Intro: Hello, and thanks for tuning into a new episode of Engage, a podcast from the Chartered Institute of Public Relations. Hosted by Shayoni Lynn - this episode explores the differences between mis and disinformation, particularly around the future of our planet, exploring how information pollution creates inaction and how conspiracy theorists are stirring up the culture wars around climate change. Our guests on today's podcast will explore the roles of comms and PR practitioners In tackling this issue.

Shayoni: 2022 has been a record-breaking year for weather-related events. China recorded its highest temperatures and driest summer in 60 years. A third of Pakistan is currently underwater due to severe flooding, and temperatures in the UK have reached 40 degrees Celsius. My name is Shayoni Lynn, and I'm a CIPR fellow. I'm also the Vice-chair of CIPR's Behavioural Insights in PR panel, and I sit on CIPR's new ESG expert panel. I'm CEO of Lynn, a behavioural science communications consultancy where we also house The Misinformation Cell. Launched last year - The Misinformation Cell is the UK's fast dedicated anti-disinformation service for PR and communications.

And earlier this year, we launched Lynn Planet, a dedicated practice which employs systems thinking to find the most impactful solutions to help businesses and organisations transition to a sustainable future. It is clear that we are in a climate emergency, and we are experiencing the negative impacts of climate change. It is here, it is now, and we have to deal with it. I'm delighted to be joined by three experts to discuss our topic today. Cleaning up toxic information in the fight against climate change.

Joining me today are David Gallagher, Stefan Rollnick and Rebecca Zeitlin. David, would you like to introduce yourself now?

David: Hey, thanks, Shayoni and thanks CIPR. And for all the listeners, as you say, it's a really timely, urgent discussion for us to be having – not a moment too late. For years I was in big PR, I was CEO for Ketchum in the UK and then Europe, Middle East and Africa, and then went to the holding company and looked after PR businesses around the world, so I'm pretty familiar with the mindset of big PR companies. Since January, I've been running my own consultancy, advising agencies on growth and development. I should say, in disclosure, I'm associated with Lynn as a board director and my interest in misinformation/ disinformation goes way back. And, in fact, I'm hoping in a few weeks' time to be able to launch a new initiative – a non-profit initiative – bringing maybe many of these listeners together who have a… share an interest in looking at misinformation and disinformation and ways of tapping that. So, hopefully you'll be hearing more from me on that topic later, but really happy to be part of this conversation.

Shayoni: Thank you, David. And Rebecca, would you like to introduce yourself?

Rebecca: Sure. I'm Rebecca Zeitlin, I'm the Marketing Director at a climate technology business called Levidian. We're based in Cambridge and so this is obviously a topic near and dear to my heart. It's a space that I've been working in for some time. I'm also a chartered PR and on the board of the Chartered Institute, and I sit on the PRCA's Misinformation in the Climate Crisis panel, as well as on the committee of the Stem PR Association, Stempra. So I have a number of different hats that I wear, but in all of them, climate change is absolutely central and my interest is primarily on the misinformation side of the discussion rather than the disinformation side, because I think educating ourselves in what the climate

crisis actually is and what it means for organisations is an important step in creating better communications.

Shayoni: Great to have you with us, Rebecca. Stefan, would you like to introduce yourself, please?

Stefan: Yes, thanks, Shayoni. And just to echo everyone else's, thanks to the CIPR for having us here. I'm Stefan Rollnick, I'm head of the misinformation cell at Lynn. But ironically, perhaps, Rebecca, I can bring a bit of perspective on the disinformation side of things. My background is in science communication and then in politics, for my sins, and I've spent a lot of time washing around in various gutters of the internet, learning more and more about how conspiracy theories work and how they seek to disrupt positive and progressive change. I think there's going to be lots to talk about here today.

Shayoni: Brilliant, thank you. And before we start reflecting on Rebecca's comments on the difference between mis- and disinformation, I think it's really important we set out our stall in the different types of information out there. So, Stefan, would you like to take us through the various types of information that can persuade and influence audiences?

Stefan: Sure, absolutely, and Rebecca, please challenge me here on anything I say, because there's a lot of semantic debate, I think, in this community about the differences between mis- and disinformation, but also the significance and usefulness of these definitions. So, broadly speaking, to kick us off, misinformation is inaccurate information spread without the intent to mislead and cause harm. The difference between that and disinformation, I always remember D for deliberate, is inaccurate information spread with the intent to mislead and cause harm.

