

## How to spot climate change denial

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They would have us believe that it is all a grand conspiracy. That the world is not warming. Instead, a cabal of scientists, governments, civil society and media is trying to spin an elaborate lie to convince us that it is. The climate liar – or skeptic in polite parlance – is bravely standing up to this.

A plethora of websites and think tanks are at the forefront of this initiative. The largest – the Cato and Heartland Institutes, as well as the Heritage Foundation – relentlessly assault the public sphere, trying their best to convince people that manmade (anthropogenic) global warming is not happening. Funded by figures in the shadows, these create an umbrella for groups around the world to claim legitimacy: You're only crazy if you're punting an absurd idea on your own.

These voices are more muted in South Africa – preferring to exert their weight behind closed doors. But there are exceptions. The Institute of Race Relations recently published an article titled, “No scientific basis to climate change scare.” Several other voices have made a profession out of comment and analysis pieces in newspapers, questioning global warming.

The idea is absurd at best, and dangerous at worst. The science is unequivocal: The world is warming at a rate hitherto unknown in human history. Average temperatures are already 1°C hotter than they were two centuries ago – with Africa increasing at 1.5 times that rate.

To lessen the damage this will create, humanity has to act as quickly as possible. Over 140 world leaders gathered in Paris last week in an attempt to create a framework for crafting this. Decision makers take anthropogenic climate change as fact and have moved on from that debate to solutions.

But, united in their rejection of fact, skeptics have managed to take advantage of a critical weakness in the media – the desire to portray two sides to a story for balance, even if there aren't two sides.

Our media keeps falling for this – either through genuinely not knowing the science, or because it realises dramatic debate brings the clicks. Debate is critical, but only when based in facts and reality.

The skeptic therefore manages to gain a legitimate public platform, where they are set up to debate a single scientist. Scientists, government officials and policy makers have to either ignore the skeptic – and surrender the public debate to them – or give them legitimacy by responding.

The take home for anyone watching or reading is obviously that there is a debate to be had. People then lobby their politicians, confused at existing climate legislation, which accepts global

warming as fact. The politicians have to respond and call a debate with the skeptic. Victory. The waters get muddied and action on climate change is delayed.

So much of this relies on skeptics misleading you. Here's a handy list to carry around, giving some of the thoroughly disproven "facts" that skeptics spit out.

- The climate has changed before: Correct. The climate has always been in a state of flux. The world is old and humans are young. We evolved to thrive in a world where carbon concentrations were less than 300 parts per million, now they are 400 parts per million. The world should actually be cooling and that the opposite is happening is down to humans. The resulting change is unprecedented and abrupt. Abrupt changes lead to extinctions. Skeptics are exceptionally good at cherry-picking their facts – picking one thing and using it to represent the whole. Watch here for a mention to a mini-ice age several centuries ago in Europe as "proof" that the world is not warming.
- There is no consensus on global warming: False. Several in-depth studies – examining peer-reviewed climate research – show that around 97% of studies published on the topic of global warming accept it as fact that humans are the driving force, and that it is happening. Skeptics will quote petitions by alarmed scientists, stating the opposite. But on inspection few of these scientists work in climate science. The 3% of studies that do not take a position are confused and have been shown to rely on pseudo-science and manipulation of facts. This would be akin to a plumber claiming authority on how a swing should be hung.
- It hasn't warmed since 1998: False. This is a favourite of the copy-paste brigade that troll the internet. 1998 was an unusually warm year, thanks to a powerful El Niño. In a temperature graph it therefore makes an extreme spike, hotter than the years around it. The top of that spike is only now being exceeded. This argument ignores the gradient of any temperature graph, showing how the world is constantly warming – 2014 was the hottest year ever recorded, until this year.
- The sun is warming the planet: False. Solar activity does influence the planet. But the last few decades have seen the sun in a cooling phase, so the world should be cooling. It isn't.
- Carbon is good: Correct, to an extent. This is a more recent shift in the climate denial brigade, as the science stacks up against their arguments. The idea here is that carbon helps life thrive and should be welcomed. This is true, a spike in carbon concentrations 10 000 years ago led to the agricultural revolution. But, again, this argument ignores the rate that concentrations are increasing and the impact that this has. Cake is good, but having it endlessly stuffed down your throat will be deadly.

There are many more arguments put forward by those that would want you to think the science of global warming is not settled. These are – for now – the main ones. With a knowledge that these are false, the public can ensure the debate moves towards the solutions we need to adapt to a changing climate. Staying in the past will cost our future.