



GREEN TALK:
NEW LEADERSHIP,
OLD FEUDS AND
EMERGING ISSUES
IN THE COP26 ONLINE
CONVERSATION



2022



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Executive Summary

In the autumn of 2021, Counterpoint and E3G engaged in a social media listening exercise to understand popular engagement with climate issues in the period before and during the COP26 climate summit. Geographically this focused across 7 European countries, the UK and the US. The project was particularly interested in understanding the nature of the anti-climate conversation and dissent around COP26 – with a focus on the role of traditional denial, delay and dissent type actors, and with a view to observing the various ways in which climate sceptic groups might undermine the legitimacy and the outcomes of the COP process.

COP26 online characteristics

We noted a number of characteristics of this particular COP. First, that in the run-up to COP26 and despite a summer of extreme weather events, there was little reference to COP26 in online conversations, even though there were plenty of references to climate change. But climate change and COP did not seem connected in the general public conversation.

Second, in comparison to the previous years, we noted that the COP26 online conversation was more open and diverse. One key finding was that there were many more elected officials participating in the conversation. But we also noted a far greater negativity of tone and expressions. Particularly a growing lack of trust in COP as a platform for meaningful engagement. So, one finding is that a more open COP conversation is also a more political COP conversation, but that also translates into a less trusting, more negative and more polarised conversation.

Groups and actor behaviour

We embarked on the project with an eye for anti-climate policy action and dissent coming from climate sceptics, but we were forced to note that most of the mistrust toward COP and most accusations of corruption, elitism and disconnection came from pro-climate civil society and activists. Their actions and campaigns suggest that they treated COP26 as a space to take on and challenge the official climate narrative and its proponents – and refocus it on one key theme: climate justice. The conversation online – with its relentless shaming or deriding of official announcements in particular around climate finance, damage and loss, and more generally the failure of wealthy countries to address the needs of the climate transition for poorer and more climate vulnerable countries – allowed for the emergence of a well-organised and diverse group of young activists ready to challenge official COP.

COP26 as a turning point?

Some of the key take-aways from this study are about the role that COP26 played in laying the groundwork for the next phase of mobilisation.

Our analysis shows that activists have begun establishing “climate justice” as their key mobilisational frame going forward, and there is evidence that political leaders and other elites have been responsive. In the run-up to COP27, activists from across the globe are unlikely to let go of this theme.

This COP also seems to have ushered in a greater polarisation of the rhetoric and of the conversation around relevant issues. This polarisation raises the profile of the conversation, but also, unhelpfully, contributes to undermining the legitimacy of the COP process. Attention needs to be paid to this for COP27, which stands to be even more polarised.

Climate sceptics and climate deniers/detractors/delayers were not as active as we expected around and at COP26, but the activity we did note suggests that they have laid the groundwork to mobilise effectively outside of COP to co-opt citizens and voters through tried and tested populist themes (referendums on Net Zero, border issues, cost of living) and accusations of hypocrisy, disconnection and hysteria. The online conversation suggests that their memes, expressions and accusations are percolating through to mainstream parties and voters (and even through to activists).

Introduction

The aim of this project was to learn from the online climate conversation in the lead up, during and immediately after COP26 by engaging with various online and traditional media sources. E3G and Counterpoint were prompted to engage in this exercise for several reasons: first because the annual international climate summit or COP (“conference of the parties” under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change) is a major focal point for global attention on climate action and cooperation, and COP26 in Glasgow would be a significant marker to bring parties together to accelerate action towards the goals of the Paris Agreement through the 2020s. We also knew that the release of the IPCC’s assessment on the state of climate science (AR6) in July 2021, would add to the sense of urgency and the particular relevance of this COP.

Second, because in recent years, and through the pandemic, the online space and in particular social media has continued to increase in relevance as influential channels for dissent and disinformation. While these online conversations build on a long history of climate denial, delay and disinformation. The possibilities for amplifying and changing the actions of offline activism was clear. With instances of popular opposition to measures (eg the Gilets Jaunes in France) serving as prime examples. Even as COP26 and its potential for dissent (and for the undermining of a fragile public consensus around climate policy) loomed large, policy makers and civil society were unprepared and lacked systematic understanding of the risks in the online space.

This pilot study was therefore designed, in part, to demonstrate the value of adding new tools to our more traditional and interpretative political analysis: namely doing some of the listening we usually carry out in conversation groups, in the online space. This we felt would help us capture nascent or established dynamics that can affect the ideological and political landscape within which policymakers are operating. It would also help us gauge more immediate outcomes – or perception of outcomes – of events such as COP26. Would new groups or new group dynamics appear? Would new or distinct themes surface to frame the conversation (both for the “good guys” and the “bad guys”)? And, if so, what kind of opportunities might they create, for a range of actors? Would weak signals be detected and evidenced to enable proactive action?

Below is a more detailed description of the scope of the project and hypotheses that framed our inquiry.

A. Project scope

Our project was driven by a set of overarching key hypotheses:

- That COP26 is framed as an elitist project by climate critics.
- That climate policy-makers are accused or suspected of taking little or no notice of the toll their policies can take on ordinary people – whereas these policies alienate and restrict the freedoms of the poor, and excludes those who would bear its burden.
- That COP participants lack in legitimacy and capacity to deliver on their targets. One of our key questions was around trust in those involved in COP – would we find evidence of that lack of trust? Evidence of despair in the face of greenwashing or delay tactics?
- That dissent between different types of climate supporters ('Green on Green' action) might have the potential to undermine both the legitimacy, but also the success of COP.

These hypotheses all entailed looking out for potential dissent and negativity on the part of groups and parties who are dissatisfied with current action and policy and thus looking for confrontation. So one of the defining aspects of this research is that we were, in some ways, tracking negativity (1), in a space (social media) that is, in any case, rife with negativity, on a topic (climate politics) that is polarising, at an event (COP26) designed to address an emergency, through an initial gateway (Twitter) that is highly politicised (we looked at plenty of other sources too, more on that below). We were therefore understandably keen to make sure that our focus did not turn into a blind spot. As such, we made sure to track positive expressions in the run up and during COP26 and did check for positive conversations; these were thin and mainly

official congratulatory announcements.

Our research delivered interesting results. As we recount in the next few sections, our overarching hypothesis that listening to online conversations would reveal some alternative and deep dynamics of climate debate was verified. Key findings were:

- That the COP26 online space evolved into a space increasingly devoted to challenging the 'Real Life' COP26;
- That the COP26 online space was mostly critical (angry, impatient, accusatory, frustrated);
- That, strikingly, negativity emanated at least as much from activists – and more broadly the pro climate camp – as it did from the deniers, detractors and delayers. Thereby verifying one part of one of our key hypotheses about the potential for fragmentation of the pro-climate camps.
- This 'Green on Green' action was not characterised by internecine conflict. Rather increasing fault lines and fractures are emerging in the pro-climate camp in terms of who is to be held accountable, how should the effort be framed, and which tactics and platforms are most suited for progress.

This is a very particular and focused analysis: one specific event, and online—and intended as a pilot study. So the insights from the exercise can only be limited. However, our findings give us crucial insights as to the role of social media in shaping the evolving field of climate mobilisation and climate narratives. Perhaps most importantly they give us leads as to the narrative that is going to shape the road to COP27, and what we might expect to see next November in Sharm El Sheikh.

(1) <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2016/10/26/13413292/social-media-disrupting-politics>

B. Methodology

Overview

This project brought together a diverse team of engineers, data scientists, policy experts, researchers and analysts. The primary source for original analysis came from gathering and analysing the data from online communications platforms. Secondary sources included the existing knowledge base of the team, traditional media outlets, and other specialised reporting outlets.

This is a significant simplification of the complexity and technological detail underpinning the methodology. Therefore, a full detailed overview of technical methods and processes can be found in the Annex of this publication. What follows are some head-line elements of methodology to inform the reader.

Geographical focus

The choice of geographical focus was determined based on the interests of the project partners and the technological and team capacity for language processing. The key geographies were:

But the very nature of COP26, in combination with the borderlessness of social media means that however much we tried, the geographical boundaries of the conversation needed to be elastic.

- U.S.
- U.K.
- France
- Germany
- Italy
- Poland
- Denmark
- Sweden
- Spain

Timeline

STEP	TIMELINE	FOCUS
1	June 2021	Project Conception & Initiation
2	July - Aug. 2021	Development of Methodology & Technical Instrumentation
3	Sep. 2021	Trial Implementation of 'Listening Room'
4	Oct. - Nov. 2021	Active Engagement in COP26 Dialogue
5	Nov. 2021 - Mar. 2022	Analysis, Reflection & Reporting

Data sources

For primary collection, online social media platforms were the most important source. Twitter, given its open API and accessibility provided the highest volume of data with the most ability to interrogate it. Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Wikipedia were among other important data sources.

While these platforms were dominant, a wide range of other data sources were utilised at various times. For a much more detailed description of data sources and their usage, please see the Annex of this publication.

