Misinformation campaign revealed in war on sustainable food & farming

Nearly a million conspiracy and junk science posts align with interests of meat and dairy sector at war with progressive policy and changing diets

Uncertainty over COP28 food & farming outcomes

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A flood of conspiracy theories, junk science and aggressive pro-meat posts online are undermining a shift to more sustainable food and farming in Europe and North America, according to the largest ever analysis of online meat and dairy-related misinformation.

Nearly a million misleading posts attacking ‘soyboys’, Bill Gates, the global elite and others have gained millions of likes, shares or comments in just over a year. The content has been championed by Geert Wilders, Tucker Carlson, Donald Trump Junior and other famous faces on the political right, according to the study by Ripple Research, a Swiss registered data analysis firm, commissioned by the non-profit Changing Markets Foundation.

The research is a comprehensive snapshot of a communications war against scientific and policy concern over the environmental and health impacts of farming and changing patterns of diet. Big meat and dairy interests are clearly behind some of the posts, according to Changing Markets.

Posts were found to regularly mix conspiracy theories with genuine government proposals in Ireland, the Netherlands and the US, whipping up opposition and making policy change harder, the research report says.

Policy restraint is already casting a shadow over global climate talks, starting tomorrow. COP hosts, the UAE, want governments to integrate food and agriculture into national climate plans, but it is not clear if all will sign in time for the December 1 Leaders Summit. December 4 will see ministers discuss a Global Methane Pledge, though action on livestock is expected to be limited. December 10 will be a first ever ‘food day’, at which the FAO will highlight the overconsumption of meat and dairy in rich countries. An agriculture declaration to be adopted by governments so far includes no concrete targets, nor does it mention meat, livestock or diets.

Ripple crunched 285 million posts, mostly on Twitter/X but also on Reddit, blogs and web forums, sent over a 14 month period to July 2023. It identified around 948,000 posts that bend the truth to promote meat and dairy or attack greener alternatives and climate science.

The content comes from an army of 425,226 real and bot accounts, with just 50,000 of these driving all 3.6 million likes, shares and comments. Half that engagement came from 50 accounts that include famous right wing commentators and politicians. The most influential
were Cabot Phillips, journalist for a popular US conservative news site, and @iluminatibot, an anonymous account that regularly promotes illuminati conspiracy theories. The two generated 186,843 and 186,101 likes, comments and shares of misleading posts respectively. Self-proclaimed medical experts were also influential, including @DrLoupis, @amerix and @SBakerMD and junk science posts were a regular theme.

Of the nearly one million posts categorised as misinformation by Ripple, 740,077 of them or more than three quarters (78%), go on the attack. Of these, the largest number (350,465 posts - 37%) and those gaining the most engagement were heavily conspiratorial. The WEF, governments and the rich are accused of being at war with farmers, planning mass starvation and cannibalism. Bill Gates is a frequent target in posts that link synthetic meat to illnesses and starvation. Posts attacking well-known officials including John Kerry, Eric Adams, and Jacinda Ardern, as well as institutions that support progressive food and climate policies, were also common.

Of the rest, 223,389 posts (24%) variously alleged that plant-based milk/meat or lab-grown meat (alternative proteins) lack nutrition, are “ultra-processed” “Frankenfood” that can cause serious disease and “turbo cancers”. 69,045 posts (7%) had a climate focus, denying livestock are a problem or attacking alternative proteins as a threat to the environment, or predicting government imposed meat rationing and farm closures. 83,790 posts (9%) had a culture war aspect, attacking ‘soyboys’ as effeminate, associating meat with health, strength, sexual stamina and fertility under banners like #MasculinitySaturday, or bashing vegans as cultists that want the population to “eat bugs”. 13,388 posts (1%) question scientific findings on climate, environment and health benefits of reduced meat and dairy.

A spike of posts pointing to a UC Davis study exaggerated the environmental impacts of lab-grown meat. The work is not peer reviewed and has been heavily criticised. The university received funding from the livestock industry, the New York Times has reported.

The level of hostility against alternative proteins, 292,434 posts, 31% of all posts, surprised Changing Markets, which had expected to find a majority of posts promoting meat and dairy. In fact, only around one in every five posts (207,669 or 22%) did so. Of these, most (173,971 or 84%) talked up the health benefits of meat or dairy. Often under the banner #meatheals, posts exaggerate the psychological / health benefits, attribute mental and healing properties or celebrate the ancestral wisdom of a carnivorous diet. A minority (33,698 or 16%) made misleading positive environmental claims about meat and dairy production.

Industry paying academics for support is not new. What is new is a major conventional public relations campaign, and the recruitment of an army of online influencers, complete with a ‘digital command center’. The efforts have drawn comparisons to big oil misinformation.

Changing Markets Foundation senior campaigner Maddy Haughton-Boakes said: “We traced online attacks on alternative proteins and posts that exaggerate the benefits of meat and dairy directly to industry and its representatives. A large volume of conspiracy theories and culture war content about food and farming came from those on the political far-right rather than industry. But the two have a shared agenda, to downplay the science and
weaken regulation. This ultimately maintains and even enhances the status quo of high meat and dairy consumption with low regulation.”

Campaigns and lobbying may explain a persistent blindspot in legislation to curb agricultural emissions. Producers helped persuade Italy to ban lab-grown meat earlier this month. Florida may soon follow. There is also farming push back on funding for plant-based milks in schools in the EU. The sector is also fighting to keep control over the use of words like burger and milk, and remove wording on plant-based diets out of an intergovernmental climate report.

Agricultural production is responsible for an estimated 37% of global climate emissions, with livestock representing over half (57%) of these. Animal farming is the largest source of man-made methane emissions. If the livestock sector grows at its current rate, it will account for 49% of the global emissions budget for 1.5°C degrees by 2030.

Despite this, animal farming continues to receive the lion’s share of EU and US public subsidies and other support, a recent study found. Meanwhile, funding for plant-based meat start-ups has fallen to its lowest level since 2018, the Financial Times reported this summer.

The Ripple research is the largest quantitative study on meat and dairy-related misinformation, it says, citing a smaller study as the only comparable predecessor.

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