Global Sustainability

cambridge.org/sus

Intent in climate delay discourses

William F. Lamb[1,2] and Maisa J. Mattila[1]

[1]Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research (PIK), Member of the Leibniz Association, Potsdam, Germany and [2]Priestley Centre for Climate Futures, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK

Research Article

Cite this article: Lamb, W. F., Mattila, M. J. (2025). Intent in climate delay discourses. *Global Sustainability*, **8**, e44, 1–8. https://doi.org/10.1017/sus.2025.10031

Received: 29 August 2024
Revised: 23 July 2025
Accepted: 16 September 2025

Keywords:
climate delay; climate denial; discourses; politics and governance

Corresponding author: William F. Lamb; Email: william.lamb@pik-potsdam.de

Abstract

Non-technical summary. Climate policy discussions often veer into questioning whether actions are worthwhile, if technological fixes are the solution, or if others should take responsibility instead. Interest groups can use these discussions – also known as 'discourses of climate delay' – to downplay the need for ambitious climate action. But in other contexts, such discussions can reflect the legitimate concerns of citizens. Here we examine possible ways to make such a distinction and judge when someone intends to delay climate policy.

Technical summary. We conduct a review of the climate policy discourse literature with a focus on how studies evaluate intent. We find that they usually refer to one of three actor-based categories: interest, behaviour, or track record. That is, actors are considered more likely to have intent when they have material or ideological connections to fossil interest groups, behave in ways that undermine climate policy (e.g. through voting or funding oppositional science), or have a track record of rhetorical opposition to climate policy (e.g. having previously articulated climate denial). We further suggest that argument density (e.g. the number of claims they make against climate policy), ambiguity (e.g. whether they leave room for an interpretation of delay), and professional context (e.g. whether they are professional communicators) matters. We summarise these categories to provide a companion to 'discourses of climate delay' that focuses on intent. We further consider how the evaluation of intent can support traditional fact and logic-based misinformation identification strategies.

Social media summary. Examine interests, behaviour and track record to evaluate intent in climate delay discourses.

1. Introduction

Climate delay discourses are arguments that downplay or discredit the need for ambitious climate action (Lamb et al., 2020). They do so by questioning normative aspects of climate policy, such as who is responsible, what actions should be taken, and whether climate mitigation is desirable or possible. In a separate framework describing the broader landscape of climate contrarian discourses, these discursive strategies have also been characterised by the overarching claim 'climate solutions won't work', as distinct from climate denial, climate impact scepticism, and ad hominem attacks on climate advocates (Coan et al., 2021). A growing scholarship traces how these types of discourses are used by fossil fuel companies, conservative think tanks, and far-right political actors to obstruct climate policy legislation and action (Brulle & Aronczyk, 2019; MacLean, 2020; Markowitz & Rosner, 2003; Oreskes & Conway, 2011).

The original article on climate delay discourses has received quite a lot of attention and by now warrants some further elaboration. In particular, it has been argued by Pflieger and De Pryck (2023) that *intent* and *context* are decisive to the interpretation of climate delay discourses. They give the example of when social justice aspects of climate policy are critically discussed. On the one hand, these discussions may be instrumental to improving the outcomes, effectiveness, and fairness of climate policies – and for reflecting the real concerns of affected actors. On the other hand, interest groups aligned with the fossil industry may seek to problematise justice aspects of climate policies in order to discourage measures that would incur them regulatory costs. The evaluation of intent and context can distinguish these positions and is needed to make a reasonable claim that climate delay is taking place.

How then can intent be judged? Pflieger and De Pryck (2023) argue that a careful discourse analysis is needed. According to the discourse analysis literature, this would involve a systematic qualitative or quantitative analysis of the concepts, metaphors, storylines, ideas, or categorisations used by the actors in question, alongside an evaluation of the participating actors' interests and of their underlying ideologies or 'meta-discourses'. In practice, this could also mean investigating 'discourse coalitions' by conducting a qualitative analysis that focuses on the relationships between parties involved, their specific interests, and discursive identities (Hajer, 1993, 2006), for example, differentiating between coalitions that aim to maintain the status quo and those that challenge it. In essence, assessing intent requires, in the first instance, a focus on actors.

© The Author(s), 2025. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

We agree that this work is necessary to advance our understanding of climate delay discourses. Yet, one of the strengths of the original article is that it offered a simple framework that enabled the wider interdisciplinary and lay audience of this journal to critically reflect on an emerging form of climate misinformation. This misinformation consists of not just factually incorrect statements, but the broader spread of *misleading* information through distractions, omissions, and redirections (Guess & Lyons, 2020). For many of us, this type of climate misinformation manifests in daily life, through media engagement and chance encounters in the policy realm, where experience and heuristics are important guides as to how we recognise it and respond. Resources developed within the climate research community such as skepticalscience.com or the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Assessment Report FAQs are well suited to supporting fact-checking efforts, but do not provide insight on how to judge intent and conduct a basic actor analysis.

In this spirit, we have two aims in this article. First, we attempt to demystify the concept and analysis of intent, and therefore make it more accessible for those engaged in climate policy discussions. We do this through a review of the literature on climate policy discourse analysis, categorising and analysing how intent has been evaluated in prior work. In other words, we ask 'how have prior climate policy discourse studies assessed whether or not a given actor is purposefully spreading misinformation?'. This allows us to offer some heuristics for how intent might be judged and further studied. Second, we consider how the judgement of intent relates to other approaches in the literature that are used to classify misinformation – namely fact and logic-based identification strategies. We argue that the judgement of intent is not always needed to identify and counter misleading information, but that it is strongly complementary to these other approaches.