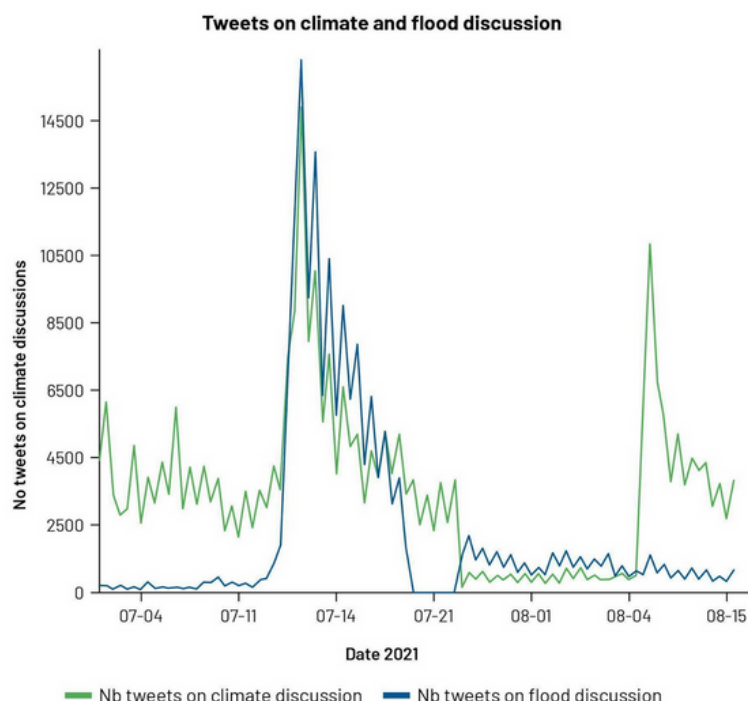
I. The shape of COP26 online

A. A slow start to the COP26 online conversation

The project was initially characterised by relative silence despite the gravity of the issues at stake, and the sense of emergency. The summer of 2021 had come replete with extreme weather events, floods in Germany, fires across Europe and the United States and the IPCC's starkest warning yet, but the conversation was muted, and in the US it was deeply partisan.

Highlight: Summer 2021 – German floods and US wildfires

In order to gather reactions in two different continents and to test the relationship between COP26 and extreme weather events, we compared the German floods and the US wildfires and what connection – if any – respective national publics made between these events and a) climate change; and b) COP26. In Europe, extreme weather events were closely associated to climate change and to some extent to the IPCC report, but not to COP26.



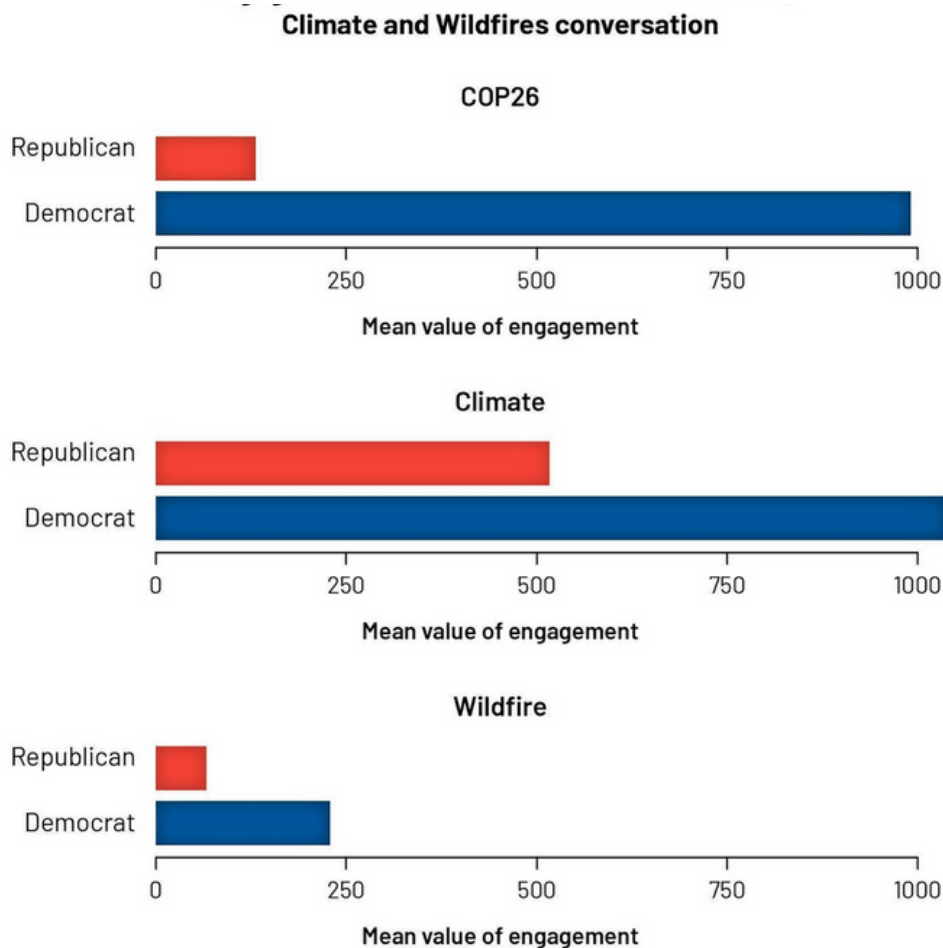
The IPCC report saw some engagement around its 'code red warning' with a few hundred tweets in relation to the German floods. And after the floods the report was used in Germany as additional reliable evidence that climate action needs to happen now.

Despite the relevance of the IPCC in this context, COP26 was hardly mentioned in the discussions on the German floods and did not managed to serve as a call for action. We see only a few dozen tweets and no engagement.

In the US, the connection between extreme weather events and climate change was not often made. Wildfires and extreme weather events in the US led to little political engagement and only Democrats associated them to climate change - while Republican politicians tended to talk about wildfires as a forest management issue.

This no doubt reflects the deep partisanship on climate and the degree of political polarisation in the US. In addition to the lack of mention of COP26, it is particularly concerning that the causal relationship between climate change and wildfires was not stronger in the US.

The chart below captures engagement on these issues according to the party affiliation of officials. First, it highlights the polarisation between Democrats and Republicans on the issue of climate and related issues (such as COP26, but also extreme weather). Second, it also starkly illustrates the decoupling between extreme weather and climate/COP26.



As late as October 2021, in the few weeks leading to COP26 in Glasgow, social media was rife with climate talk, but mentions of COP26, climate's biggest international event, were much scarcer in comparison. While it is true that year on year online discussion of the COP process, on platforms such as Twitter, increased—this aggregate growth was to be expected from the ever-expanding volume of total online discourse and doesn't tell us much.

That, in effect, was our first finding: across Europe and the United States social media was host to debates, discussions, conspiracies, warnings about climate, but COP26 seemed to be but a ghost in this conversation.

This lack of early online engagement around COP26 could be rooted in the fact that social media conversations often tend to reflect national or even local concerns (even when they are conducted in English), and that COP was not promoted much in national media conversations in its run-up.

Previous social media monitoring of the European Green Deal conversation also suggests that citizens do not give much consideration to these official events and seldom consider them as directly relevant in the path to net-zero. For those committed to climate policy, these actors are often perceived as an overly cautious 'establishment', lacking in ambition (because too tied to political and special interests); And for those who are more sceptical, their actions are perceived as high-handed and ill-informed about the needs of ordinary people.

The fact that, as shown in previous research (2), there is often a lack of dialogue between multilateral actors and everyone else – think tanks, civil society, national and local level politicians. This doesn't help create a connection between such negotiations and most publics. Given the multiple and often opaque layers of process, media and institutions that mediate access to multilateral discussions, it is perhaps not surprising that their connection to local climate concerns is still tenuous—but that does not mean that it is not problematic.

Our study also suggests that when publics do take notice of the COP multilateral process, the conversation online (including from ordinary members of the public who are neither activists nor professional critics) is quite critical of the COP process. Taken together, all of this tends to suggest that the conversation surrounding COP26 is not woven into the general climate conversation. Yet, as we discuss further on, some of the conversations that occurred during COP26, seem to have had a significant impact on the way in which the climate (and COP conversations) might be framed going forward.

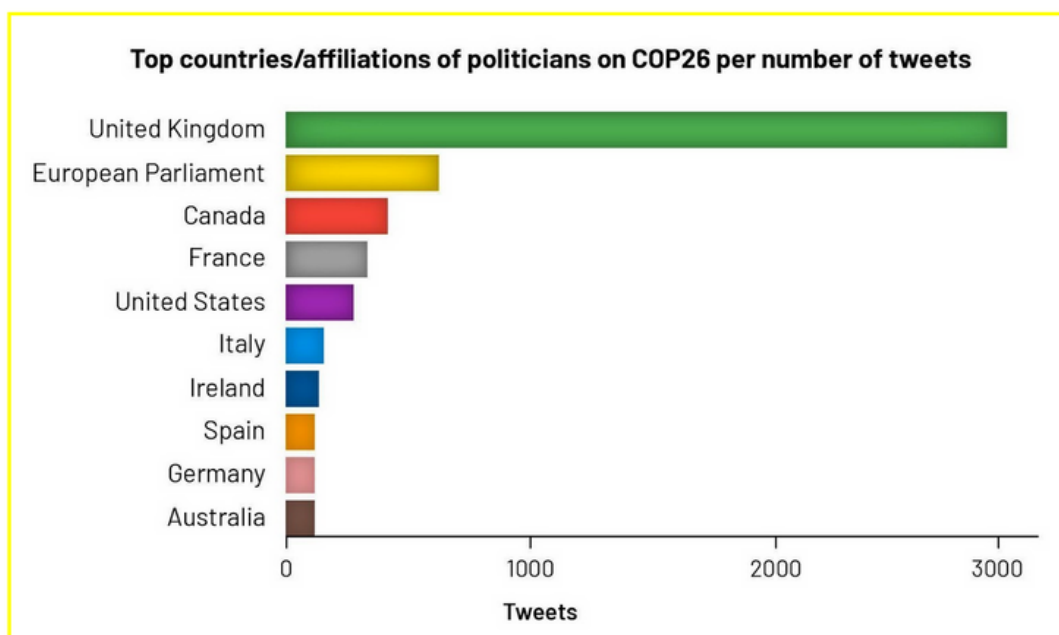
(2) https://counterpoint.uk.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Green_Wedge_Counterpoint_OSEPI.pdf