I suppose early on, I'll try to challenge the debate here and say that in our work in the misinformation cell, we actually spend a lot of time using the lens of adversarial narratives, which was coined by the Global Disinformation Index. What adversarial narratives does is it moves the focus of the conversation away from the content of the information and the extent to which it is accurate or inaccurate, and it's harm – so how harmful the information is. So we'd say that adversarial narratives are collections of content that build narratives, which in this case disrupts climate action. And I think we know from a lot of what we see in the news and from fossil fuel interest groups, a lot of it is disinformation, a lot of it is accurate information cherry-picked to present a narrative which is designed to disrupt climate action and sometimes disrupt democracy, more broadly, which makes it such a complex but fascinating issue.

Shayoni: Thank you, Stefan. Thinking about mis-/ disinformation specifically in relation to climate change, David, why do we need to be aware of this from a PRN communications perspective, what role do we, as practitioners, have to play?

David: Well first… Stefan, thanks for that definition. I realise I've probably been using these terms incorrectly or interchangeably, and I'll try to be more conscious of that. I kind of wonder in some ways if it matters, at the end of the day, what the intent is. You know, maybe from a legal perspective and maybe

for some sort of intervention perspective, I guess it matters, but I'll leave that for you guys to debate the root and meaning of the words.

I think, as you started off the session, Shayoni, there really isn't a bigger issue facing the entire planet right now. So if we're going to pick one thing to focus on as communicators, it's probably helping the world understand the truth about what's happening to it right now. So from an urgency point of view, I'm trying to think of anything that would really take its place, but you see it reflected in pretty much every discussion that we have right now. And by 'it' I mean misinformation/ disinformation, specifically as it relates to climate policy and climate action. You know, I have an interest also in public health and vaccines and immunology, and I think that we see the same patterns playing out there and we see them playing out, really, in challenge to democracy. I mean, here in the UK, we saw that in several instances, it's definitely something that you see in the US and you're seeing it, really, around the world.

So as an issue, I can't think of anything more important for us as communicators – as those who help make sense of the world. And I, kind of, without trying to define communications and PR, I think that's, kind of, what our mission or purpose is. I think it's absolutely essential that we understand what's happening, what the motivations are, who the actors are, what the distribution channels are, and then what our moral and ethical obligations are, both to understand that and apply that to our work.

Shayoni: Thanks, David. I couldn't agree more, I mean specifically in regards to climate change, which is such an emergency – perhaps society's biggest emergency right now. This is the decisive decade to mitigate climate change and we have to act now.
I'm sure, though, our listeners will want to understand: how does climate mis-/ disinformation start? Is it social media or is it a social media vehicle for spreading misinformation? So Rebecca, what do you think?

Rebecca: I think social media is a vehicle. I mean, it's simply one of many channels by which this information is communicated, regardless of whether it's adversarial or not. And I completely agree, Stefan, that the definitions of mis- versus dis- versus mal-information, they are blurry. Particularly on this topic, I think they're probably even blurrier. You know, I think a lot of communicators are sharing information when they themselves don't have an intent but their organisation might, so it is both mis- and disinformation simultaneously – and what do we call that? There's not really a term for that.

So, for me, the information itself is coming from a variety of both credible and not credible sources and it's simply being disseminated through a variety of channels. Social media happens to be the one that I think we're seeing. It moves the fastest over everything, but this is not a conversation that's new and it predates social media, frankly, you know, we see it in old print ads. You know, you can go right back to what feels a little bit like the Dark Ages sometimes when we think about how we communicate today, but those original techniques are still in play and have been in play long before social.

Stefan: Yeah, I think it's fun to, kind of, think of this in terms of supply and demand. I think for me that's like a really useful way of looking at it and the mechanisms of both. And just to completely echo what Rebecca just said around the demand side of things. If you look back, like you said, in print times, but I

think back to, you know, way back to the advent of antisemitic conspiracy theories in Europe, and you think about the situations and the conditions there and what the commonalities were. You have new forms of communication absolutely supercharging the way we interact and connect with each other.

But on top of that, in a lot of these cases, if you think about it in terms of conspiracy thinking and what leaves us vulnerable to some of these narratives. Often, it's things like feeling like we have a lack of control over our circumstances and that's going to spiral with the cost-of-living crisis. Often, it's around community and a sense of purpose and we see that a lot in the male radicalisation space in terms of violent misogyny. We see that a lot around the lack of community and purpose being a major risk factor for radicalisation in these areas.

And we also see it in terms of comprehension, so just complete information overload: how do we make sense of our world? And obviously conspiracy theories, which are just one element of this, are stories that connect unconnected dots, which makes it much more attractive to us as a story. But also there's the supply, and I do think it's worth in this conversation just acknowledging the fact that while these are things that have been around for many years, decades, and even centuries. There are people making huge amounts of money from designing products which are making our lives ten times harder as communicators, and that includes Facebook, that includes the ad tech industry as well, and there's a lot of self-reflection we need to do as an industry around how digital advertising has changed the world of disinformation and given it the cash injection it needs to radicalise people. So not contradicting anything anyone has said so far, but just to add that into the mix.