2. Definitions

To begin with, it is important to establish the main categories and definitions that we use in this article (Table 1). We define intent as the judgement of whether or not an actor is purposefully spreading climate misinformation, based on their discourse in context. This follows the main objective of our article, which is to develop criteria for informed judgements of intent, while also pointing to the main information that should be analysed: actors and their discourse. Importantly, we agree with Ramaswami et al. (2022) that intent should be judged from observable actions, affiliations, or behaviour and is thereby different from motive (the reasons for taking action), which is an internal state that cannot be observed. We acknowledge that definitive conclusions are difficult to reach on intent. It is therefore useful to consider it rather in terms of confidence (e.g. highly likely, more likely, and unlikely) as derived from one's analysis.

Table 1 lists further categories and definitions that are related to intent. We consider misinformation in a broad sense, capturing not just false information but also the use of misleading information and rhetorical techniques such as cherry picking evidence or oversimplification (see e.g. Cook et al., 2018), insofar as these can lead an audience to false conclusions. These definitions are specific to our review, but are informed by the wider fields of climate politics and climate policy discourse studies, which are admittedly not always consistent in terms of underlying epistemology and terminology.

3. How have discourse studies on climate mitigation evaluated intent?

In this section, we review how prior work has evaluated intent in climate policy-focused discourse analysis. To obtain a relevant sample, we screened the complete set of articles citing Lamb et al. (2020) and Coan et al. (2021) up to March 2024 in Google Scholar. We then reduced this set to articles that applied a stated form of discourse analysis on subjects related to climate change policy or mitigation. It should be noted that not all of these studies directly apply the frameworks of Lamb et al. (2020) or Coan et al. (2021), but instead cite these works to situate themselves in the field of climate policy discourse studies. We then conducted an interpretative review, focusing on how authors either implicitly or explicitly evaluate intent. That is, we started by looking at the methods they apply and the actors they chose to focus on, both of which may carry implicit notions of intent, before summarising the relevant categories and approaches in studies that more directly address this issue.

Most articles in our sample utilise techniques such as discourse analysis (Chen, 2023; Christiansen et al., 2023; Hanson, 2024; Kukkonen & Malkamäki, 2024; Lin, 2024; Lowes et al., 2020; Markard et al., 2021; Neubauer et al., 2023; Ohlendorf et al., 2023; Trimmel et al., 2024; Van Ryneveld & Islar, 2023; Vowles & Hultman, 2021), rhetorical analysis (Sassan et al., 2023), or frame analysis (Moreno et al., 2022; Supran & Oreskes, 2021) to do the methodological work of untangling climate policy discourses. Hence, the common theoretical basis on which they build their interpretations is that it is possible to discern meaning from narrative, that meaning is constructed by both the author and the audience of a given piece of communication, and that communication is often an attempt by the communicator to convey information in a way that will have an influence on the worldview or opinions of the intended receiver. In other words, these works attempt to move beyond describing what people say, to evaluate what they mean (Hajer, 2006; Hajer & Versteeg, 2005).

Our first observation is, therefore, that most studies contain at least an implicit evaluation of intent, as captured in their underlying epistemology. Studies have largely adopted qualitative methods, often by categorising content and frames into codes – either drawn from the literature or developed deductively – to identify consistent patterns across text or media sources. Others have taken quantitative approaches or combined them with qualitative analysis, exploring the formation of narratives through the occurrence of specific keywords, or using methods such as topic modelling (Chen, 2023; Si et al., 2023; Supran & Oreskes, 2021), cluster analysis (Meyer et al., 2023), or manual counting (Neubauer et al., 2023; Painter et al., 2023).

We find that in terms of actor focus, many studies deal with discourses propagated by incumbent fossil fuel interests, including industry advocacy groups (McKie, 2023, 2021; Neubauer et al., 2023; Sassan et al., 2023), oil and gas firms (Kuhl et al., 2024; López, 2023; Lowes et al., 2020; Ohlendorf et al., 2023; Si et al., 2023; Tilsted et al., 2022), and electric utilities (Williams et al., 2022). Others focus on 'aligned' interests, such as right-wing think tanks (Moreno et al., 2022; Plehwe, 2021; Samoilenko & Cook, 2024) and right-wing populist and far-right political actors (Hanson, 2024; Selk & Kemmerzell, 2022; Vowles & Hultman, 2021). Since these types of actors may have a direct interest in delaying climate policy, intent could be argued to be implicit in the focus of such studies. However, interestingly, a significant set of studies also examines broader media discourses in newspapers, on television,

https://doi.org/10.1017/sus.2025.10031 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Table 1. Categories and definitions used in this article

Category	Definition
Intent	The judgement of whether or not an actor is purposefully spreading climate misinformation, based on their discourse in context.
Misinformation	The spreading of false information, but also the broader use of distractions, omissions, and redirections (Guess & Lyons, 2020) that can lead an audience to false conclusions on the urgency and efficacy of climate policy and action.
Discourse	The act of using a specific set of ideas, concepts, and categorisations to assign value or meaning to physical and social realities (after Hajer, 2005). Distinct from 'narrative' in that it can exist across space and time, outside of a set context.
Actor	An individual or organisation engaged in climate policy discourse. Of particular relevance to the interpretation of climate delay are actors that: (1) are involved in normatively significant climate policy choices such as politicians, political parties, political organisations (e.g. think tanks), or fossil fuel firms; (2) have sufficient resources and access to evidence to evaluate the impacts of their normative choices; and (3) have control and agency over their decisions and discourse (Ramaswami et al., 2022).
Interests	The policy preferences of groups or coalitions of actors, which are often related to underlying material concerns (e.g. they accrue wealth from the fossil fuel industry) or ideological positions (e.g. libertarian stances on private sector regulation). Of particular interest for judging intent in climate delay discourses are 'fossil interests' that conduct political advocacy against policies that would limit fossil fuel production or use.

and in social media, where such motives are not as easily traced (Andersen, 2023; Lin, 2024; Meier & Fugl Eskjær, 2023; Meyer et al., 2023; Nielsen, 2023; Painter et al., 2023; Sylla et al., 2022; Trimmel et al., 2024).