B. Low online engagement in COP26 from national representatives

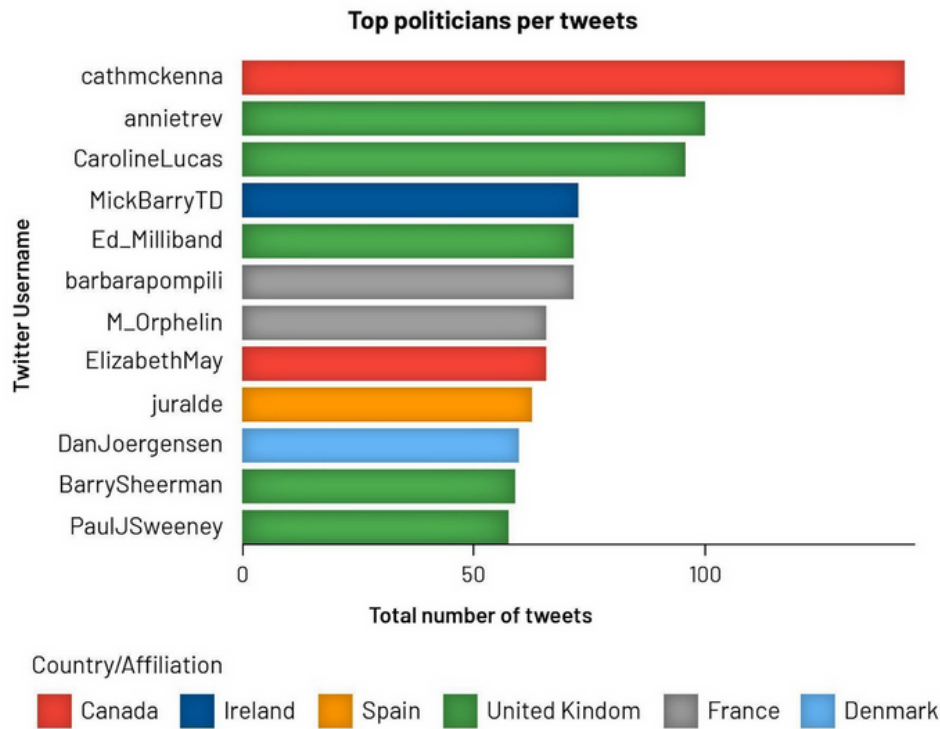
It is worth noting that nationally elected representatives did not engage much with the COP26 online media space outside of official announcements during the event (the UK is a bit of an exception for obvious reasons). And, after COP ended, their reactions, with some national variations, remained muted in all our case-study countries.

Unsurprisingly, UK political representatives were more active: they were engaged as

COP26 hosts but were also dragged into the conversation as the public called them out on government hypocrisy in environmental matters, as well as on the fall-out around the various crises plaguing Boris Johnson's government at the time. An interesting exception to this lack of online engagement is European Parliament members – who were highly engaged in the social media conversation during the event, which added to the European national political elites, makes Europe by far the most engaged area.



The volume of online engagement by respective national political representations was marked by the disproportionate engagement of the UK as host country. While this was somewhat expected, the contrast with other national entities with a commitment to pro-climate policies is notable.



The most surprising element around levels of engagement remains the relatively low profile of the Biden administration on COP26 matters.

This is particularly striking given that COP26 coincided with Biden’s drive to highlight the US’s renewed commitment to multilateralism and its institutions. Biden’s opening speech was designed to demonstrate that the ‘US was back’, both at the heart of the climate conversation and at the heart of multilateral negotiations (bearing in mind the fact that COP26 was an extension of Biden’s trip to Rome for the G20). At the same time, Biden’s COP speech was designed for domestic audiences – with a commitment to B3W (Build Back Better) rather than Net Zero. Biden’s high-wire act between, on the one hand, his international commitments (a main axis of which is solidifying a democratic axis against China, whilst attempting to bring China into the tent on climate); and on the other, his lack of domestic room for manoeuvre given his extremely thin Democratic majority in Congress), is in part the explanation for what amounted to low-key engagement online from the Biden administration.

This lack of engagement online around COP26 from national level politicians, highlights at the very minimum, that multilateral negotiations are disconnected from the everyday concerns of most elected politicians. COP26 did not figure prominently in national politics. We can see this from tracing the reactions to specific crises such as the American Wildfires and German Floods from the summer of 2021.

These critical climate events generated significant climate related discussions in online discourse, particularly in Europe (and much less so in the US). However these bursts of online discussion did not regularly or meaningfully link back to COP as a relevant platform for addressing them or their broader implications. Where we tracked more general climate oriented conversations in the geographies we observed, there was almost no connection to COP or UN led climate initiatives. This suggests that (at least until now) COP processes had failed to connect to national level concerns, and failed to make the link between the everyday lives and concerns of national audiences (including on climate matters) and the importance of multilateral

negotiations (including the Paris Agreement). Though multilateral frameworks tend to be naturally removed from everyday concerns, this disconnection from citizens' everyday concerns is a failure of narrative and framing from national representatives.

This is particularly striking in the aftermath of a 2021 summer dominated by extreme weather events across the globe. Yet the connection between COP26-ONLINE and these events seems to be tenuous at best in the public imagination as exemplified by the online conversation.

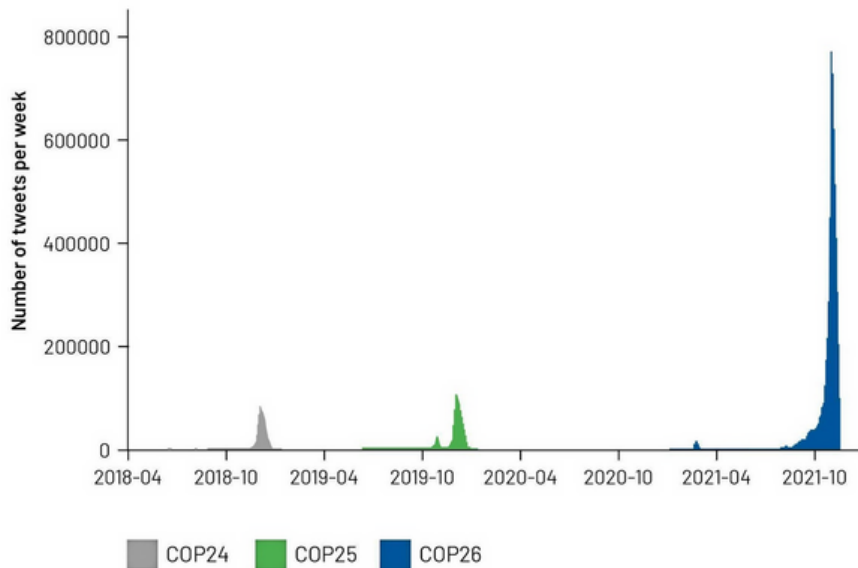
C. Interesting teasers in the Pre-COP online conversation

Despite very little online take up of COP26 in the run up to the event, there are three things worth mentioning -

First, COP26 got a lot more online engagement than previous COPs using expressions on Twitter a clear trend emerges:

KEY ONLINE ENGAGEMENT ACROSS RECENT COPS			
Engagement	COP24	COP25	COP26
Tracked Tweets	228,683	358,362	2,228,135
Tracked Press Links	15,504	22,737	157,394

These data can be seen clearly in the visualisation of Twitter engagement as it expanded over the last 3 years of collected data.



D. Interesting teasers in the Pre-COP online conversation

G20 sets the stage

Second, was the G20 which provided both the context and a preview of prevailing narratives to come. Criticisms of elites not engaging with the 'real issues' emerged in the online discussion and remained as COP26 began.

G20 Provides a Teaser of Online Engagement for COP26

The G20, held in Rome immediately prior to COP26 (30–31 October 2021), seemed to both serve as a COP26 rehearsal as well as a teaser event in terms of the main dissent narratives that would emerge at COP26.

At least 37% of all tweets on G20 are about climate issues. By the end of the G20, as coverage bled over into the start of COP26, climate dominated the online discussion of G20 with over 50% of all G20 related tweets in English on November 1st. This engagement online was largely led by activists critical of how the G20 is handling climate crisis. There was no significant representation from traditional deniers / delayers.

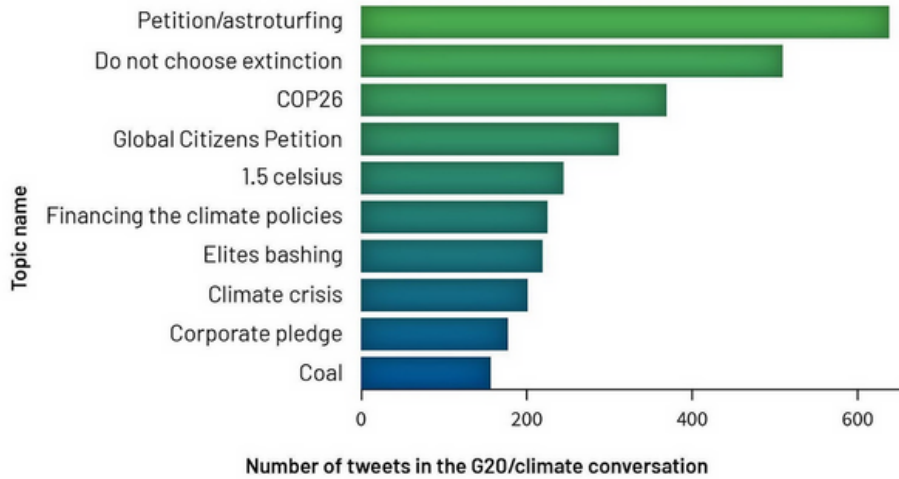


Figure 1.1 Topics of G20 Climate Engagement

As teasers to the topics that would come to be influential in the online dialogue for COP26, some trends emerged over the course of G20. These topics would remain relevant in the COP26 online dialogue as outlined further below this paper.

It was clear that “Elitism” was fueling activists mistrust, “Greenwashing” is considered another form of denialism, and disagreements exist among activists on how best to frame their efforts for climate progress.