Rebecca: Yeah, the ad tech point is such an important point, I think we don't talk about it nearly enough as communicators – that it's very easy to talk about the channels that we think we own, such as they are on things like Facebook, but the ad tech space is a space where we're putting information out in the world and anticipating it being delivered in a particular way, and then not doing any diligence to ensure that it has been delivered in the way we would expect. And therefore we're paying to perpetuate messages that could be in direct contradiction to our corporate policy without even knowing that we're doing that. And, you know, just baffling to me how few people seem to be spending time and energy thinking about that.

And one other thing I would just add is also the changing nature of faith and maybe that's not a conversation for this podcast, but as we see the decline of organised religion, very broadly, that's changing how people are interacting with broad overarching pieces of information. So what do we have faith in as people? And when it isn't an organised religion, what might it be otherwise? And certainly when it comes to radicalisation around things like violent misogyny and those kind of spaces, that's got to be contributing to it and I don't think we would be wise to disregard that in the subject of climate change either, particularly as it relates to, kind of, the conspiracy theories wrapped around why the world is changing.

David: I totally agree and I just want to, kind of, maybe tie your comment back to something that Stefan said that he and I had spoken about before, and that's this notion of supply and demand. And I think most

of our attention goes to supply. You know, how could we root out these malicious actors who are intentionally for profit, for diplomatic territorial gain, for whatever purposes, spreading misinformation?

Then there's, sort of, how do you control the distribution of that? And maybe that's regulating platforms. And there's a whole debate about supply. There is a ready audience for this type of information, and I think that's probably the thing that makes us most uncomfortable. And sometimes we talk about media literacy, we talked about content moderation, and those are, I think, part of the answer. But the things that makes us most uncomfortable is the fact that there are people who really don't care about the accuracy, the veracity of information. They use it for their own purposes. It just complicates the situation and the problem dramatically.

Just a story about how new this is, though, and sometimes I get batted down: People say, 'oh, misinformation isn't new'. I think I would acknowledge that, but with the Internet, with social media, it's turbocharged. In fact, that's not even… it's given nuclear power, you know, multiplied by a million.

When I grew up in rural Texas, I happened to be president of my student council. And I just say that because I got a letter addressed to the student council president at my high school address. So I'm like 17 years old, I got a letter mimeographed – most listeners won't even know what that was: it was a way of reproducing before a Xerox machine, before a photocopier, you mimeographed, which is basically one step away from a Gutenberg press – very primitive printing. But I got this sloppily reproduced letter basically advising me that I had a role as a student leader to fight the Jewish conspiracy. And this was in the 80s, and it's the same story you could see it almost verbatim, the same text appear on different hate sites. So this concept, there was a supply of information, there was a pretty clumsy distribution system, and there was a very sloppy supply identification ….demand identification process for this. So they were just, you know, sending it to me randomly and I could just wad it up and throw it in the waste basket.

But where it's complicated now is that, if I had clicked on that, I'd feed the algorithms that I was interested in that, and then I'd start getting more and more of that. And before I know it, that's dominating my entire inbox. I'm seeing very little of any other things and I'm going down increasingly extremist radicalised opinions or pieces of content. And you see those same patterns replicated in the climate debate, but in other debates as well. And I think that's why this is a bigger issue than climate, but I get the urgency of the climate conversation.

Shayoni: Yeah, and I think, you know, to your point, David, of demand, you know, from a cognitive psychology perspective, we seek out information that aligns with our values and our beliefs. And to Rebecca's point, why belief plays such a big role in how we consume this information, how we react to this information, and how we act on this information as well.

But Stefan rightly talks about agency – I think going through the pandemic and the loss of agency has created a lot of psychological trauma on us and the perception, even of losing agency, can play a huge role in wanting to advocate, whether intentionally or unintentionally, some of these narratives. So this is, absolutely, I think we're all aligned on this.

I'm keen to pick up on the trajectory of climate, mis/ disinformation. So how do we see this evolving? Perhaps over the next decade?

Rebecca: It'll get worse before it gets better, Shayoni. You know, I know that's a bit of a fatalistic thing to say, but we are, in my mind, entering a different kind of battleground period here, where, you know, the lines of who's on which side have been very blurry for the last fairly short period, actually. And I think the period of the pandemic really changed the way some of those conversations were happening, because we saw very clearly what happened when you suspend, essentially, general human activity for a period of time, right?