Importantly, few studies explicitly discuss intent. This topic is rather dealt with on a spectrum, from studies that tend not to deal with it even indirectly (e.g. descriptive social media analysis reporting on the range of different climate policy discussions that take place), to analyses where the evaluation of intent is implicit but captured in other analytical concepts (e.g. discourse coalition studies of newspaper material, where the political leanings and histories of different actors are traced), to those that make a more direct claim of intent (but may nonetheless refrain from stating it outright). In the latter categories, we observe that most studies focus their attention on the actors themselves, typically evaluating their interests, behaviour, and track records.

4. Characteristics of intent: interest, behaviour, and track record

Interest emerges as a key characteristic of intent in our review, on the basis that someone who actually benefits from misinformation is arguably more likely to spread it (Fallis, 2015). As such, it is unsurprising to find that many studies explore the connections between those propagating climate delay and groups that are materially threatened by measures to address climate change. These connections may consist of employment, funding, shared personnel, or other support received from various parties linked to the fossil fuel industry, including companies (e.g. oil and gas firms), special interest organisations (e.g. industry trade associations), or non-profit organisations (e.g. foundations and think tanks) (Andersen, 2023; Christiansen et al., 2023; Holder et al., 2023; Moreno et al., 2022; Plehwe, 2021; Tilsted et al., 2022; Williams et al., 2022). On the other hand, we often find that the focus on particular actors or organisations and their interests is not fully elaborated in the discourse literature, for instance, only briefly pointing to connections with the fossil industry, without a deeper explanation of how discourses may be shaped by material alignments.

In other areas of the climate obstruction literature, it has been shown that material interests can intersect with ideological stances, values, and beliefs. Much work, for instance, has gone into examining think tanks such as the Heartland Institute, the Cato Institute, and the Institute for Economic Affairs, which espouse a broader program of neoliberal ideology and limited state intervention that is highly opposed to climate policy and action (Plehwe, 2021; Plehwe et al., 2021). These and other institutes have been linked to a decades-long effort of breathtaking scope by Charles and David Koch to promulgate libertarian ideas and support conservative political causes in the United States, backed by personal wealth accrued from fossil fuel industries (Bennett & Livingston, 2020; Doreian & Mrvar, 2022; Gibson & Brulle, 2024; MacLean, 2020).

A second analytical area concerns *behaviour*. This consists of concrete acts that may be consistent or inconsistent with the rhetoric or claims of a specific actor, such as financial investments (Li et al., 2022), voting patterns in parliaments, or acting as a signatory of a known misinformation document (Spampatti et al., 2023). The logic here is that rhetorical opposition to climate policy is a manifestation of actual opposition to climate policy, which can be observed through someone's behaviour.

One example of how to leverage behaviour in the analysis of intent is to demonstrate an action-rhetoric gap. For example, one could assess whether industry claims with regard to their climate actions are consistent with what we can observe and verify, as in Li et al. (2022)'s comparison of oil major claims versus actions and investments with respect to renewable energy. In a corporate context, this has commonly become known as the analysis of 'greenwashing' (Nemes et al., 2022). Similarly, one could compare discrepancies between private and public communications, such as when ExxonMobil internally discussed the drivers and risks of climate change, but externally downplayed them (Franta, 2018; Supran & Oreskes, 2017). The stark difference between these communications suggests an active choice to present information to the public in a certain way. Indeed, perhaps the strongest example here would be an actual statement of intent to mislead, which explains the continuing interest among climate obstruction scholars in archival research of internal communications (Franta, 2018).

The focus on behaviour can draw closer attention to the processes of climate discourse production and propagation. Here, it should be acknowledged that fossil interest groups mobilise vast resources on public relations efforts (Brulle et al., 2020; Brulle & Werthman, 2021), including instances where several million dollars have been spent by the American Petroleum Institute on large-audience 'Super Bowl' advertisements to greenwash oil and gas products (Sheehan, 2018). Indeed, interest groups are known to engage in sophisticated chains of activities that produce and

https://doi.org/10.1017/sus.2025.10031 Published online by Cambridge University Press

propagate discourses, such as funding oppositional science and issuing press releases to the media; establishing 'grassroots organisations' that manufacture community opposition to policy proposals; or coordinating industry-wide organisations to produce educational material and deliver training to key stakeholders (Ulucanlar et al., 2023). The scale, reach, and messaging of these campaigns – which are unambiguously supportive of the fossil industry – ought to be a clear measure of intent.

A final characteristic that cuts across the analysis of interest and behaviour is *track record*. This captures whether or not someone has had connections to fossil interest groups in the past, or has had a history of behaving in ways inconsistent with a desire to mitigate climate change. Such a perspective is strongly embedded in the epistemology of discourse analysis, which aims to situate discourse actors within the wider (historical) context of their actions and networks. It is also reflected in online resources such as DeSmog's Climate Disinformation Database, where detailed biographies of individuals and organisations that have repeatedly engaged in climate contrarianism over an extensive period of time are gathered.

An interesting aspect of this longer-term perspective is whether actors and organisations that propagated climate denial or obstructive behaviour in the past are now shifting towards climate delay discourses. In other words, has someone been active in propagating climate denial in the past? This shift has been observed at an aggregated level (Coan et al., 2021), but only one study in our review traced it for individual actors or organisations (Ekberg & Pressfeldt, 2022). (Conversely, a shift in the other direction – from delay to denial – is of course also plausible, and was identified for one of Ekberg & Pressfeldt's cases). In our view, explicitly considering such historical contexts and whether such shifts occur is of deep interest to the analysis of intent, even if some public figures have purported to 'change their minds' about climate change (Walker, 2021).

