CAAD DATA MONITOR

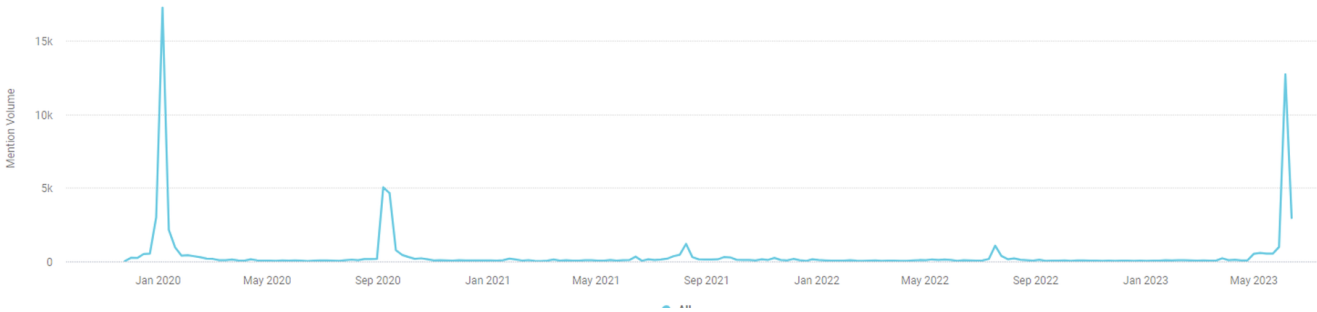## Wildfire Misinformation: Arson Claims Set the Climate Debate Ablaze

Hello! You are receiving the CAAD Data Monitor having previously subscribed to outputs from our coalition, including the COP Intelligence Unit. If you do not wish to receive these emails, kindly respond with 'unsubscribe'. New subscribers can sign up here, and any investigative leads or feedback for future editions can be sent to the 'CAAD Tipline' at contact@caad.info.

Whenever wildfires burn, the smoke clouds of misinformation rise. Some examples are hard to forget, like US Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene's 2018 claims involving space lasers and the Rothschilds. But the problem goes beyond such outlandish conspiracies. In recent weeks, a former Canadian foreign minister suggested the fires were a publicity stunt by "green terrorists," while the Premier of the Province of Alberta focused her crisis response on arson investigations while drawing criticism for avoiding questions on the impacts of climate change.

The Long Tail of Wildfire Misinformation

Original posts on Twitter containing keywords related to wildfires, bushfires or forest fires in conjunction with arson or eco-terrorism between 1 December 2019 and 18 June 2023

Social media is central to the spread of mis or disinformation which can include fake arson claims during wildfire events. Having reviewed historic data across platforms, three main episodes stood out:

- **Australian bushfires (December 2019-January 2020);**
- **Wildfires on the US West Coast (August-September 2020); and**
- **Recent Canadian wildfires (May-June 2023).**

To gain deeper insight into these incidents we used **topic modelling** - a computational technique to detect patterns of speech in large datasets - and included **data across four social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Reddit)**. Findings below cover a 'top layer' of analysis that reflects broad trends but cannot serve to quantify scale. Our analysis highlights which patterns of speech, referred to as 'topics,' the model identified across all three of these events, and which seem to be specific to one case. For those interested, a fuller explanation of the methodology is available here.

Lines of Attacks

1) "It's arsonists, not climate change"

Donald Trump Jr. ✔
@DonaldJTrumpJr

Truly Disgusting that people would do this! God Bless Australia. More than 180 alleged arsonists have been arrested since the start of the bushfire season, with 29 blazes deliberately lit in the Shoalhaven region of southeast NSW in just three months.

theaustralian.com.au
Arson toll soars
NOTE: The Press Council has decided that this article did not breach its Standards of Practice. Read the full adjudication here.

3:12 PM · Jan 7, 2020

7,473 Retweets   **1,241** Quotes   **22.2K** Likes   **82** Bookmarks

Breitbart ✔
7 January 2020 · 🌐

Australian law enforcement has arrested over 180 people for arson in connection with the nation's raging bushfires, as alarmists try to pin the blazes on "climate change."

BREITBART.COM
Report: Arson, Not Climate Change, Behind Australia's Bush Fires

👍😢😮 10K   3.3K 💬   24K ↗

While human activity can play a significant role in starting wildfires, a singular focus on arson as the sole cause is misleading and obscures the role of, for example, carelessness or lightning strikes. More importantly, it obscures the fact that dry and hot conditions, which are becoming more likely with climate change, are a key factor in whether human action or weather events lead to major wildfires. For an overview of the core science, we recommend this explainer from The Narwhal.

Within posts related to arson, the most prominent 'topics' contained broad claims that **climate change cannot cause forest fires**. Our model identified more specific 'topics' blaming politicians and officials, as well as the mainstream media, for allegedly **failing to acknowledge the "real" extent of arson**. Crucially, reports of arrests or charges brought in relation to the fires were cited across all three events (Australia, US, Canada) and used to dismiss any environmental factors.

While isolated incidents of arson did occur in all episodes, they were falsely taken as evidence (or conclusive proof) for the 'true' issue at hand: i.e. human sabotage, not climate change. There were also high traction posts that used clearly misleading numbers to inflate the role of arson, including a tweet by Donald Trump Jr. A fact-check from the Australian Associated Press highlighted that this number conflates arson (deliberately set fires) with other offences (like carelessly discarded cigarettes).