So I think it really shifted industrial perception of what's happening with climate change. And certainly from the in-house side of the conversation, the pace with which that is accelerating is pretty remarkable, actually. And that will make it very messy until more regulation gets put in place.

We're seeing some of that start, but things like different financial regulations and different forms of taxation, whether that's carbon taxes or methane taxes or whatever it might be, all of those policy instruments are going to come into play over the next, say, ten years. They are not a tomorrow thing that will happen. And so while we're going through that period of the policies coming into place to kind of set the guardrails for the conversation, it will be very, very messy. My hope is then, after that happens, once we have some policies in place, we will start having a more organised conversation and we'll enter a, kind of, different phase of what's happening.

Obviously, all of that is going to happen against the backdrop of a climate that is changing literally in front of our faces. It was terrifying to me this summer that people were not scared by how hot it was in the UK. Like, that's really scary, it was really hot here – that's not normal. And it's going to be like that going forward now. So I think that, kind of, changing backdrop and the sort of catastrophisation of weather events and how do we refer to one in 1000 floods that are happening literally every year? All of that is going to be very messy for a little while and hopefully we'll reach a place where we find a new language and a new narrative to be able to talk about crisis, climate crisis. I don't think it's going to be fun! [Laughs].

David: I was going to say too: I think it'll definitely get worse before it gets better. I think it can get better and maybe we can spend some time on that in a moment too. But I think it's harder than we think because there's such a mythology. We're not starting from an objective-even baseline, it's not a blank canvas. And all we have to do is just show people data and help them understand what was before, what it is now, and what it's likely to be.

There is a mythology, especially where I grew up in America, but I think here and in many places, there's a mythology around the automobile, around how people get around, about traffic and travel, and how that's opened up the world, which means that we're not starting from, you know, an even playing field.

There's a lot of convincing that we have to do to get people to change fundamentally. Industries have to think fundamentally differently about how they're going to face the future. So even as they start to turn around and I think there are some positions that we could come in from the carbon industry, from the shipping industry, from others. It's slow and they've got a lot of public opinion on their side, at least at an emotional level. So I think it is going to be a tough slog.

Shayoni: I couldn't agree more. I think we're all agreed, and we know that we need transformational change across all entities. We need it at a much faster pace than we are currently at, and the combination of scope and pace makes mitigating and adapting to climate change one of the most complex and demanding challenges, I think, of our time.

I want to reflect on some specifics, and I know that the misinformation cell has done some work on climate disinformation. So looking at you, Stefan, what are the key pieces of climate mis- and disinformation which dominate today's conversation? What insights can you share with our listeners?

Stefan: I suppose in this regard, if it's not too academic, it makes sense to look at the narrative structure, not just the specific pieces of mis- and disinformation. Because when we look at how disinformation actors are looking to disrupt the climate debate, in the spirit here, as we've alluded to, of acknowledging where things have gone well or where things have worked, we have made a lot of progress in pushing some of the, kind of, outright climate scepticism out of the mainstream. And the challenge then becomes more about how we avoid the waters of the debate becoming muddy, which is, you know, how we get stasis.

I've heard disinformation be described as an inherently conservative force because it paralyses any kind of action due to the chaos it causes. And I think that's why I see fighting mis- and disinformation as a moral challenge as well – it's not just a technical one.

In terms of what we're going to see, and this potentially relates to the previous question: the challenge here that we've got and the opportunity that disinformation actors here have in the content and adversarial narratives they're producing, is that we need more and more global cooperation at a time where countries have internally often never been so divided since times of civil war or, indeed, global war.

We have a rising diffluent gap between the richest and the poorest as well, which increases sense of loss of control and often produces populist backlash, which can contribute to the vision as well. And also, one of the conspiracy theorists', kind of, favourite tropes is around global control and bringing it back to David's point about Jewish conspiracy theories. You know, it's the same stories that forced my family to leave Eastern Europe at the beginning of the 20th century. Those narratives are being reused and recycled and projected onto organisations like the World Economic Forum or the World Health Organisation as examples of how small cabals of individuals are pulling the strings for their own benefit.

And so, I think in looking for a way to counter those narratives, really a lot of our communication has to be grounded in regular people. So this is the thing about the just transition, right? This is about framing

climate action, not just as a vehicle for mitigating climate change, which we know it has to be, but actually also as a vehicle for delivering justice and, in some cases, raise standards of living as well. This is about proper housing, this is about access to, kind of, sanitation and clean water as well, and so we obviously realise the scale of the challenge that we have.