5. Additional avenues to evaluate intent: density, ambiguity, professional context

So far, our review has primarily focused on actor-based categories that are used to judge intent. But in addition to understanding who is propagating climate discourses, we propose that it may also be useful to observe how arguments are structured and where they may be delivered. We therefore suggest three further categories: density, ambiguity, and professional context.

First, in our experience, certain actors have a tendency of deploying many climate delay claims in fast succession – which we call *density*. This pattern of argumentation stands in stark contrast to when someone carefully engages with a given normative aspect of climate action, such as whether policies do indeed impact on social equality and ought to be redesigned in a given way. The use of dense argumentation is a known debating technique referred to as Gish Galloping or Firehosing, where many individually weak arguments are used to overwhelm efforts at rebuttal. In our review, we did not identify any studies that observed density or reflected on it when contrasting alternative discursive positions. But given that climate contrarian content is known to combine many different categories together – including denial, impact scepticism, ad hominem, and climate delay claims (Flack et al., 2024) – we think that there should be closer attention to this phenomenon.

Second, we would argue that it is a fundamental task of those who engage in public discussions on climate change not to leave any *ambiguity* as to whether we should take action. If one's intent is not to undermine climate policy action, it is arguably counterproductive to continuously field arguments that attack such policies while failing to offer constructive alternatives. In addition, one always has the opportunity to explicitly clarify intent and therefore prevent others from being misled (Fallis, 2015). Usually, it is not in the interest of political actors to reduce ambiguities, as leaving room for interpretation can help them to evade responsibility or smooth over potential conflicts (Geden, 2018). This underlines the important moderating role of journalists and other third parties in challenging political actors on their concrete positions and intentions. Ambiguity can also hide *inconsistencies* in policy preferences, which two of our articles suggest may be related to underlying obstruction strategies (Hanson, 2024; Vowles & Hultman, 2021). For instance, it has been shown that far right party manifestos enthusiastically support local environmental policies (presumably to tap into nativist sentiments), but generally oppose climate change policies, even though the two issues are clearly interlinked in practice (Forchtner, 2019; Schwoerer & Fernandez-Garcia, 2024). It is therefore important to observe whether or not actors reduce ambiguity and clarify their positions, and whether these are consistent with the claims being made.

Finally, we would argue that the *professional context* of climate discussions matters. There is a difference between the everyday conversations of private actors, versus public statements from professional communicators such as politicians, public relations experts, or media commentators. Actors in the latter category have a deep awareness of and agency over their messaging strategies, and sufficient resources that they cannot claim error or ignorance with respect to their likely effects (Ramaswami et al., 2022). Their messaging is, by nature, intended to influence large swathes of the public. In turn, these public messages can be reproduced in private discussions and among social media users, while interacting with and shaping broader cultural phenomena, such as the low salience of climate issues in some countries (Brulle & Norgaard, 2019). These may indeed be the objectives of professional communication efforts. Thus, while climate delay can be undoubtedly present in private conversations, judgements of intent ought to take a more critical stance for those operating in professional contexts where strategic and well-honed messaging is the norm.

6. Comparing approaches to identify and debunk climate delay discourses

The original claim in this article is that an analysis of intent is instrumental to identifying climate delay discourses. Here, we set this discussion in the context of two other approaches that are used in the fields of cognitive psychology and communication studies to classify and counter climate misinformation – namely, fact and logic-based approaches (Table 2).

In the fact-based approach, misinformation is interpreted as the spread of claims that are contrary to 'common understandings of verifiable facts' (Guess & Lyons, 2020). As such, scientists and advocates can identify it through fact-checking, and respond by communicating and reinforcing scientific facts on a given topic (Schmid & Betsch, 2019). In the logic-based approach, identification rather focuses on rhetorical techniques and strategies. Arguments are deconstructed into their basic premises and conclusions, which can then be interrogated for logical fallacies (Cook, 2020; Cook et al., 2018; Schmid & Betsch, 2019; Vraga & van der Linden, 2020). If these fallacies are present, then arguments can be exposed as misleading. The logic-based approach calls

https://doi.org/10.1017/sus.2025.10031 Published online by Cambridge University Press

for improvements to critical thinking as the basis for countering misinformation.

Compared to these two approaches, the focus on intent leads us to an analysis of the underlying actors, interests, and practices of misinformation production, in addition to the specific content claims that are made. Strictly speaking, the focus on intent already presupposes that misinformation is being spread and is rather concerned with whether it is intentional and can be classified as 'disinformation'. Well-known examples include the study of propaganda campaigns and denial 'playbooks', and research into the spread of ideologically-motivated rhetoric through non-profit organisations and policy circles (Holder et al., 2023; Kukkonen & Malkamäki, 2024; Lowes et al., 2020; McKie, 2021; Moreno et al., 2022; Sassan et al., 2023). As we have discussed, this approach suggests that mis/disinformation can be identified by observing the link between rhetoric and underlying interests, with a focus on interests, behaviour, and track record. It also implies that misinformation can be countered by rendering these links and activities transparent.

To what extent is the study of climate delay amenable to these different approaches? Arguably, all are relevant and complementary, particularly when one considers their individual weaknesses. For instance, fact-checking presents significant epistemic challenges when it comes to climate delay discourses. This is because policy discussions are often driven by values rather than verifiable facts. They deal with normative questions such as how responsible different parties are for addressing climate change, or they refer to hypothetical future scenarios about how we should reduce emissions. This is an area where different approaches ought to be legitimately discussed, not least because values and preferences for how to reduce greenhouse gas emissions vary markedly across society. Further, as in other fields of social policy, the 'solutions' to climate change often come with new challenges that themselves need to be deliberated (Grundmann, 2016). Still, fact-checking may be useful in cases where the policy option space is constrained due to biophysical or techno-economic reasons. Not all policy positions are possible to hold, given the mounting evidence that certain mitigation options are simply too slow, expensive, or undeveloped compared to others to offer a viable pathway to ambitious climate targets (for instance, in the recurring debate on nuclear versus renewable energy for decarbonising the power sector).