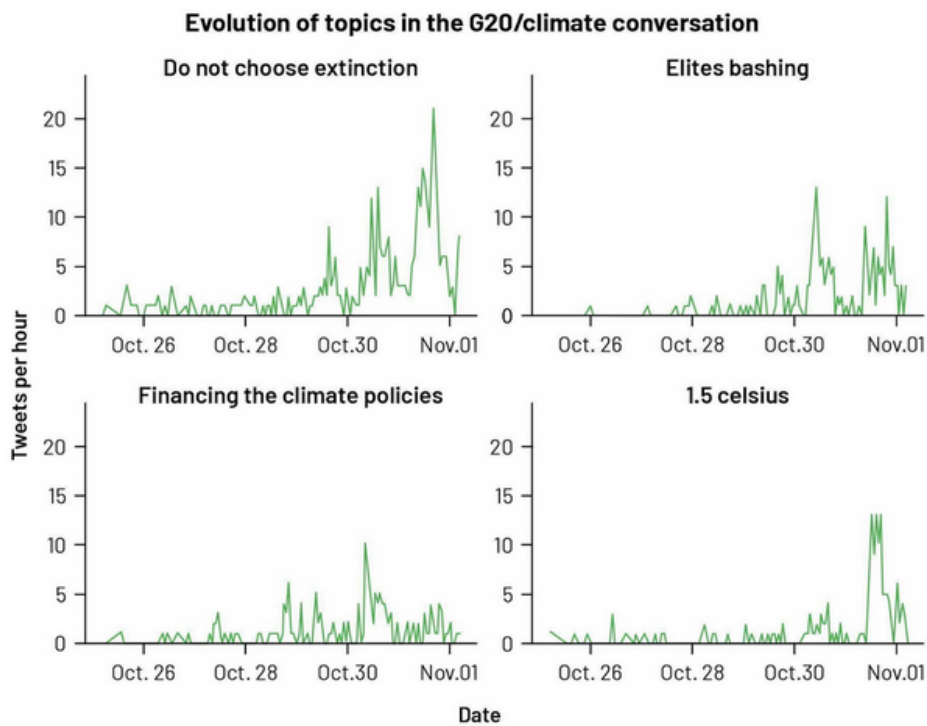


Figure 1.2 Agenda Setting Conversation Trends for G20 Online Dialogue

The online dialogue around the G20 convening coalesced into an increased focus on climate topics as the event ended and fed into the beginning of COP26. Climate related topics began to dominate

the Twitter conversation, and certain themes to the dialogue emerged. These continued to have relevance as the focus of online conversation moved into the COP26 period.

The 'Delay COP' narrative comes into focus

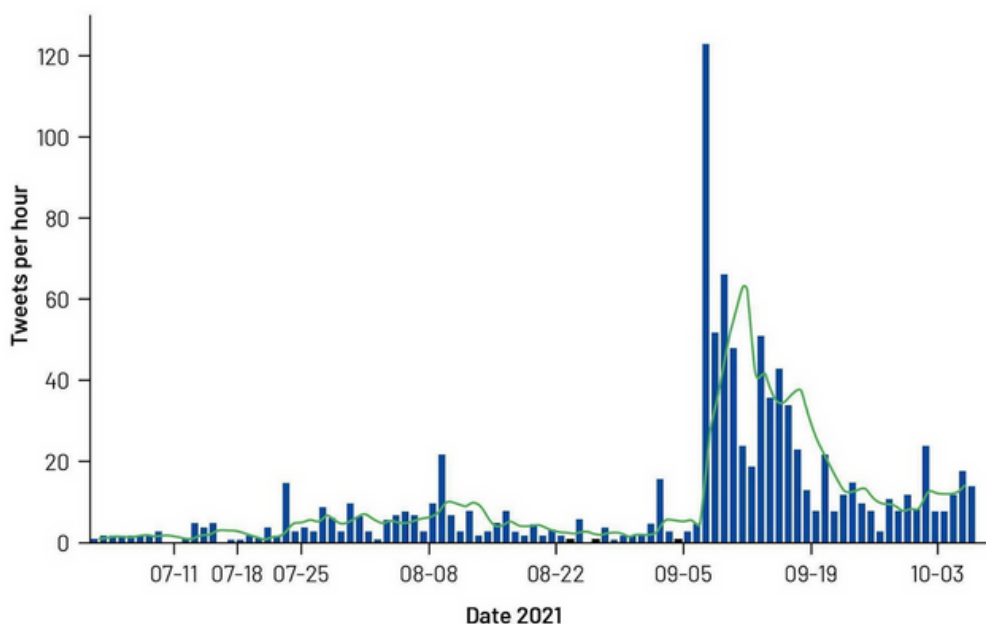
And **finally** was the 'Delay COP' narrative which acted as a teaser of critical narratives to come.

In the period immediately preceding COP – rife with conversations around perceived access inequalities – the 'failure of COP26' narrative gained some traction before the proceedings even began. The 'logistical failure' narrative were closely linked to narratives around the exclusion of Global

South countries and participants (amplified by the hashtag #MissingVoicesCOP26). These narratives around lack of access and equity drove early perceptions not just of a COP26 failure, but of an exclusionary COP.

The calls to 'Delay COP' given difficulties accessing it multiplied online. All of which likely paved the way for the broader climate justice narrative that was to emerge.

Summer timeline of the "delay" posts in the COP26 conversation



Online discourse lit up with concern on the inequities of access for different delegations based on their nation of origin and varying COVID related logistics hurdles. The overall sentiment online spiked around the idea that logistics barriers reflected larger climate justice boundaries. A topic that emerges further in the COP26–Online discourse later in the event.

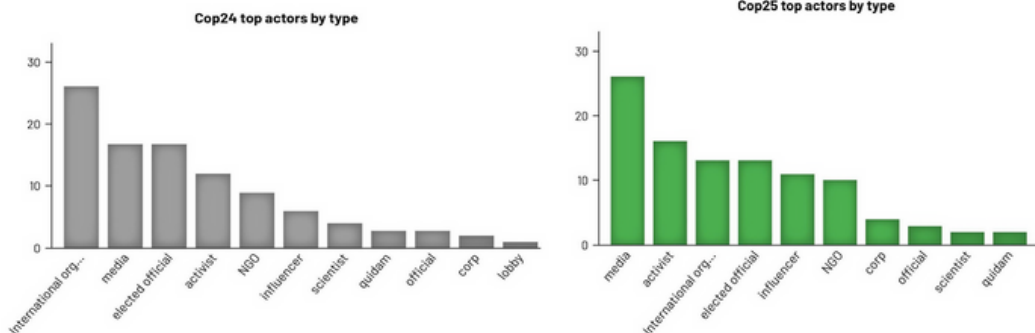
II. The tone of COP26 online: more open

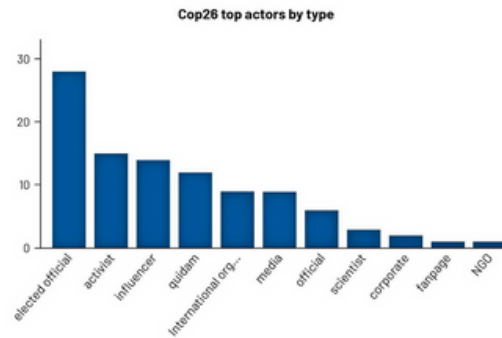
A primary finding is that as the online conversations became more open and inclusive (with a greater variety of voices) from one COP to the next, so did negativity rise.

In a similar vein, we note that as politicisation grew (participants were increasingly drawn from the partisan political sphere), so did expressions of negativity. One early conclusion therefore, is that a more open COP means a more political COP, and a more political COP means a more negative COP. Coupled with the growth in political participation, this raised early questions about what kind of impact this might have on political polarisation around the climate issue.

A. The rise of political COP?

Previous COP conversations were dominated first and foremost by international organisations – media personalities and elected officials came a distant second in order of engagement:





Highlights: By COP25, the media and activists overtook international organisations for the top spot (with elected officials also in third place). By COP26 elected officials are far more prominent in their overall volume of content creation in comparison to previous years. However this aggregate growth doesn't translate into increased engagement in any meaningful manner.

Furthermore, the overall growth of volume of engagement by elected officials from previous years may in some respect be a positive sign – it means that national governments recognize legitimate discourse is happening online. However the degree to which their content was irregular, largely press release based, and didn't result in dialogue with the highly engaged influencers, points to an ongoing disconnection.

This trend, though, also raises the issue of the politicisation of COP. Which, on the one hand could signal a greater relevance of COP in national debates (though according to the research, not very much so far), and a more important place in people's concerns; But which also ushers in a number of related negative dynamics from which the political sphere suffers: specifically, the 'importing' of the political sphere's polarisation into the climate debate. This is something to which we will return. This shift towards more politicisation can also be seen through the growing relevance of both activists and influencers between COP24 and COP26.