But I think about, and I forget which politician it was in the US, this is back in the 90s, but as the debate about climate action was beginning to form, this politician framed climate action as an adventure, not this kind of big scary thing that we have to do: eat your greens, if you're pardon the pun. Actually, climate action is this amazing technological and societal adventure into a new way of seeing the world and a new way of seeing living and a new way of, kind of, seeing humancentric design in terms of how we think about cities and transport as well.

So, conspiracy theorists, to return to your original question, Shayoni, they're playing on the classic narratives of ‘in groups’ versus ‘out groups’, competitions for resources, small cabals of individuals controlling the strings behind the scenes. We can get into specifics about Jewish space lasers and stuff like that, but really what you're going to find at the heart is the same conspiracy theory narrative every single time. And it's our job to show people the real difference and the real benefits, and sell that kind of counter narrative and not find ourselves tied up in knots and, indeed, paralysed by the weight of all this disinformation, and focus on telling our stories and our deeper truths to fight that.

Rebecca: Can I just pick up on that just transition point? Because it's a point that… let's call it an aggravation for me, for lack of a better word. And it's kind of broadly the fact that a lot of climate change narrative that I see and interact with is very black and white. It completely lacks any nuance. It's either we have natural gas or we don't have natural gas, to use an example that's very relevant to my day to day. But, equally, all of those narratives are very ‘Western centric’. And when we talk about a just transition, we talk about a just transition often in the context of the experience of those of us in the UK or in the United States, or Canada, or Western Europe. And when you think about those mythologies that we were speaking about a minute ago around, say, cars or aeroplane travel or we can name a thousand other things, and you think about the parts of the world that have only really just started cracking access to that, you know, that's a challenge for us in how we craft narrative because when we're trying to be just and inclusive and understanding, the burden of climate change is borne most heavily by those who have not been creating it, as we all know.

And those are the communities that need and want access to a better and more economically fulfilling – and whatever other metric you want to attach to it – life. So that, kind of, that point of just transition to me is that it's very easy for communications people to fall into the trap of ‘Western centric’ narratives, particularly those of us who work for, say, consumer brands, where we're trying to talk about climate change in the context of a product that a huge percentage of the world may or may not even have access to.

And I think that actually fuels division because it makes it very easy for some of these more marginalised groups to point to Western narrative and say, you just don't understand what we're going through. And

then you have, kind of, how that fuels climate change-driven radicalisation and climate change-driven terrorism and all these concerns that are happening on the margins of what most of us think about every day but are very real and create very real risk for pretty much everybody in addition to, obviously, the risks resulting from climate change itself.

David: I think that's a brilliant insight in terms of making sure messages and stories resonate around the world, even if they follow global themes, as Stefan just mentioned. Stefan, you mentioned this need for stories that we tell, even in Western cultures, to have some degree of positivity attached to it. And I think that's another challenge for us as communicators.

I listened to this interview with Margaret Atwood, who I think is one of the greatest storytellers of her time, and she was saying that, you know, there are, kind of, three appeals from leadership to the people they're trying to lead. And the first is, you know, 'we'll protect you', so you have a different audience you're appealing to with those messages, so there's a security message. Then there's a justice message: 'we'll help make sure that the right thing gets done'. And I think that's part of the climate argument. But then there's…she called it fun. I would say more there's a beauty or a creative or an inspirational message: 'we can do things that are appealing to us, we can do things that are adventurous', to use your word. 'We can have… we can do amazing things together'.

And I think that's part of the language that we have failed to incorporate in some of our narratives. We focused on the security issue. We focus sometimes on the justice components, both very real. But I don't know that we've yet cracked on how do we make an appealing call to action, how do we make that more appealing and attractive to people?

Rebecca: It's hard to make something appealing when it involves sacrifice, right? And I think so much of what has to happen to actually make meaningful progress in the fight against climate change is actual sacrifice. So it's about how do we, kind of, sex up sacrifice and make that something people choose to do voluntarily, right? And I think technology actually has a really important role to play, less so, kind of, the sorts of technologies that we use to communicate, perhaps, but the rise of interest in things like battery electric vehicles and hydrogen fuel cells, and some of these really – whether they're ground-breaking or not, that's probably a subject for a different day! – but those kinds of technologies are starting to make it cool to make a sacrifice. They're making it cool to do something different, and I think that's important, but they're also making it possible for industries who are the real drivers of a lot of climate change to make changes that their shareholders and stakeholders are saying, 'yes please, go and make that change, even if it costs us something'. Whether that's a proactive cost or reactive cost, it's making it interesting impossible for them to do that. So I think there's a…I totally agree, there's a real framing challenge for us. How do we frame sacrifice in a less sacrificial sort of way?

Shayoni: Stefan, do you have anything to add to this?