Where claims cannot be straightforwardly fact-checked, the logic-based approach can offer more purchase. Using a taxonomy of misinformation techniques called Fake experts, Logical fallacies, Impossible expectations, Cherry picking, and Conspiracy theories, Cook et al. (2018) contend that a large number of climate denialist claims can be refuted using logical argumentation – an analysis that Flack et al. (2024) extend to focus on solution-oriented or climate delay claims. A strength of this approach is that it explicitly focuses on uncovering hidden premises, thereby exposing the ambiguity that is common in many claims. It also does not require specific domain knowledge on climate policies to apply. On the other hand, the logic approach struggles with inductive claims that do not feature definitive conclusions, that is, the difference between a definitive claim such as 'carbon taxes do not work' versus an inductive one such as 'the evidence that carbon taxes work is limited and uncertain' (Cook et al., 2018).

Compared to fact and logic-based approaches, the focus on intent recognises that there are different positions to take on questions of climate policy, and that these positions will be occupied by actors with specific constellations of interests. In other words, it does not presuppose a given correct answer to climate policy, and it is not bound to certain types of content such as definitive claims. On the other hand, intent is by nature ambiguous and actor-based interests can be intransparent – often purposefully so. Judging intent is therefore a subjective and imprecise exercise, and carries strong normative implications for all those involved.

Table 2. Fact, logic, and intent-based approaches to identifying misinformation or disinformation

Approach	Mis/disinformation identification strategy	Debunking strategy	Weaknesses in a climate policy context
Fact	Compare climate policy claims to verifiable facts.	Communicate the facts	Climate policy choices are often driven by values, which cannot be judged against a factual evidence base.
Logic	Deconstruct climate policy claims to identify reasoning errors.	Improve critical thinking	Climate policy claims can be provisional and do not feature definitive conclusions to interrogate for reasoning errors.
Intent	Identify the actors who make climate policy claims and evaluate the interests they represent.	Render interests transparent	Intent is ambiguous, actor-based interests are often intransparent; goes against community norms of challenging ideas, not people.

7. Conclusion

In this article, we aimed to expand on the concept of intent in climate policy discourse analysis and categorise how it has been evaluated in prior work. We find that intent is rather an implicit concept in most work. Nonetheless, we derive three categories to guide future actor-based analysis – interests, behaviour, and track record – while identifying three further categories that also deserve empirical attention – density, ambiguity, and professional context.

We believe these categories can assist the interdisciplinary and lay audience of this journal to critically reflect on climate delay discourses that they may observe in policy and media contexts (Box 1). In doing so, it should be noted that the overall weight of evidence can be considered. How many questions to judge intent have been answered in the affirmative? While a single affirmation may leave room for doubt, a multitude ought to constrain our credibility that someone is acting in faith and without intention to undermine climate policy.

Box 1: Questions to judge intent in climate delay discourses

Does the individual or organisation…
…have material **interests** that would be harmed by climate policy?
…**behave** in ways that are inconsistent with their rhetoric or that oppose climate action?
…have a **track record** of repeatedly propagating climate contrarian claims?

Does the content…
…have a high **density** of 'climate delay' claims?

https://doi.org/10.1017/sus.2025.10031 Published online by Cambridge University Press

…leave room for **ambiguity** with respect to the need for ambitious climate action?
…take place in a **professional context**, such as in advertisements or media appearances?

To our knowledge, there has been no research that explores how actor analysis can support fact and logic-based techniques to identify and debunk climate misinformation. We perceive this as an important gap for future research, given that all three approaches have inherent strengths and weaknesses.

As climate policy implementation advances, discussions over how it takes place and who bears the costs or benefits will only become more frequent. Addressing climate change will require transformative and encompassing solutions across all sectors and segments of society. These solutions will likely give rise to new challenges, such as conflicts over land use, labour market shifts, or local impacts from the extraction of new minerals and resources. Such 'wicked problems' underscore the importance of listening to and engaging with affected parties, and doing so reflexively and repeatedly as new issues arise (Grundmann, 2016; Levin et al., 2012). The notion that certain discourses constitute climate delay should not be used to stifle these conversations, as they are instrumental for reflecting the real concerns of citizens and stakeholders, and in the right setting can even strengthen support for climate policies (Dryzek et al., 2019). Nonetheless, we should not be naive to the fact that a spectrum of powerful interests can benefit from casting doubt on the design and implementation of climate policy. The evaluation of intent can provide one entry point to shining a light on climate delay discourses and, therefore, on the broader phenomenon of climate obstruction.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at https://doi.org/10.1017/sus.2025.10031.

Acknowledgements. We thank John Cook for valuable feedback on an early draft of this manuscript.

Author contributions. WFL conceived and designed the study. MJM conducted data gathering. WFL and MJM wrote the article.

Funding statement. This work was supported by the European Union ERC-2020-SyG 'GENIE' (951542) grant.

Competing interests. WFL and MJM declare none.

References

Andersen, R. (2023). Pushing products and blaming consumers. In M. P. McAllister & E. West, *The Routledge Companion to Advertising and Promotional Culture* (2nd, pp.371–383). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003124870-38

Bennett, W. L., & Livingston, S. (2020). A brief history of the disinformation age: Information wars and the decline of institutional authority. In W. L. Bennett & S. Livingston Eds., *The Disinformation Age* (1st, pp.3–40). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108914628.001

Brulle, R., & Aronczyk, M. (2019). Environmental countermovements: Organised opposition to climate change action in the United States. In A. Kalfagianni, D. Fuchs & A. Hayden (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Global Sustainability Governance* (pp. 218–230). Routledge.

