differences in reporting on the climate crisis and to determine whether myths and disinformation strategies vary significantly across contexts. While in Nordic countries the dominant themes may concern the socio-economic costs of the green transition, in Romania and the region emphases related to sovereignty or critical stances toward the European Union may prevail. Recent data confirm these contrasts: while overall 9 out of 10 European citizens perceive climate change as a very serious problem, the proportion is lower in Romania (Gómez-Casillas & Márquez, 2023). This difference in sensitivity may be correlated with the country's low level of media literacy, where resilience to fake news is below the European average (Lessenski, 2023). Comparative research could therefore provide not only theoretical clarifications – validating or refuting the narrative conflict and fragmentation model proposed here – but also practical benefits by identifying good communication practices in countries with greater informational resilience.

Beyond these two central axes – AI and international comparisons – other avenues are relevant. One is the temporal and quantitative extension of the analysis. The current study covered a limited period and a small sample; future research could track the evolution of discourse over five or even ten years to highlight trends and turning points. Qualitative investigations could be complemented by representative opinion surveys measuring belief in various climate myths, providing a solid statistical dimension for narrative interpretations. Another direction, experimental in nature, would test the effectiveness of inoculation messages or positive narratives in controlled settings, similar to approaches taken elsewhere (van der Linden et al., 2017). In this way, strategies to combat disinformation and strengthen scientific consensus could be evaluated directly and with local relevance. Finally, given global information connectivity, it is worth investigating how major international events – climate conferences, extreme natural disasters, transnational activism – reverberate in the Romanian digital environment. The reception of Greta Thunberg's speeches, the uptake of the climate emergency concept, or the impact of the Fridays for Future movement are examples that can be explored to understand how the relationship between global and local narratives is articulated.

In conclusion, research perspectives in online climate communication are multiple and convergent. The emergence of AI technologies, the need for intercultural comparisons, the importance of empirical expansion, and the relevance of experimenting with innovative communication strategies outline a dynamic, interdisciplinary field of exploration. Although focused on the Romanian case and a limited period, this research provides a solid basis and raises timely questions, inviting collaboration among the academic community, practitioners, and experts in climatology and public policy. In this context, future climate communication strategies – national or regional – have the opportunity to become more effective in informing, raising awareness, and mobilizing society in the face of the climate challenge.

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