Stefan: Yeah, just to come in on that and an observation I've had from spending a lot of time studying – I suppose people like me – but men who are isolated and more vulnerable to radicalisation. We've been

thinking about this in terms of our work and our research, in terms of male mental health and barriers to seeking mental health support. We've looked at it in terms of violence against women and girls as well, and domestic violence, and how that plays out and how a lot of those issues are intertwined. But one of the really interesting things I've seen mentioned somewhere online is this idea of climate action. All those sacrifices you're talking about, Rebecca, being in some way emasculating. And what I always find so fascinating is seeing those same men who might otherwise feel emasculated by climate action driving around with the window of their Tesla down and thinking, like, there's really something like… something's happened there. And whatever you think about Tesla, and as somebody who's interested in Twitter and trolling and misinformation, I have opinions about that that we'll park for now, but I do think that's a really interesting… interesting model there.

And just before we move on, just to highlight what we were talking about around, actually, in some of our biggest vulnerabilities in communicating climate action and the need for it and the justness of it, there are some objective truths that we can't escape, Rebecca, and what you were talking about – about some parts of the world only just having access to these parts of industry – that's not misinformation, it's an objective truth and it's one of the biggest challenges we have. And so we saw that when we were monitoring what was happening around the time where Russia invaded Ukraine, Russia wasn't targeting us, they were targeting countries in Africa who'd been negatively impacted by hawkish Western foreign policy. And it's the same in Southeast Asia. And so I think to come up with a response to this is both difficult but requires honesty of the complexity and the fact that sometimes you have to acknowledge the best disinformation actually contains a lot of truth. And there's something challenging but also liberating in that, because it comes about, 'okay, what's our new story that we can tell'?

Shayoni: That's really interesting? And I think I want to spend some time talking about climate action and how we can persuade more audiences, more communities, more individuals to take action. I think, Rebecca, your point about sacrifice and framing of sacrifice is really interesting.

Fundamentally, there is also a capability gap in that people don't… it's too big, right? It's too…how do you…what…so the drop in the bucket effect: is my small trade off in this moment in time going to have an impact on this massive global challenge? So there are lots of issues, behaviourally, cognitively, structurally, that affect why individuals or communities don't take action. But I want us to reflect on how we can, as communicators and leaders in this space, persuade our audiences, persuade our organisations, to improve their engagement in the space and take action.

David: Yeah, one thing we haven't really talked about is the role – and I'm about to contradict myself – which I'm really good at, but is the role of… I call it the carbon fuel… the carbon industry in this discussion. And I think one thing we're struggling with is that we do not, as activists, as people who are concerned about climate change, we don't own the conversation. We might think we do because we're producing reports and we're documenting temperature change, there's some great infographics that show how shocking the rise in temperature has been. Yet we're still not really setting the debate, at least from a policy point of view, not consistently. I think we still got a lot of work to do to engage consumers.

And then I look at what the fossil fuel industry has done and I think, by and large… and by the way, I think it's a big industry, there's different components – some are more advanced and some are others, some might be more 'proaction' than others – I don't want to paint it as one big monolithic beast, but overall they've gone from being pretty invested in climate denial – and there's a lot of evidence that there was both research and activity spread and just denying the actual impact of burning fossil fuels – to want a climate obstruction. And that's, kind of, taken several different paths and it's at different stages, I think, in different places around the world.

So in some cases it's active disinformation about the validity of science, about the credentials of the scientists who are producing the science. In other cases it's greenwashing. And I think you see a lot of greenwashing now, and which kind of credentials or efforts or contributions to the effort are held in front of a whole backroom of activities that have nothing to do with advancing clean energy solutions but protecting legacy investments.

And then you have, you know… tactically, it breaks down into, kind of, paltering and sort of as Stefan's point, some kind of true points that end up being very misleading in their implication or their application. This message that we got a delay, that it's just not a good time for the economy, we got to wait for the war to be over. There's many approaches that the industry has taken to slow things down, and I think that's our biggest challenge right now is countering those delay… those obstruction strategies, tactics and putting some more urgency to it. So it's kind of a convoluted statement, but I feel strongly that we haven't talked enough about the industry yet.

Shayoni: No, no, no, no. I couldn't, you know, we're in the decisive decade – if we don't act now, when will we? So Rebecca, what are your thoughts on this?

Rebecca: I'll admit having somewhat complicated thoughts because, you know, I work with energy in my day job and I really have struggled over the last, let's say, a year or so with the narrative around fossil fuels in particular. And that narrative is getting louder as a result of the war in Ukraine and the energy crisis. And I see so many people saying things like, 'well, we just have to stop using natural gas, it's proof that fossil fuels are the worst thing, we just should shut them all off'. And I think this comes back to something I said earlier, and I think a lot of people just don't have the information to be able to make an effective argument, which makes it very easy for the industry to disregard what people say, right?