Brulle, R. J., Aronczyk, M., & Carmichael, J. (2020). Corporate promotion and climate change: An analysis of key variables affecting advertising spending by major oil corporations, 1986–2015. *Climatic Change*, *159*(1), 87–101. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-019-02582-8

Brulle, R. J., & Norgaard, K. M. (2019). Avoiding cultural trauma: Climate change and social inertia. *Environmental Politics*, *28*(5), 886–908. https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2018.1562138

Brulle, R. J., & Werthman, C. (2021). The role of public relations firms in climate change politics. *Climatic Change*, *169*(1–2), 8. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-021-03244-4

Chen, S. (2023). The fate of bitumen: An exploratory study of national newspaper coverage of Alberta's bitumen industry during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, *10*(1), 30. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-01515-2

Christiansen, K. L., Hajdu, F., Planting Mollaoglu, E., Andrews, A., Carton, W., & Fischer, K. (2023). "Our burgers eat carbon": Investigating the discourses of corporate net-zero commitments. *Environmental Science & Policy*, *142*, 79–88. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2023.01.015

Coan, T. G., Boussalis, C., Cook, J., & Nanko, M. O. (2021). Computer-assisted classification of contrarian claims about climate change. *Scientific Reports*, *11*(1), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-021-01714-4

Cook, J. (2020). Deconstructing climate science denial. In D. C. Holmes & L. M. Richardson (Eds.), *Research Handbook on Communicating Climate Change* (pp. 62–78). Edward Elgar Publishing. https://doi.org/10.4337/9781789900408.00014

Cook, J., Ellerton, P., & Kinkead, D. (2018). Deconstructing climate misinformation to identify reasoning errors. *Environmental Research Letters*, *13*(2), 024018. https://doi.org/10.1088/1748-9326/aaa49f

Doreian, P., & Mrvar, A. (2022). Chapter 12: The Koch Brothers and the climate change denial social movement. In D. Tindall, M. C. J. Stoddart & R. E. Dunlap (Eds.), *Handbook of anti-environmentalism* (pp. 234–247). Edward Elgar Publishing. https://doi.org/10.4337/9781839100222.00022

Dryzek, J. S., Bächtiger, A., Chambers, S., Cohen, J., Druckman, J. N., Felicetti, A., & Warren, M. E. (2019). The crisis of democracy and the science of deliberation. *Science*, *363*(6432), 1144–1146. https://doi.org/10.1126/scienceaaw2694

Ekberg, K., & Pressfeldt, V. (2022). A road to denial: Climate change and neoliberal thought in Sweden, 1988–2000. *Contemporary European History*, *31*(4), 627–644. https://doi.org/10.1017/S096077732200025X

Fallis, D. (2015). What Is disinformation? *Library Trends*, *63*(3), 401–426. https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2015.0014

Flack, R., Cook, J., Ellerton, P., Kinkead, D., Coan, T., Boussalis, C., … Dargaville, R. (2024). Identifying reasoning fallacies in a comprehensive taxonomy of contrarian claims about climate change. *Environmental Communications, (in review)*. Retrieved from https://crankyuncle.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Flack_2022_deconstruction.pdf.

Forchtner, B. (2019). Climate change and the far right. *WIREs Climate Change*, *10*(5), e604. https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.604

Franta, B. (2018). Early oil industry knowledge of CO2 and global warming. *Nature Climate Change*, *8*(12), 1024–1025. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41558-018-0349-9

Geden, O. (2018). Politically informed advice for climate action. *Nature Geoscience*, *11*(6), 380–383. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41561-018-0142-4

Gibson, C., & Brulle, R. J. (2024). *Koch and Climate Obstruction*. Climate Social Science Network, Institute for Environment & Society at Brown University. Retrieved from https://cssn.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/GibsonBrulle_KochandClimateObstruction_2024.pdf.

Grundmann, R. (2016). Climate change as a wicked social problem. *Nature Geoscience*, *9*(8), 562–563. https://doi.org/10.1038/ngeo2780

Guess, A. M., & Lyons, B. A. (2020). Misinformation, disinformation, and online propaganda. In N. Persily & J. A. Tucker (Eds.), *Social Media and Democracy* (1st, pp.10–33). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108890960.003

Hajer, M., & Versteeg, W. (2005). A decade of discourse analysis of environmental politics: Achievements, challenges, perspectives. *Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning*, *7*(3), 175–184. https://doi.org/10.1080/15239080500339646

Hajer, M. A. (1993). Discourse Coalitions and the Institutionalization of Practice: The Case of Acid Rain in Great Britain. In F. Fischer & J. Forester (Eds.), *The Argumentative Turn in Policy Analysis and Planning* (pp. 43–76). Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822381815-003

Hajer, M. A. (2005). *The politics of environmental discourse: Ecological modernization and the policy process*. Repr. Clarendon Press.

Hajer, M. A. (2006). Doing discourse analysis: Coalitions, practices, meaning. In M. van den Brink & T. Metze (Eds.), *Words matter in policy and planning—Discourse theory and method in the social sciences* (pp. 65–74). Koninklijk Nederlands Aardrijkskundig Genootschap.