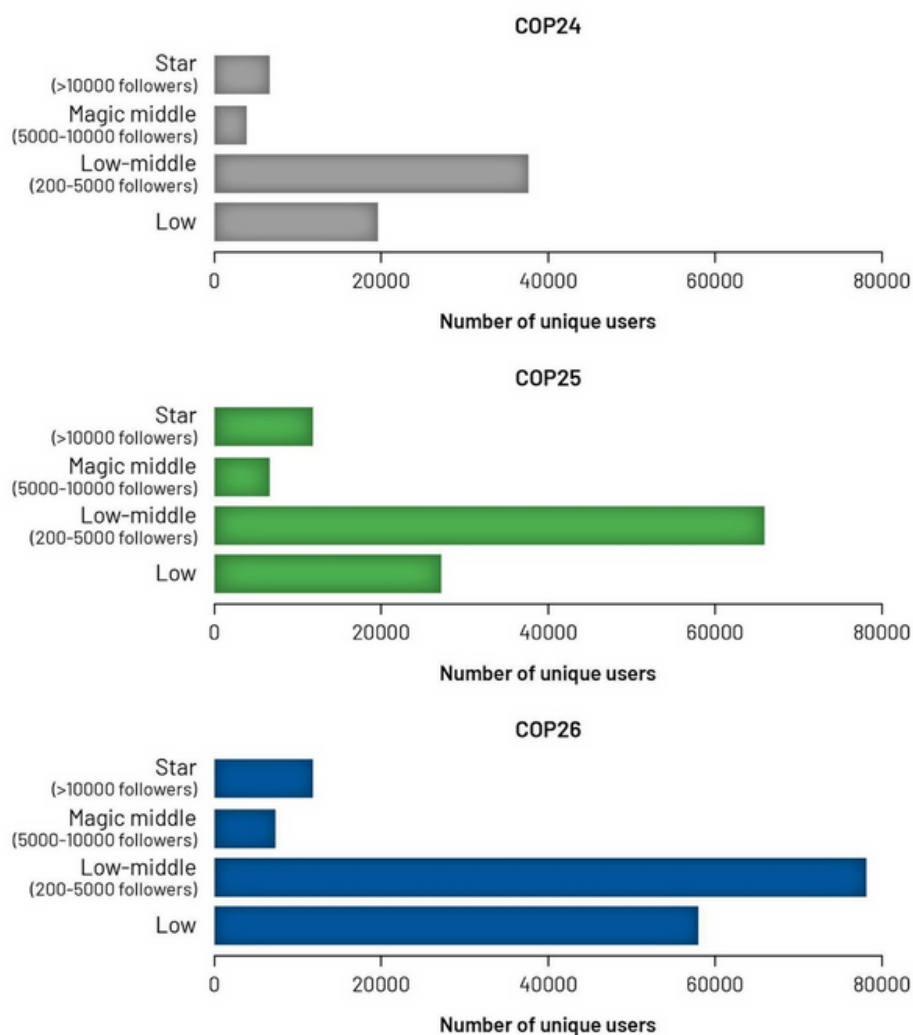
Our social media listening also picked up on a point highlighted by the FT's Gillian Tett; What Tett notes is the '(...) change in the tribe shaping climate policy. Back in 2015 when a COP produced the Paris Climate Accords, the tribe was dominated by environment ministers, scientists and activists. Now business leaders, financiers and government officials are on the stage.' This suggests that no member of the elite can simply blithely ignore either the COP process, or the climate emergency conversation more broadly. The sheer number of players means that power plays will be more prominent – and that COP26 is far more of a political battlefield.

The conversation around COP26-ONLINE remains an elite conversation. But over the past 3 COPs we see both a different set of elites gain prominence online, as well as an increased number of non-elites trying to enter the conversation.

B. A shift in influencers – the growth of the Magic Middle and the Long Tail

The graph below illustrates that the profile of the typical online influencer has changed over the last three COPs: while the online space is still dominated by ‘stars’ (people with more than 100 000 followers), there is nevertheless a growth of the ‘Magic Middle’ – people who have between 5–10k followers – and the ‘Long Tail’ who have between 2–5k followers.

These two last categories of people are important (especially the Magic Middle) because they tend to be the groups from which new leadership and new trends emerge:



The sentiment analysis tools for the project sought to understand the reach and influence of different actors. It is clear from the data that the distribution of influential voices is becoming more diverse and spreading beyond traditional "Stars" with high follower bases.

In the TOP 100 by engagement, we note that, from one COP edition to the next, new voices gain access, as well as legitimacy and recognition from audiences.

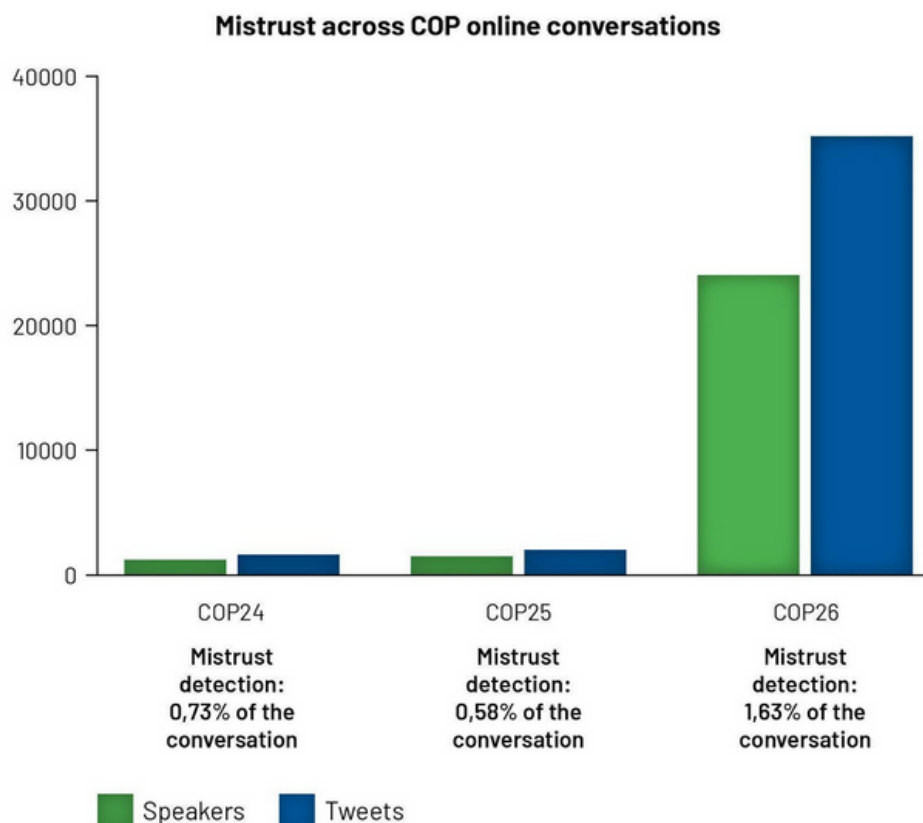
These new, popularly designated VIPs are a challenge for the COP official leadership – and we can see their progression year on year in the TOP 100.

These newly "recognised" voices that are not around the negotiating table, but nevertheless present around COP (Twitter's Magic Middle and its Long Tail) and are led by activist stars, dominate COP26 and set the conversation agenda.

III. The growth in negativity

A. In COP we don't trust

The enlargement of this online 'tribe' while, in principle, a positive development (from the perspective of awareness and debate), also brings with it distrust (**the mistrust we measured across COPs rises in parallel with the diversification of the actors in the conversation**), and an online conversation that is more negative and confrontational. As noted in our introduction: online spaces tend to be negative, but we still measured an increase in negativity in the online space year on year.



The sizeable increase of mistrust sentiment in the online database jumped dramatically for COP26. The underlying drivers of this might be explained by broader findings outlined in this report. Yet this dynamic would merit deeper examination.

We can count many more speakers and expressions of mistrust in COP26 than during the previous ones, and our monitoring allows us to group these expressions into the following baskets of accusations:

Hypocrisy: which is used to discredit announcements and potential actions at COP26. The most popular accusation has been that leaders do not set a good example and are very much in a 'do as I say, not as do' mode – hence the countless instances of private jet bashing and references to leaders who used private jets to go to a climate conference whilst asking others to reduce their flights (often falling under greenwashing).

Elitism and double-standards: The messages also often refer to the fact that there is one rule for the great and the good – and another for ordinary people (eg. leaders can easily travel and do not seem to be subject to social distancing rules). This extends to the discussions on climate finance where wealthy countries are accused of failing lower income and climate vulnerable ones.

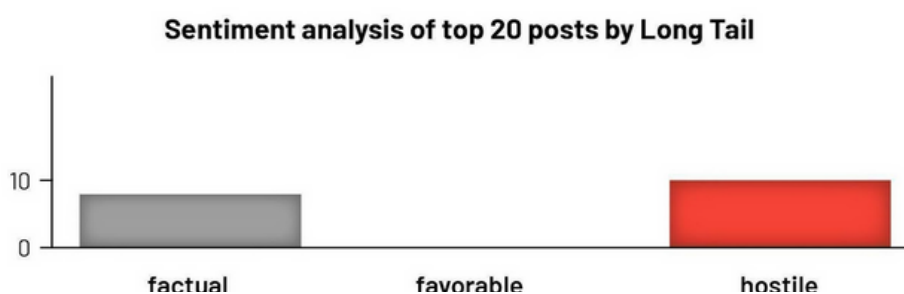
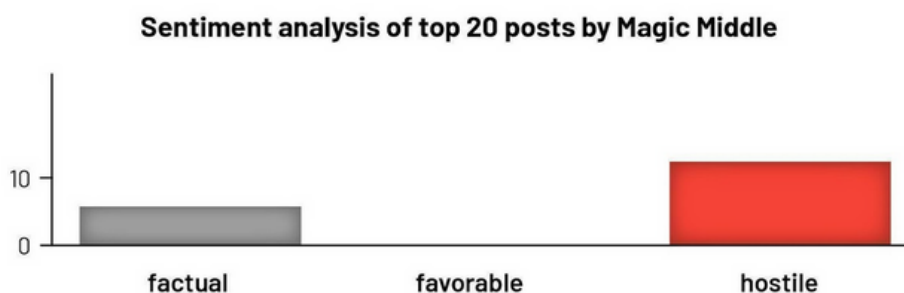
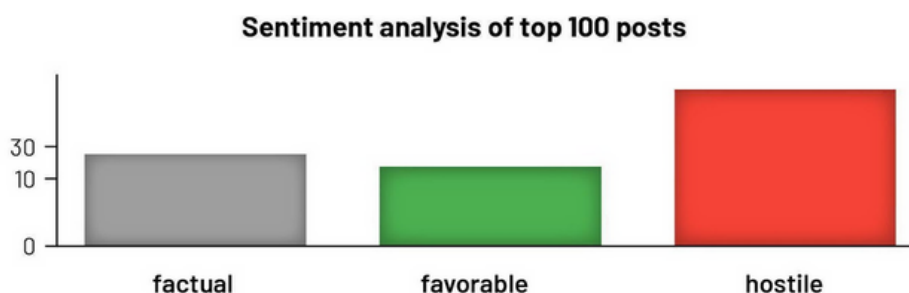
Cronyism and collusion: letting fellow leaders off the hook, by not doing much to force them (China, India and Australia) to phase out coal.

