



THINKCLIMA Panel

Climate Change Denial and Think Tanks: EU vs US

15.30h-17.30 - March 7, 2018
Sala de Graus Tanger, 55309
Campus Poblenou – Roc Borona 138

PANEL

The social and financial organization of climate change counter-movement activities in the United States of America, by Max Boykoff, director of the Center for Science and Technology Policy Research, University of Colorado-Boulder (U.S.).

Responses to climate denialism from communication: The case of Spain, by Francisco Heras, environmental biologist and Head of the Adaptation Unit at the Spanish Office of Climate Change (Spain).

Diversity and concurrence of climate change denial and climate policy opposition in Europe, by Dieter Plehwe, senior fellow at the Berlin Social Science Center (WZB) (Germany).

Moderator: Núria Almiron, THINKClima Director

The social and financial organization of climate change counter-movement activities in the United States of America

Max Boykoff, director of the Center for Science and Technology Policy Research, University of Colorado-Boulder (U.S.).

Abstract: Ideological polarization around climate change issues – particularly in the United States (US) – has increased in the last twenty-five years. This polarization has led to fundamentally different interpretations of scientific evidence, highly varied public perceptions of uncertainty, and consequent policy confrontations and stalemates. In recent years, more attention has been paid to the structural, political economic and cultural roots of why, in the face of overwhelming scientific consensus, less than half of US Americans believe that humans contribute to 21st century climate change. The focus of these analyses are on contrarian voices –often dubbed climate ‘skeptics’, ‘deniers’ or ‘denialists’ – that have gained prominence and traction in the US public domain over time through a mix of internal workings such as journalistic norms, institutional values and practices, and external political economic, cultural, and social factors. These considerations are connected to social networks of climate contrarianism and climate countermovement activities. This movement also advocates against substantive action to adapt to or mitigate climate change. The presentation will work to interrogate the state of play of contrarian social networks and their effects – from individual attitudes to larger think-tank organizational and financial flows – in the US context, commonly referred to as ‘belly of the beast’ in terms of carbon-based industry power and political/societal/cultural polarization. This presentation will work to unravel how contrarian and climate counter-movements demonstrate themselves to be (at times deliberately) detrimental to efforts seeking to enlarge rather than constrict the spectrum of possibility for varied forms of climate action in this high-stakes, high-profile and highly-charged public arena.

Bio: Max Boykoff is an Associate Professor in Environmental Studies, Director at the Center for Science and Technology Policy Research (CSTPR) and a Fellow in the Cooperative Institute for Research in Environmental Sciences (CIRES) at the University of Colorado-Boulder. He is also a Deputy Editor at the journal of Climatic Change and a Senior Fellow at the University of Oxford Environmental Change Institute. He earned a Ph.D. in Environmental Studies (with a parenthetical notation in Sociology) from the University of California-Santa Cruz and a Bachelor of Sciences in Psychology from Ohio State University. His research and creative work focuses on cultural politics and environmental governance, science and environmental communications, science-policy interactions, and climate adaptation. Through connected projects and collaborations, his research examines how climate science and policy find meaning in people’s everyday lives, as well as how this, in turn, feeds back into science and policy decision-making. He is a co-author and editor of six books and edited volumes, and over fifty articles and book chapter

Responses to climate denialism from communication: The case of Spain

Francisco Heras, environmental biologist and Head of the Adaptation Unit at the Spanish Office of Climate Change (Spain).

Abstract: Climate Change counter-movement has got a huge social impact on some countries. However, this impact is not related to the scientific value of the claims made but to the effectiveness of its communication strategies. The knowledge about the drivers of climate denial is improving and, consequently, different strategies to fight the communication of the climate change counter-movement have been suggested. These proposals include: a) To forget the climate change detractors (in many places “those who deny climate change science are irritating, but unimportant”), b) to shift the debate from the subject under consideration, instead exposing to public scrutiny the communication tactics used by denialists, c) to uncover denialism motivations, d) To debunk the myths they disseminate and e) to demand social responsibility to the sponsors of denialism.

In Spain radical denial of climate change has little public support. But “soft denial” is widespread and social and political salience of climate change is limited. In this context, strengthening policies and measures to fight climate change could rocket denial responses and strengthen the climate change counter-movement. Supporting climate science and climate action is easy if painless solutions are proposed. But what will be the social response if policies and measures become more ambitious?

Bio: Francisco Heras is environmental biologist and Head of the Adaptation Unit at the Spanish Office of Climate Change. He is co-director of the Spanish Network “Responses to climate change from education and Communication”. He is author of a thesis on "Social representations of climate change in Spain: contributions to communication".

Diversity and concurrence of climate change denial and climate policy opposition in Europe

Dieter Plehwe, senior fellow at the Berlin Social Science Center (WZB) (Germany).

Abstract: Based on the data base “planet climate” compiled by climate change policy activists in Germany and the Netherlands and our think tank network research database we will examine the landscape of European climate change policy opposition. While many concerned members of the climate change policy community – both environmentalists and pragmatic mainstream politicians – attack climate change denial in an effort to defend the scientific basis for rational policy making, they miss important elements of the climate change policy opposition. Neoliberal activists do not necessarily share the specific denial of anthropogenic climate change. Instead neoliberals focus on climate change policy skepticism based on economic analysis and rationality on the one hand, and a more fundamental science philosophical skepticism with regard to the role of science in society and social reform. The two camps are distinct, fueled by different concerns and commitments. A comparison of the network of signatories of climate denial declarations and petitions with the network of neoliberal opponents of climate change policy opponents displays little overlap, but the impact of the two forces works in the same direction of stimulating worries, hesitation and outright opposition with regard to climate change policy making. While the European mainstream appears united against denial, neoliberal economic (policy) concerns are prominent both in climate policy support and opposition circles. Neoliberals play important roles both with regard to limiting policy discourses (climate capitalism) in general and with regard to policy instruments in particular (pricing, trading). By way of focusing on climate change denial critics are wasting a lot of time watching the tip of the iceberg, which will not suffice to prevent the ship from wrecking.

Bio: Dieter Plehwe is a senior fellow at the Berlin Social Science Center (WZB). His work on the history and variety of neoliberalism and think tank networks includes studying so-called free market environmentalism (new resource economics) and the co-constitution of climate justice, climate denial and climate policy opposition movements.