So if you're sitting within the fossil fuel industry and people are saying, 'well, you just switch off natural gas, it's no problem', it's easy to completely disregard everything they say and completely disregard their opinion as not being valid because that is evidentially impossible to do, right? What we're seeing happening in European industry right now, as we speak, with industry shutting down to a greater or lesser extent, as a result of the energy crisis, that wouldn't happen if there was an alternative to fossil fuel, right? They would switch because the money would indicate that they should switch. There's nothing for them to switch to. So 'off' is the only choice.

And I think when we put that at the front of our minds, if you want to change how organisations behave – big organisations behave – you have to understand a little bit about their motivation. And I think a lot of the narrative, the activist narrative, I see is lacking that understanding, is lacking some of the nuance.

Now, that's a little bit separate from what the average communicator who is not working in the fossil fuel industry, or an adjacent industry, is going to be doing on a daily basis. And I think, again, that comes back to how can you influence your organisation to make a change that's meaningful for your organisation without biting off more than you can chew? Because not every organisation should be making a comment on the use of fossil fuels, right? It's just not practical to do that, even if it fit in with kind of a brand guideline, right, which it wouldn't for most organisations. So I think there's also this kind of balance for professional communicators between: what do you believe as an individual and what activism do you undertake as an individual? And what influence can you have on your organisation? Your organisation's communications as it relates to climate change?

And that's things like understanding how your supply and value chains work. Understanding how you audit your suppliers to make sure that they are measuring their emissions. Is your company measuring its own emissions? All of those kinds of questions that we as communicators can own within our organisations – that will have a meaningful impact on climate change over time. And it's something that you have direct control over today.

And I think it's very easy to get caught up in a conversation about these things we can do that are a bit amorphous and really hard to actually enact on a daily basis in our jobs, unless you work in the energy sector or in lobbying and policy, perhaps, but not that many people do in the grand scheme of things.

Shayoni: Stefan?

Stefan: I suppose we've had different angles there: the industry angle and the communicator angle, so I'm going to do the… fly the flag for democracy angle, because I think, I mean, first of all, this is a call to action for everybody to get involved to protect their democracy, which can be really fun if you're framing it as the adventure thing: you get outside, you meet new people, you wave placards, you make friends.

This isn't some kind of dour Calvinist kind of duty. This is like something that can be really fun and energising for people. But the reason why I think democracy is also an important part of this is: often, when you look at the polling, and I've got friends and old colleagues here in Wales who were involved in the recent regional elections here, when you look at the polling on things like climate change or the environment, often, public opinion is there. Like, there's enough public opinion in order to pull the policy levers that we need to bring about quite a lot of systemic change. Now, obviously there's personal change that needs to happen as well. But one of the threats and one of the barriers here, I think, is often that the policy solutions don't line up with public opinion.

And if you lose your democracy and people lose their voice in those policy decisions, that gap just gets further and further. And so for me, the real call to action that's kind of connected with all of this is around protecting our democracies and understanding that that's an active process.

I spent a lot of time over the lockdown, diving back into bits of history where there was civil conflict or global war as well, and looking at what points…you know, the intervention points really further upstream before you reach conflict. And I think one of the things that just came home to me was that when radical forces begin to seep into a democratic culture, regardless of how democratic that is, you really have no option but to try and push them out of the mainstream. And if you don't do that through social norms and through activism, you end up having to do that on the battlefield, quite honestly. And as we've seen in Ukraine, these kinds of conflicts can be incredibly disruptive to important progressive policy change. And so none of this is happening in a vacuum. And so I think we've covered lots of bases here and I think when you cover them all of the time, at the same time they seem overwhelming, but actually a lot of them are really interconnected and they support each other as well.

And so you can have this kind of upward spiral, as it were, with a lot of this stuff. But the point I'd like to make here is protecting democracy is also protecting the climate.

David: Hear hear.

Shayoni: Hear hear, indeed. It's such a complex issue, there's so many different parts, so many moving parts to this, and we have to work collectively to address some of this. The point Rebecca makes about understanding organisations and influencing organisations is one part of the puzzle. The other being able to plug that capability gap in audiences and provide that information. So when mis-/ disinformation does land, audiences are…perhaps have that information to hand to make better judgments.

I want to draw this to a close and ask for any final reflective thoughts on this issue, any calls to action, anything we want wider CIPR listeners to think about, to reflect on, to act on.