Hanson, J. (2024). Looking beyond climate contrarianism: Nationalism and the reterritorialization of climate discourse in Spain's Vox party. *Nordia Geographical Publications*, *53*(1), 39–61. https://doi.org/10.30671/nordia.121511

Holder, F., Mirza, S., Namson-Ngo-Lee, Carbone, J., & McKie, R. E. (2023). Climate obstruction and Facebook advertising: How a sample of climate obstruction organizations use social media to disseminate discourses of delay. *Climatic Change*, *176*(2), 16. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-023-03494-4

Kuhl, L., Stephens, J. C., Arriaga Serrano, C., Perez-Lugo, M., Ortiz-Garcia, C., & Ellis, R. (2024). Fossil fuel interests in Puerto Rico: Perceptions of incumbent power and discourses of delay. *Energy Research & Social Science*, *111*, 103467. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2024.103467

Kukkonen, A., & Malkamäki, A. (2024). A cultural approach to politicization of science: How the forestry coalition challenged the scientific consensus in the finnish news media debate on increased logging. *Society & Natural Resources*, *37*(1), 91–112. https://doi.org/10.1080/08941920.2023.2259326

Lamb, W. F., Mattioli, G., Levi, S., Roberts, J. T., Minx, J. C., Müller-hansen, F., … Steinberger, J. K. (2020). Discourses of climate delay. *Global Sustainability*, *3*(e17), 1–5. https://doi.org/10.1017/sus.2020.13

Levin, K., Cashore, B., Bernstein, S., & Auld, G. (2012). Overcoming the tragedy of super wicked problems: Constraining our future selves to ameliorate global climate change. *Policy Sciences*, *45*, 123–152. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11077-012-9151-0

Li, M., Trencher, G., & Asuka, J. (2022). The clean energy claims of BP, Chevron, ExxonMobil and Shell: A mismatch between discourse, actions and investments. *PLOS ONE*, *17*(2), e0263596. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0263596

Lin, Y. (2024). Blame and responsibility assignments in fast fashion-triggered environmental injustice: A case study of eco-documentaries. *Environmental Communication*, 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2024.2309251

López, A. (2023). Gaslighting: Fake climate news and big carbon's network of denial. In K. Fowler-Watt & J. McDougall (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of media misinformation* (pp. 159–177). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-11976-7_11

Lowes, R., Woodman, B., & Speirs, J. (2020). Heating in Great Britain: An incumbent discourse coalition resists an electrifying future. *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions*, *37*, 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eist.2020.07.007

MacLean, N. (2020). Since we are greatly outnumbered": Why and how the koch network uses disinformation to Thwart Democracy. In W. L. Bennett & S. Livingston (Eds.), *The Disinformation Age* (1st, pp. 120–150). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108914628.005

Markard, J., Rinscheid, A., & Widdel, L. (2021). Analyzing transitions through the lens of discourse networks: Coal phase-out in Germany. *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions*, *40*, 315–331. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eist.2021.08.001

Markowitz, G., & Rosner, D. (2003). *Deceit and denial: The deadly politics of industrial pollution*. University of California Press.

McKie, R. E. (2021). Obstruction, delay, and transnationalism: Examining the online climate change counter-movement. *Energy Research & Social Science*, *80*, 102217. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2021.102217

McKie, R. E. (2023). Canada and Petro-Nationalism. In R. E. McKie, *The Climate Change Counter Movement* (pp. 115–137). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-33592-1_5

Meier, F., & Fugl Eskjær, M. (2023). Topic Modelling Three Decades of Climate Change News in Denmark. *SSRN*. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4513921

Meyer, H., Peach, A. K., Guenther, L., Kedar, H. E., & Brüggemann, M. (2023). Between calls for action and narratives of Denial: Climate change attention structures on twitter. *Media and Communication*, *11*(1), 278–292. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v11i1.6111

Moreno, J. A., Kinn, M., & Naberhaus, M. (2022). A stronghold of climate change denialism in Germany: Case study of the output and press representation of the Think Tank EIKE. *International Journal of Communication*, *16*(2022), 267–288, https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12361

Nemes, N., Scanlan, S. J., Smith, P., Smith, T., Aronczyk, M., Hill, S., … Stabinsky, D. (2022). An integrated framework to assess greenwashing. *Sustainability*, *14*(8), 4431. https://doi.org/10.3390/su14084431

Neubauer, R., Graham, N., & Krobath, H. (2023). Defending "Canadian Energy": Connective Leadership and Extractive Populism on Canadian Facebook. *Environmental Communication*, *17*(6), 634–652. https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2023.2235919

Nielsen, S. B. (2023). Orchestration of perspectives in televised climate change debates. *Discourse & Society*, *34*(2), 175–191. https://doi.org/10.1177/09579265221117015

Ohlendorf, N., Löhr, M., & Markard, J. (2023). Actors in multi-sector transitions—Discourse analysis on hydrogen in Germany. *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions*, *47*, 100692. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eist.2023.100692

Oreskes, N., & Conway, E. M. (2011). *Merchants of doubt: How a handful of scientists obscured the truth on issues from tobacco smoke to global warming*. Bloomsbury Press.

Painter, J., Ettinger, J., Holmes, D., Loy, L., Pinto, J., Richardson, L., … Wetts, R. (2023). Climate delay discourses present in global mainstream television coverage of the IPCC's 2021 report. *Communications Earth & Environment*, *4*(1), 118. https://doi.org/10.1038/s43247-023-00760-2

Pflieger, G., & De Pryck, K. (2023). Contextualizing discourses of climate delay: A response to Lamb et al. (2020). *Global Sustainability*, *6*, e20. https://doi.org/10.1017/sus.2023.18

Plehwe, D. (2021). Think tanks and the politics of climate change. In D. E. Abelson & C. J. Rastrick (Eds.), *Handbook on Think Tanks in Public Policy* (pp. 150–165). Edward Elgar Publishing. https://doi.org/10.4337/9781789901849.00022

Plehwe, D., Goldenbaum, M., Ramanujam, A., McKie, R., Moreno, J., Ekberg, K., … Hrubes, M. (2021). *The Mises Network and Climate Policy* (Policy Briefing No. 2021:2). The Climate Social Science Network. Retrieved from The Climate Social Science Network website: https://cssn.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/CSSN-Mises-Research-Report.pdf