Corruption: forging agreements that are self-serving under the cover of climate policy. An accusation levelled both at political leaders and corporates (greenwashing).

These accusations – coming from climate detractors and activists alike – create a level of mistrust that permeates COP processes, and certainly permeated the COP26 online conversation.

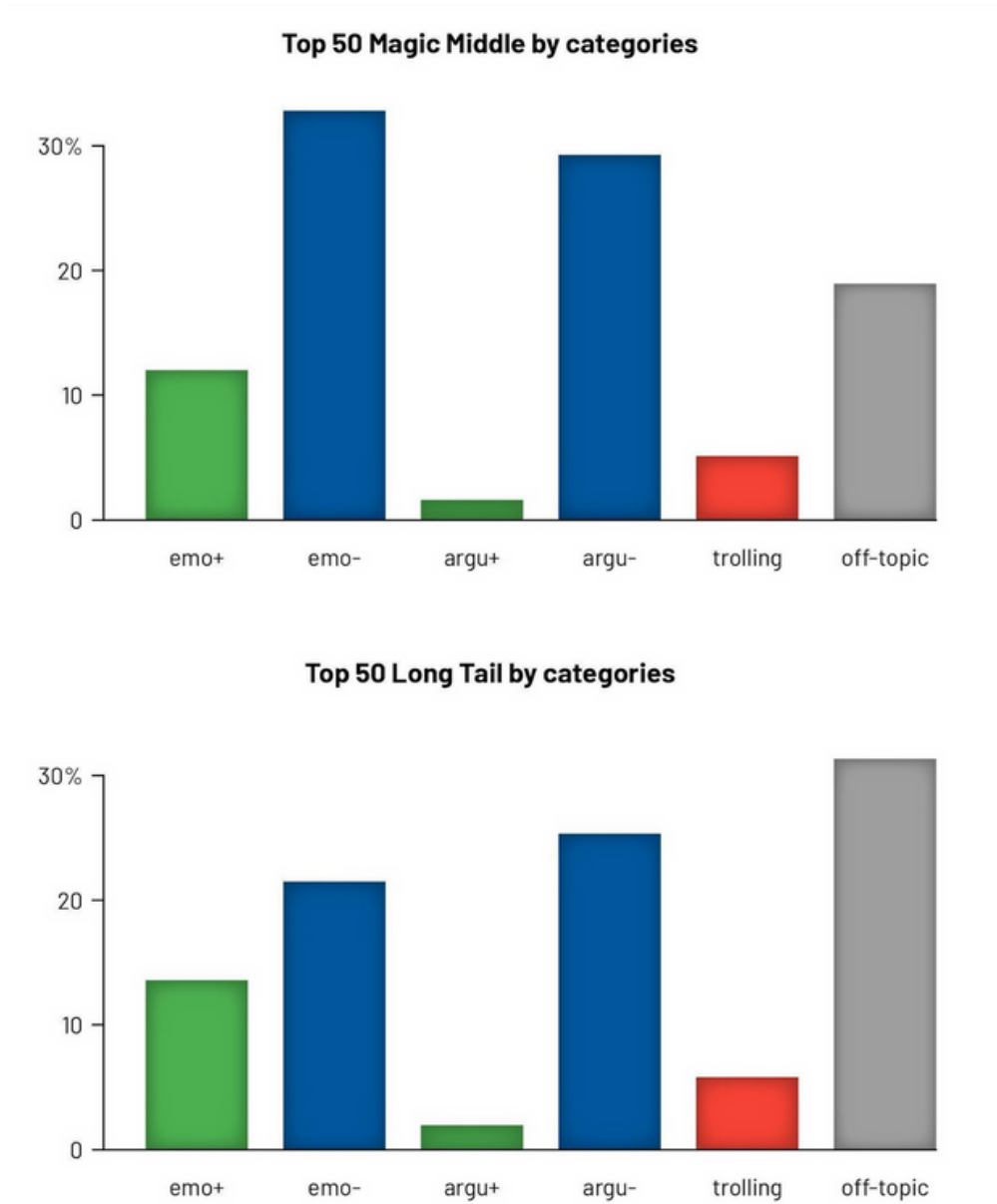
B. Signals of negativity

In the TOP100 expressions by engagement, activist and civil society voices tended heavily towards criticism of the established COP process. Broken down by sentiment analysis, almost all expressions by Magic Middle and Long tail participants in the TOP 100 of the COP26 online conversation are negative and hostile. Those negative expressions are extremely meaningful: they illustrate that virality in COP26 is largely driven by expressions of anger.



In the most engaged online commentary, it is clear that hostile sentiments are more dominant among the most influential voices. Hostility appears to drop among more emergent voices with less reach in the “magic middle” and “long tail” segments.

Highlight: Conversational Tone Among Emerging Voices



Using sentiment analysis to understand the content from these emerging categories of online voices, a few patterns emerge. The bulk of online discourse trends towards sentiment that is either emotional supportive or critical, or fact based arguments for or against climate change initiatives. Trolling is less represented in the data, and of course off-topic sentiments are prevalent.

IV. The usual suspects: deniers, detractors, and delayers

As outlined in our introduction, our initial research intention was to track expressions of dissent and we expected that most of these would be coming from climate sceptics, especially on the populist right or far right of the political spectrum.

One key initial finding was that the engagement from anti-climate policy actors was very uneven depending on their national provenance: American climate detractors were nearly absent (neither Republican voices – overwhelmingly critical of climate policy – nor the harder-edged far right US groups engaged much online). This contrasts with the European picture, where European populist parties and their key actors did engage somewhat – and in the case of the UK, were more highly engaged than elsewhere (possibly a consequence of the UK being ‘host country’).

In order to make sense of ‘shades’ of hostility in the, broadly defined, climate-policy critical camp we found it useful to divide them into three groups:

- **Deniers**, who, as the label suggests, generally deny either the existence of climate change, or deny that it is a threat, and/or deny that it is a consequence of human activity. American Trumpist Republican politicians are a prime example, as are the leaders of many far right groups (such as the UK’s Net Zero Watch). All of them argue in various ways that climate change is a natural phenomenon that is self-regulating and that climate policy frameworks are an unjust swindle perpetrated by elites on ordinary people in order to maintain compliance and control over populations; Authoritarian populist parties and their leaders such as Fidesz in Hungary and PiS in Poland (both currently in government) are further examples of such deniers. For actors such as PiS and Fidesz, the argument is also one that makes a case for national sovereignty – many of their attacks focus on the humiliation inflicted by scientific or institutional elites by demanding that they comply with ‘unfair’ climate policy demands. Other far right parties such the Spanish Vox, or the German AfD, are also in this category.

- **Detractors**, who accept that there is such a thing as climate change, but tend to minimise the threat and mobilise against the notion of a climate ‘emergency’ and any policies whose stringency seek to address it. Right wing populists and nationalists (often in opposition--such as Marine Le Pen’s Rassemblement National in France) are prime examples. They no longer deny the existence of climate change but call into question the way it is being framed by scientists and policy-makers who they accuse of hysteria – and above all of disregard for the well-being of ordinary people who will hardest hit by such policies. For such detractors, climate policy frameworks are technocratic solutions that marginalise human and social needs. Finally, for these actors too, climate policy frameworks are often depicted as going against principles of national sovereignty.
- **Delayers**, who agree that climate change is a real threat, but argue that policy proposals are too rushed and too radical – and would therefore harm current production and living standards. Their solutions tend either toward the purely technological, or toward imposing restrictions first on the larger polluters (like China and India) before any restrictions are imposed on their country. Many European conservative parties fall under this category: from the German CDU (whose leader Armin Laschet argued that German industry needed to be protected first and foremost); to the current representatives of the French mainstream conservative right who explicitly argue against most forms of sustainable energy production and advocate primarily relying on nuclear power; Pablo Casado, leader of the Spanish Conservatives (The Partido Popular) is possibly even more stridently anti-climate and flirting with deniers. The same goes for the Danish conservatives – Venstre – (who had dropped any climate change targets and initiatives during their tenure in power from 2015 to 2019). (3)

These categories are useful for the purposes of helping to specify the kind of dissent we came across online, although they are not necessarily airtight and it is best to represent them on a continuum since some themes are common to more than one category (sovereignty for example plays a role – more or less emphasised, more or less closely resembling nationalism – in almost every category; and accusations of hysteria can also appear across groups), since parties, and party-leaders can adapt and shift according changes in party-political landscapes and their own electoral and institutional positions. Let’s see how they behaved at COP26. It is also worth noting that the range of intent is also blurry.

For most deniers and detractors there is often an element of ‘culture war’ at play. They are certainly intent on opposing climate policy – on the ground of it being falsely justified, or on the ground of it being misguided, but fundamentally, climate policy is simply the latest front against which they can call into question the legitimacy of those in power. For deniers in particular, this goes as far as calling into question the framework of institutions (the role of the judiciary, the nature of representation, the role of public media) that allow for climate policy to be debated, and enacted. For detractors, the target is perhaps less fundamental –

(3) On what some refer to as the ‘climate inactivists’ see <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/nov/11/inactivists-tangling-up-the-climate-crisis-in-culture-wars-manston-airport-kent>

or foundational, and more focused on a particular government and a particular set of elites. Delayers are more focused on delaying or derailing climate policy on the grounds that it goes against their, or certain key, interests.