Mark Levin ✔
13 September 2020 · 🌐

I don't think arson is climate change

THEBLAZE.COM | BY THEBLAZE
Authorities arrest 4 people on arson charges in deadly and massive California, Oregon, and Washington wildfires
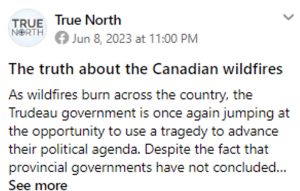
👍😢 9.7K   1.1K comments 4.5K shares

2) "It's politics not climate change"

Wildfires are once again raging throughout North/West USA thanks to Antifa/BLM arsonists, while dirty democrats blame "climate change" then demanding federal funds & blaming Trump administration.

2:51 AM · Sep 12, 2020

383 Retweets 14 Quotes 635 Likes 3 Bookmarks

TRUE NORTH True North
               Jun 8, 2023 at 11:00 PM

The truth about the Canadian wildfires
As wildfires burn across the country, the Trudeau government is once again jumping at the opportunity to use a tragedy to advance their political agenda. Despite the fact that provincial governments have not concluded...
See more

ARSON?

326.9K POST VIEWS   471.5K TOTAL VIEWS
       ◑ 20.6K   ○ 5.2K   ◉ 18.2K

A second group of posts blame arsonists for the wildfires but goes further in **ascribing explicit political motives** which differ by event. In Australia (2019) we only identified one 'topic' that overtly linked "greens" or "greenies" to the wildfires, with a few posts referring to **eco-terrorism**, but these arguments had spiralled in popularity by the US (2020) and Canadian (2023) cases.

Posts around the US **blamed the Black Lives Matter movement and Antifa activists**, reflecting localised culture wars, while for Canada we found **allegations linking eco-terrorist activity to Prime Minister Trudeau** and Environmental Minister Guilbeault.

3) "It's incompetence, not climate change"

Forest management was also a theme identified across all three wildfire episodes, and another effort to dismiss the effect of climate change on wildfires. The targets of content were generally environmentalists and politicians, who were blamed for preventing crucial forest management measures and, in turn, increasing the alleged impact of arson.

The Evolution of Wildfire Misinformation

Phase 1: Australia (2019-2020)

- For Australia, we found a disproportionately higher number of posts focused on **clarifications by law enforcement, debunks of false arson claims and coverage about misinformation itself**. While these topics were present in the other two incidents (US, Canada), they became substantially less visible.
- Among the 'topics' referencing mis-/disinformation in 2019 there were more specific ones focused on allegations against outlets in Murdoch's News Corp empire for spreading false and misleading claims. This may have brought the issue of mis-/disinformation to the fore of public discourse, explaining the disproportionate attention to this issue in the Australian episode.

Phase 2: The US (2020)

- Around the US wildfires, **calls to punish arsonists** emerged as a more distinct theme, although during all three wildfire episodes we identified 'topics' specifically **discussing the death penalty for arsonists**. The US case stood out, however, for content that called for arsonists to be shot on sight. The prominence of such topics is difficult to quantify but highlights the **potential for arson claims to mobilise vigilantism and wider violence**.

Phase 3: Canada (2023)

- The latest wildfires mark a shift online, with **conspiracy theories** rising to the surface as a more explicit lens employed to frame the cause of such events. While such content had circulated during previous events, discourse is now more overtly anchored in theories citing the World Economic Forum (WEF), the Great Reset and 15-Minute Cities.

- Our team saw examples of content across platforms which implied that **wildfires are set intentionally, with the aim to scare people into supporting climate action**. This overlaps with the 'political motive' claims discussed above, but is explicitly linked to climate change being a hoax and/or a pretext for 'elites' to exert control.
- Posts falsely allege that wildfires were set to **depopulate rural areas** and **force relocation into tightly surveilled cities -** as covered in the last edition of Data Monitor, these urban spaces are often depicted as 'open-air prisons' subject to Big State tyranny.
- Wildfires in Australia and the US mostly predated the emergence of 'lockdown' conspiracy theories during COVID-19, which are now rife across social as well as traditional print and broadcast media. The discourse surrounding Canada shows how such thinking has been normalised and can impact a variety of policy areas / issue sets, from urban planning to extreme weather response.

Note: In datasets around the US and Canada, arson claims from prior wildfires were commonly referenced. This took two forms: some content pointed to alleged incidents (e.g. in Australia) to imply a consistent, transnational trend and discredit climate science; other content cited previous mis- and disinformation in an effort to debunk recurring claims. This suggests that **false and misleading arguments around wildfires are 'sticky'** - they continue to shape discussions online - even when extensive reporting, fact-checks and public statements exist to counter them.

How to fight back

Exaggerated claims about arson are likely to reappear in the future - communicators should already 'pre-bunk' misinformation with persistent facts and explainers for the general public. Try to use accessible language and focus less on the scientific nuance than key messages (i.e. *climate change produces/worsens x impact, which leads to y outcome*) - simple, repeatable stats and headlines.

It is crucial to invest in public education *before* crises hit, as sharing information about climate change during extreme hot weather can be less effective. Do not be afraid to acknowledge arson's contribution to wildfires, where relevant and backed up by data - it's not zero, but numbers are prone to manipulation, e.g. by conflating arson with accidents or carelessness.

When you encounter bad faith attacks, a human-centred response may work better than merely debunking. For example, pointing out how misinformation endangers citizens and service workers (including frontline responders) could resonate more than a direct rebuttal explaining the science. Much like conspiracy theories, accusations of arson offer an intuitive 'explanation' for crises that feel serious and beyond people's control. It is perhaps more comfortable to imagine there are clear perpetrators than accept the larger factors at play. Be sensitive to those fears and, where possible, proactive in suggesting how people can prepare for, mitigate and/or educate others about wildfire events.

Link to tables showing the five most widely shared posts captured by the keywords on Twitter for each of the three events can be <u>accessed here</u>.

Subscribe here