Pringle, A., & Robbins, D. (2022). From denial to delay: Climate change discourses in Ireland. *Administration*, *70*(3), 59–84. https://doi.org/10.2478/admin-2022-0019

Ramaswami, A., Brunnermeier, M. K., Jenkins, J. D., Lane, M., Oppenheimer, M., Pacala, S. W., … Ewalt, K. (2022). *Metrics, Principles, and Standards for Dissociation from Fossil Fuels at Princeton University*. Princeton University's Faculty Panel on Fossil Fuel Dissociation. Retrieved from Princeton University's Faculty Panel on Fossil Fuel Dissociation website: https://fossilfueldissociation.princeton.edu/sites/g/files/toruqf2696/files/documents/Princeton_Faculty%20Panel%20Report%20on%20Dissociation%20from%20Fossil%20Fuels_Final_May%2031%202022[3][97].pdf.

Samoilenko, S. A., & Cook, J. (2024). Developing an *Ad Hominem* typology for classifying climate misinformation. *Climate Policy 24*(1), 138–151. https://doi.org/10.1080/14693062.2023.2245792

Sassan, C., Mahat, P., Aronczyk, M., & Brulle, R. J. (2023). *Energy Citizens* "Just Like You"? Public Relations Campaigning by the Climate Change Countermovement. *Environmental Communication*, *17*(7), 794–810. https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2023.2255388

Schmid, P., & Betsch, C. (2019). Effective strategies for rebutting science denialism in public discussions. *Nature Human Behaviour*, *3*(9), 931–939. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-019-0632-4

Schwoerer, J., & Fernandez-Garcia, B. (2024). Climate sceptics or climate nationalists? Understanding and explaining populist radical right parties' positions towards climate change (1990–2022). *Political Studies*, *72*(3), 1178–1202. https://doi.org/10.1177/00323217231176475

Selk, V., & Kemmerzell, J. (2022). Retrogradism in context. Varieties of right-wing populist climate politics. *Environmental Politics*, *31*(5), 755–776. https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2021.1999150

Sheehan, K. (2018). This Ain't Your Daddy's Greenwashing: An Assessment of the American Petroleum Institute's Power Past Impossible Campaign.

In M. Rimmer (Ed.), *Intellectual Property and Clean Energy* (pp. 301–321). Springer Nature. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-2155-9

Si, Y., Desai, D., Bozhilova, D., Puffer, S., & Stephens, J. C. (2023). Fossil fuel companies' climate communication strategies: Industry messaging on renewables and natural gas. *Energy Research & Social Science*, *98*, 103028. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2023.103028

Spampatti, T., Brosch, T., Mumenthaler, C., & Hahnel, U. J. J. (2023). *Blueprint of a smokescreen: Introducing the validated Climate Disinformation Corpus for behavioral research on combating climate disinformation*. Preprint. PsyArXiv. https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/v7895

Supran, G., & Oreskes, N. (2017). Assessing ExxonMobil' s climate change communications (1977-2014). *Environmental Research Letters*, *12*(084019). https://doi.org/10.1088/1748-9326/aa815f

Supran, G., & Oreskes, N. (2021). Rhetoric and frame analysis of ExxonMobil's climate change communications. *One Earth*, *4*(5), 696–719. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.oneear.2021.04.014

Sylla, A., Glawe, F., Braun, D., Padev, M., Schäfer, S., Ahmetaj, A., … Calero Valdez, A. (2022). Discourses of climate delay in american reddit discussions. In F. Spezzano, A. Amaral, D. Ceolin, L. Fazio & E. Serra (Eds.), *Disinformation in open online media* (pp. 123–137). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-18253-2_9

Tilsted, J. P., Mah, A., Nielsen, T. D., Finkill, G., & Bauer, F. (2022). Petrochemical transition narratives: Selling fossil fuel solutions in a decarbonizing world. *Energy Research & Social Science*, *94*, 102880. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2022.102880

Trimmel, K. E., Kriechbaum, M., Lazou, R., & Brudermann, T. (2024). Between distributive and procedural justice claims: Reframing patterns of discursive resistance against climate action. *Energy Research & Social Science*, *109*, 103424. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2024.103424

Ulucanlar, S., Lauber, K., Fabbri, A., Hawkins, B., Mialon, M., Hancock, L., … Gilmore, A. B. (2023). Corporate political activity: Taxonomies and model of corporate influence on public policy. *International Journal of Health Policy and Management*, *12*, 7292. https://doi.org/10.34172/ijhpm.2023.7292

Van Ryneveld, T. N., & Islar, M. (2023). Coloniality as a Barrier to Climate Action: Hierarchies of Power in a Coal-Based Economy. *Antipode*, *55*(3), 958–981. https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12907

Vowles, K., & Hultman, M. (2021). Dead White men vs. Greta Thunberg: Nationalism, Misogyny, and Climate Change Denial in Swedish far-right Digital Media. *Australian Feminist Studies*, *36*(110), 414–431. https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2022.2062669

Vraga, E., & van der Linden, S. (2020). Responding to climate science denial. In D. C. Holmes & L. M. Richardson (Eds.), *Research handbook on communicating climate change* (pp. 79–91). Edward Elgar Publishing.

Walker, P. (2021, October 29). Cop26: Humanity 5-1 down at half-time on climate crisis, says Johnson. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/oct/29/cop26-humanity-5-1-halftime-climate-crisis-boris-johnson.

Williams, E. L., Bartone, S. A., Swanson, E. K., & Stokes, L. C. (2022). The American electric utility industry's role in promoting climate denial, doubt, and delay. *Environmental Research Letters*, *17*(9), 094026. https://doi.org/10.1088/1748-9326/ac8ab3

https://doi.org/10.1017/sus.2025.10031 Published online by Cambridge University Press