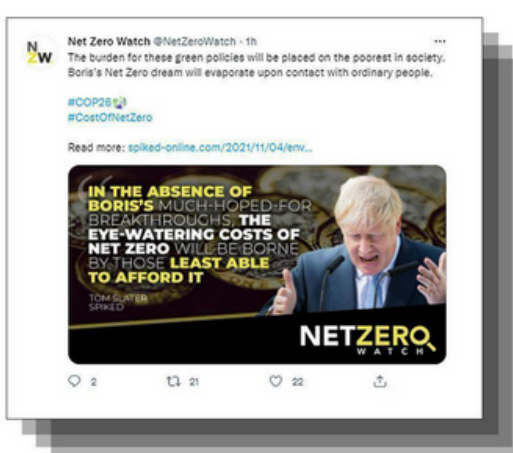
The deniers

Examples of climate deniers abound, although they are generally more prominent in the United States, and CEE countries.

While UK groups were active online during COP26, they were seldom joined by their political equivalents elsewhere. Many UK denier groups have strong links to pro-Brexit parties; This means that they were active in part egged on by the activities of the UK government as host (whose feet they are intent on holding to the fire to temper any kind of multilateral commitments that would endanger their imagined version of a Global Britain freed from such treaty shackles); In part because their obsession with the control of UK borders makes them nervous about policies that are premised on more rather than less solidarity.

Well-known climate deniers, such as the rebranded Global Warming Policy Foundation – now known as Net Zero Watch – as well as A Force For Good (Scottish anti-separatists with a resemblance to the nationalist BNP) were vocal around COP26. A Force For Good is highly likely to be behind the trending hashtag #ControlOurBordersNotOurBoilers. With A Force For Good’s connections to influential individuals as well as their high following on Twitter at 26.7k followers, they have high intent and have some means to pressure the current government to water-down their climate action efforts.

Highlight: Top Denier Influencers – Net Zero Watch



Monitoring did not reveal a high degree of engagement from some of the traditionally recognized top deniers. There were attempts to engage, but they were limited and did not gain much traction.

Net Zero Watch is one of the most prominent climate science denial groups in the UK. Their rebranding from GWPF to Net Zero Watch demonstrates their stark opposition to the UK government’s green policies and net zero commitments. Its aim is to discuss the ‘serious implications of expensive and poorly considered climate change policies’ <https://www.netzerowatch.com/>. Prominent board members include former chancellor Lord Lawson and director Benny Peiser. The former Brexit minister and Conservative MP Steve Baker recently became a Global Warming Policy Foundation trustee and frequently promotes the group on Twitter.

Net Zero Watch has grown its followers over COP26 and at the time of researching had

17.8k followers on Twitter. The group has contributed to and fueled the narrative that COP26 and climate action will cost poorer people more, and that ‘ordinary people’ will have to pay for the whims of the ‘elite’. This group is particularly interesting as it brings together the more nationalist wing of the UK’s Conservative Party and Brexit profiles. To some extent, they are not far off US Trumpist Republicans in their use of climate change as an issue to fuel a broader culture war. (4)

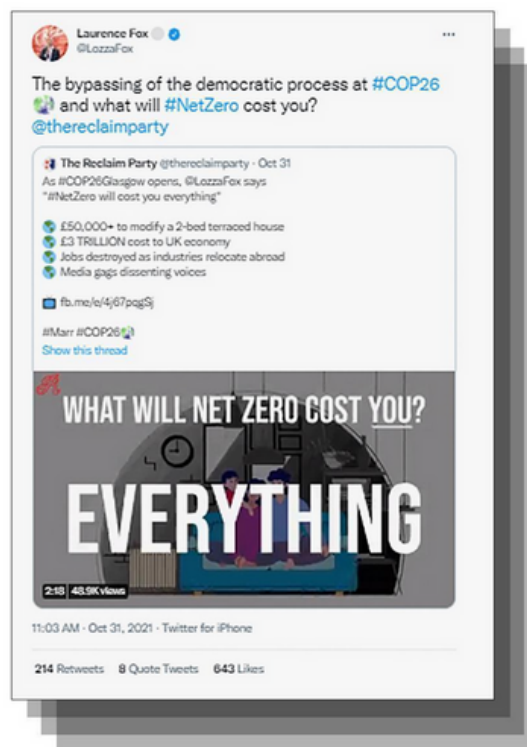
Smaller groups emerged in the lead up to and during COP26: CAR26 (which stands for Climate, Analysis, Reason) is a case in point. A group that actively promotes a Net Zero referendum:

Highlight: Emerging Denier Influencers

1. CAR 26



2. Reclaim Party



Again, the volume of “denial” commentary was comparatively low in the discourse surrounding COP. Some new groups did project themselves in this period, but their influence and reach was low.

(4) <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2022/feb/08/tories-fighting-net-zero-plans-are-dragging-climate-into-new-culture-war-experts-say>

Whilst their aims are ambitious, their current capability to disrupt is low. However, their tactics look dangerously similar to the Brexit playbook and their links to prominent Brexiteers increase their capability. (5)

Our sample of deniers is thin because COP26 was not a draw for them. We know they exist, and we know they can be a powerful force, but this was not where they chose to flex their muscle.

The UK provenance of most of these groups and their ties to various types of nationalism and to Brexit political personalities also suggests that their intent may be a continuation of the Brexit/nationalist fight and disrupting current government business, just as much – if not more – than about climate policy per se.

The Detractors

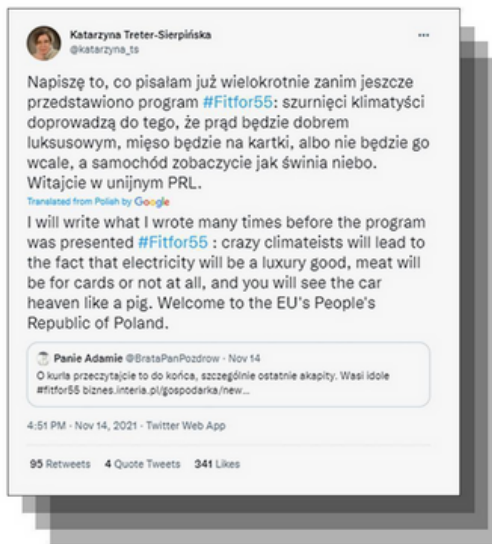
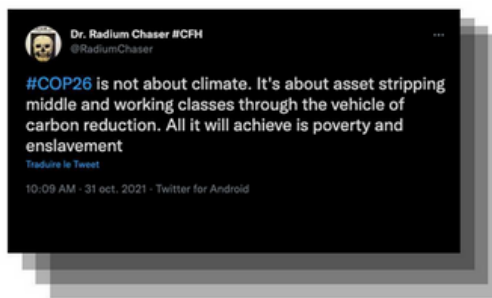
The detractors that engaged in COP26 used quite well-known populist tropes: most accusations were of a disconnected elite that would once again make ordinary people bear the brunt of the climate adaptation costs. While the same elite would find ways of shirking its responsibilities (via, for example, the use of private jets). At worst, climate policy was a power-play to allow this same elite to maintain itself in power by frightening populations (some groups expressed the belief that climate would become the ‘new Covid’ as a tool to restrict the liberties and freedom of the people). The tweets below a perfect illustration of the logic that can operate (6):

Highlight: Climate Detractors Take Many Angles



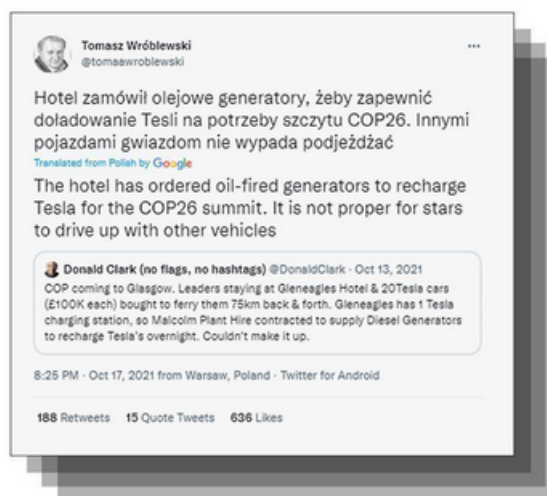
(5) For example, the director and public face of CAR26 is Lois Perry who is a representative of Reclaim. Moreover, their website is powered by Blue Sky—a communications company run by a group of Brexit veterans, some of which are directors of astroturf groups such as Defund the BBC. The group and hashtag has also been shared by the likes of Darren Grimes, supported by MP Steve Baker, alluded to as a potential new campaign focus by Nigel Farage, and is followed by Net Zero Watch, all of which increases CAR26's future capability. The hashtag #CAR26 is also likely to increase the group's following as it gains traction across social media.

(6) See also <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/climate-lockdown-and-the-culture-wars-how-covid-19-sparked-a-new-narrative-against-climate-action/>



Across Europe, the populist detractors (from the soft right to the far right) exhibit the same rhetoric and tactics: populist right leader Florian Philippot (formerly of Le Pen's Rassemblement National, now leader of his own party Les Patriotes) received broad support in his amplification of the divide between the elites and the general public when he called attention to Commission President Von der Leyen's 50km flight to Glasgow.