David: I can kick off. I just have a few resources for people who want to know more. And I take Rebecca's point to heart: not every communicator needs to engage directly on this issue. But I think every communicator needs to recognise communications malpractice when they see it, and maybe have the courage to call it out in kind of an activist way. But that's probably a subject for a different podcast, but I do see a lot of communications malpractice happening.

And to that end, there's a group called Clean Creatives. I think they're based in my hometown of Austin, Texas, but they're actively trying to discourage people from entering the entire creative sector if they're going to work on climate-denying organisations, whether it's trade organisations or energy companies. So they're trying to cut the creative resource off at the head to make sure that these campaigns aren't able to thrive. So, something to look up.

But more generally, there's a woman named Christine Arena, who's a filmmaker in the US. She tweets and is very active on this topic, climate dis- and misinformation in particular. She's already produced a couple of documentaries on this. I would definitely follow her on Twitter.

There's a woman named Amy Westervelt who's a journalist. She writes occasionally for The Guardian here, but she's US-based as well. She's got a whole family of podcasts, but her primary, kind of, flagship production related to this topic is called Drilled. And it's really worth going back to the beginning and seeing her documentation of the history of misinformation and disinformation as it relates to climate change.

And there's a guy, I think his first name is John Brewell, he is at Dartmouth, I believe, and he's done research basically linking the biggest – and this is painful – the biggest PR companies to the most egregious practisers of misinformation and disinformation, whether it's at an industry level or at a company level. And some of those names were close…dear to my heart.

So there is a growing body of research, real research, out there, and I think connections and dots are starting to be drawn and made. And I do think we have an obligation as advisors and as communicators to be aware of that, even if it's not part of our day job, so that we recognise malfeasance when we see it.

Shayoni: Stefan, any final thoughts?

Stefan: I suppose I won't go too hard on specific recommendations because knowing my behavioural science, Shayoni, we don't want to overload with choice. But what I will say, I suppose, is one of the things I steal from my late grandmother, who was an anti-apartheid activist in Cape Town. And when my father was getting involved with the anti-apartheid movement and was pushing her and questioning her on what to do and strategies and tactics, she used to just say to him, ‘be creative, stupid’ – which I'm going to say she nicked that off James Carville , you know, ‘it's the economy, stupid’, several decades before. But she used to say, ‘be creative’. She was a writer and she was an activist and I think a lot of the work we do on mis- and disinformation sounds incredibly technical and sounds incredibly information and science heavy, but what we're doing is beating that with creativity. We're fighting the lies with deeper truths and I encourage people to bring their creativity and their energy, and also their hope as well to this challenge, because that's how we're going to make a difference.

Shayoni: Absolutely. Rebecca, any final thoughts from you?

Rebecca: I'm not sure how I follow that, because that's, that’s quite poetic, Stefan! I think there are a couple of things I would say. First is that you should always ask yourself, ‘is this real?’ And not in the kind of daunting ‘oh my gosh, I can't believe anything’ sort of way, but, you know, I'm a scientist by background, right. Research methods are a thing, you know, you can always go away and do a bit of research. And with the advent of a computer in your pocket, that's an easy job.

So if you see something and it rings an alarm bell for you, or you think, ‘hmm, you know, I've seen language a lot like that lately, I'm going to look into this’, always take the initiative to do that. And then the other thing I would say is: it's a lot and it's very daunting, so take ownership of the pieces you can hold, whether that's in your personal life or in your job. You know, understand your own company and your own company's influence on the world, because that's something you have an actual impact on. Don't let it be, ‘oh my gosh, I can't take on the whole energy industry myself’. If that's too daunting for you, don't go there – start smaller and take heart, because the small steps are actually really, really important and we all have to start pivoting from somewhere, and that's as good as anywhere.

Shayoni: And as an applied behavioural scientist, I absolutely agree with research. I would only add on to that research-credible sources, with confirmation bias in mind: don't be drawn into content that aligns with beliefs and try and challenge the sources that you see and the credibility of those sources.

In terms of resources at Lynn, with the misinformation cell and Lynn Planet as well, we'll be creating a lot more content, freely available content for communicators, because this is important to us, this is part of our identity at Lynn, so we will have resources available.

Thank you to our panel today. I hope our listeners enjoyed this episode of Engage – Cleaning Up Toxic Information: the Fight Against Climate Change Disinformation.

Thank you very much.

Outro: Thanks for listening to this episode on Cleaning Up Toxic Information, the fight against climate change disinformation. We'll feature links to resources relating to the issues discussed in the podcast in the show notes.

But remember, don't let the conversation stop there. If you have any tips or guidance For other practitioners or have any comments about the episode, share them on Twitter using the hashtag Engage.