

False information explained

1. Introduction

This activity explores the problem of false and misleading information.

Using the example of false narratives around climate change, this activity will help you understand the different types of misleading information. It will also consider the threat posed by misleading information.

Learning outcomes

By the end of this activity, you will be able to:

- define different types of false and misleading information
- recognise different types of misleading messages about climate change
- explain why false information presents a significant risk to society.

Allow approximately **10 minutes** to complete it.

2. Definitions

Misleading information can take several forms, each with different characteristics and intentions. Understanding these distinctions can help you identify and address the spread of harmful narratives.

Misinformation, disinformation and fake news are all types of false and misleading information.

Misinformation refers to false or inaccurate information which results from human error or misunderstanding. This type of information is harmful but is not purposefully trying to deceive.

Disinformation is content that someone has produced or amended on purpose to generate a false or misleading story.

Fake news is a type of disinformation.

The Dictionary of Media and Communication (Chandler and Munday, 2020) defines fake news as information which “purports to be factually accurate, but which is deceptive, misleading, fraudulent, demonstrably false, and/or unverifiable — especially sensational accounts in social media that are designed to ‘go viral’”.

The difference between these types of misleading information is *intent*.

Misinformation is accidental.
Disinformation and fake news are deliberate.

3. False information about climate change

Misleading information can cover any subject. This activity uses the example of false information about climate change.

Unfortunately, disinformation about climate change is quite common. In 2024 ACT Climate Labs noted “a rising tide of misinformation around UK climate policy” in the run up to the general election. The European Digital Media Observatory (2022) found that around 10–11% of disinformation that they detected involved climate related falsehoods.

Understanding the forms that misleading messaging about climate change can take, will help you to recognise it.

Much of this disinformation challenges the evidence that climate change exists, questions the severity of the climate crisis or casts doubt on human activity as its primary cause. This type of disinformation is categorised as **climate change denial**.

Other misleading messaging challenges the need for urgent climate action. It accepts that climate change is real but promotes arguments for postponing or limiting action – often exaggerating costs and questioning proposed solutions. This type of disinformation is categorised as **climate delayism** or **new denial**.

Even though climate delayism recognises climate change science, it is still harmful as it discourages positive action.

Climate delayism is a tactic to undermine climate action.

“Delayism allows politicians, businesses and interest groups to claim that they “trust the science” and appeal to constituents who increasingly prioritise climate action while simultaneously letting them off the hook for undertaking any substantial climate action” (Global Disinformation Index, 2023).

4. What are the potential harms of misleading information?

All misleading information is potentially harmful. The Global Risks Report (World Economic Forum, 2024) ranked misinformation and disinformation on all topics as the biggest short-term risk to human society. Their message is stark and alarming.

“ ... the widespread use of misinformation and disinformation, and tools to disseminate it, may undermine the legitimacy of newly elected governments. Resulting unrest could range from violent protests and hate crimes to civil confrontation and terrorism” (World Economic Forum, 2024, p8).

Focus your attention now on misleading information about climate change.

Can you identify the potential harms of climate misinformation and disinformation? You may wish to take some notes before reading the feedback below.

Feedback

False information about climate change has the potential to cause significant social harm. The European Commission (no date) makes the point clearly.

Climate misinformation and disinformation:

- undermines trust in science
- weakens public support for climate action
- hinders policy implementation and international cooperation on climate change
- undermines democracy.

5. Summary

False and misleading information presents a significant danger to society.

- **Misleading information makes it harder to understand what's really going on.** False facts make it difficult for us to form accurate opinions or make good decisions.
- **This can lead people to make choices that aren't in their best interests.** This might affect their health, safety, studies, or everyday life.
- **False and misleading information spreads quickly, especially online.** Once it circulates, it can take a long time and a lot of effort to correct.
- **It damages trust.** People may stop trusting reliable sources — or trust the wrong ones.
- **It can cause real world harm.** Misleading claims can influence elections, harm public health, increase social tension, or lead to poor policy decisions.

Next Steps

If you want to learn more about false information and how to stop its spread, have a look at the other activities in the ['Spotting and stopping false information'](#) pathway.

6. References

ACT Climate Labs (2024) *What 2024 taught us about climate misinformation and what 2025 holds*. Available at: <https://www.actclimatelabs.org/2024-climate-misinformation/> (Accessed: 15 January 2025)

Chandler, D. and Munday, R. (2020) 'fake news', in *A dictionary of media and communication*. 3rd edn. Oxford University Press. Available at: <https://www-oxfordreference-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/view/10.1093/acref/9780198841838.001.0001/acref-9780198841838-e-3639> (Accessed: 15 January 2026)

European Commission (no date) *Climate disinformation*. Available at: https://climate.ec.europa.eu/eu-action/climate-disinformation_en (Accessed: 15 January 2025)

European Digital Media Observatory (2022) *Disinformation about climate change – main narratives in June at the European level*. Available at: <https://edmo.eu/publications/disinformation-about-climate-change-main-narratives-in-june-at-the-european-level/> (Accessed: 20 January 2025)

Global Disinformation Index (2023) *Climate delayism is the new climate denial*. Available at: <https://www.disinformationindex.org/blog/2023-11-16-climate-delayism-is-the-new-climate-denial/> (Accessed: 03 March 2026)

World Economic Forum (2024) *The global risks report 2024*. 19th edn. Available at: <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-risks-report-2024/> (Accessed: 26 February 2026).