Highlight: Climate Detractors Take Many Angles... But Their Tactics Are Similar



The Delayers

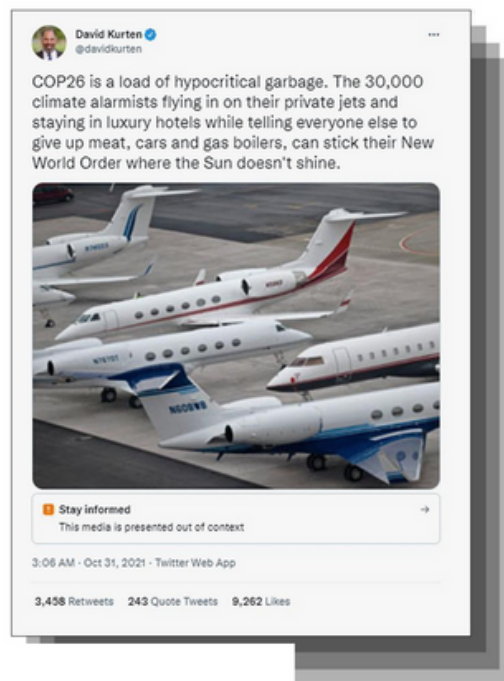
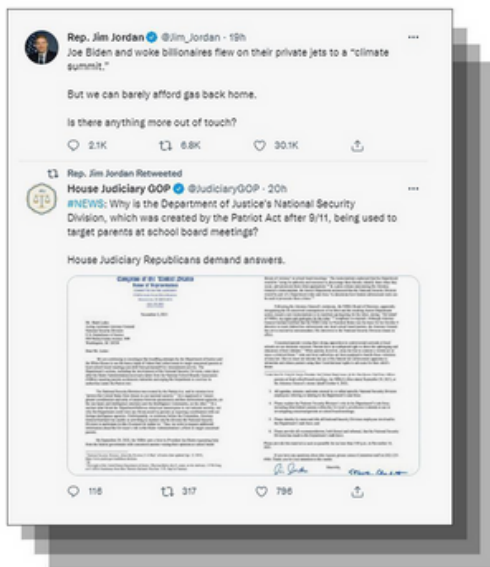
We noted that there was relatively little activity from more mainstream, conservative climate delayers. The American Republican party mainly stayed away from the COP topic and the COP conversation; And this was relatively true for many of the mainstream conservative parties.

But when they or their supporters did engage, it was alarming to note that they flirted quite openly with populist themes.

The same accusations of disconnection, and elitism regarding climate policy-makers, as well as accusation of hysteria and naivety against activists.

Across Europe and in the United States we noted that what seemed to dominate mainstream climate-sceptical conservative parties was either a snubbing of COP altogether, or an adoption of populist tactics.

Highlight: Online Delayer Negativity



As we outlined earlier in this report, across the groups of deniers, detractors, and delayers that we've reviewed so far – we find that specific shared register of negativity (hypocrisy, elitism and double-standards, cronyism and collusion, and corruption).

But our listening suggests that while climate policy critics of various types were active during COP, they were far less active than we had anticipated.

This is delicate to unpack and probably warrants further research, but what we note

is that populists, despite their growing mobilisation offline against climate, were relatively absent online as an organised group (and not very visible at COP26 offline either). One hypothesis is that the technical nature of COP discussions – with themes and sub-themes, panels, resolutions, and technical announcements – are precisely the kind of forum that climate policy critics will dismiss as technocratic and illegitimate. Not to mention far too multilateral for their nationalist preferences. Another possibility (and the two are far from mutually exclusive), is simply disdain and boycott.

Crossing into the mainstream

Perhaps most importantly, in COP26 we found shades of negativity that easily crossed from the delayer camp – into the conversations and expressions of people who had no strong anti-climate policy views.

This suggests that we should be monitoring that space between the delayers and the mainstream. What we see in much of the delay narrative and the narrative of a number of mainstream conservative parties alluded to earlier, is an open flirtation with populist views and populist accusations.

This kind of rhetoric is particularly significant as it can attract mainstream followers moved by a shared mistrust of policy-makers and politicians. For instance, we came across several instances in which people expressed a fear that climate action

might be the logical extension of the measures and restrictions adopted to fight Covid. This view is characteristic of the conspiracist far right – but not exclusively so, and is apparent in various groups that are neither far right, nor populist supporters. Such beliefs crossover into mainstream conservative accounts (not overly extreme, but cynical of 'woke liberals'). While some spill over into conspiratorial language, many ordinary users are also concerned citizens who do not trust in government to fix 'real world' issues.

This signals a dangerous capacity on the part of the softer climate sceptics (including the delayers) to use a language that taps into some of the mainstream parties and voters.

Whether this is a blurring of the boundaries between mainstream parties and climate sceptic parties, or simply a reflection of the extent to which populist tropes of mistrust and unreconstructed anti-elitism have contaminated all political discourse, or both – this phenomenon is one which we came across consistently.

In fact, the blurring of the rhetorical lines goes well beyond the boundaries between mainstream conservatism and climate sceptics, as activists and civil society can easily fall prey to language that is remarkably similar to that of populist climate sceptics – polarised and polarising, with a strong us vs them thematic, suspicious of all elites (media, politicians, finance, technocrats).

The tweets below are a good example of a blurring of boundaries as both sceptics and supporters of climate policy reach for many similar tones and fall prey to a form of anti-elitism.



Of course, the pro-climate activists and civil society actors have different objectives in mind (and always fall short of accusations against scientists – this is the one elite group that escapes their fire), but it is worth noting that the politicisation of COP, is also the polarisation of COP – a logical reflection of the politicisation of the climate conversation outside COP.

V. Unusual suspects: climate policy supporters and their COP reticence

While hostility, criticism and accusations were expected from known climate detractors, in the online conversation, it was climate policy supporters and activists that stood out for their outspoken views that challenged the legitimacy and efficacy of the proceedings.

A couple of narratives stand out : eco-populist accusations of elitism (private jets bashing for instance) coming from the Magic Middle and Long Tail actors, and accusations of greenwashing and of minorities discrimination by activists.

A dominant thread of conversation online throughout COP26 was broadly under the key heading of 'financing the transition' (our monitoring indicates that, in the online conversation, this was not as dominant a theme in previous COPs) and economic

injustices in the face of climate change and policy needs. Our research shows that the topic was discussed from multiple angles.

- The activists called for a stop in support for the fossil industry both through divestment and through the halting of government subsidies to the fossil fuel industry (see the category 'stop financing fossil fuels' in the graph below);
- There were multiple announcement on financing green investments from the financial sector, these produced significant reactions in online conversation repeatedly;
- Voices from the Global South demanded climate justice through reparation of loss & damage, as well as financial support from the Global North for the transition process in lower income, or climate vulnerable countries.

What is perhaps most interesting is that the participants in COP26 treated these issues as spaces for contestation – the battle grounds (in particular the Finance and the Loss and Damage discussions) on which the climate policy wars would be fought – wresting them from the established leadership and gradually imposing upon them a set of frames that managed to

impose a climate justice narrative that dominated COP26, as well as parts of the real-life events.

We first tracked the Finance conversation as it was unfolding, first around the speech by Mia Mottley (PM of Barbados) on November 1st, and then COP26 Climate Finance day (November 3rd).

A. Money talks and finance dominates

The theme of finance emerged first, as a call for wealthy countries to – financially – support the energy transition of climate vulnerable, emerging, and lower-income countries. This reverberated across COP26, highlighting the responsibility that the Global North needs to take in financially supporting the climate transition. The visibility of the issue was raised by powerful messages from leaders from the Global South (see examples below) as well as through COP26 weekend marches focused on climate justice, and the increasingly loud and confident voices of youth leaders drawn from across the globe.

This aspect of the finance discussion managed to engage the wider global community, in part given the group's diversity (including the national leaders, representatives of vulnerable groups – women, indigenous and children groups – and activists).

More importantly, the raising of this issue (and its rise in the social media conversation and on the ground) seemed to be an early inflection point for COP26. And potentially a turning point in the narrative frame of climate mobilisation.

Up until the beginning of COP, and over the

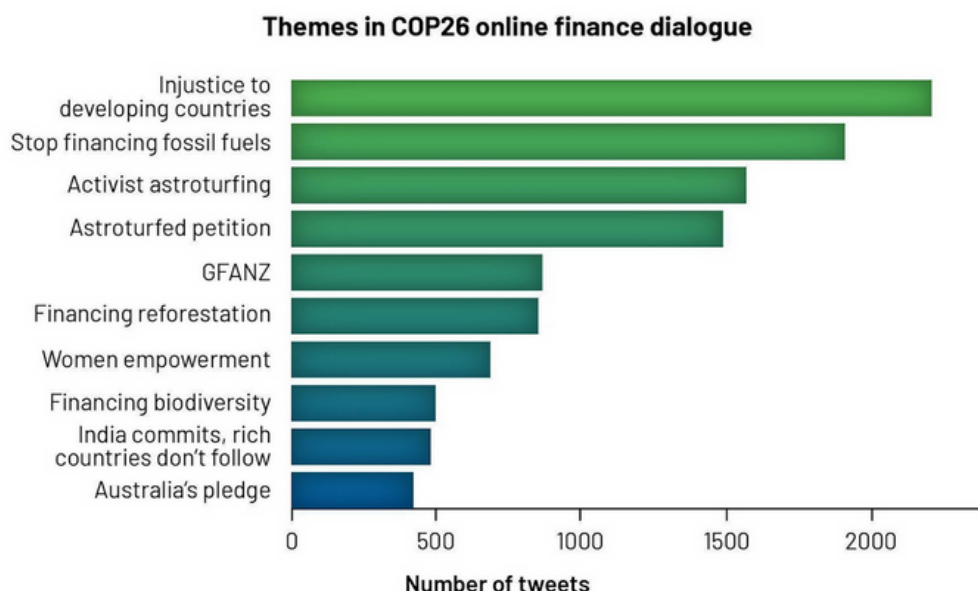
period of arrivals (of delegations), the focus seemed relentlessly and almost exclusively focused on poor logistics, bad organisation – it was the chronicle of a failure foretold (and trailed at the G20). Accompanying this narrative was the hangover from the IPCC report and a (justified focus) on the science of climate, and on the unavoidable consequences of the climate emergency denial.

But the Leader's speech by the Prime Minister of Barbados Mia Mottley on November 1st, just as COP kicked off, seemed to set COP on the finance track and make the most of the fact that the G20 had placed climate finance at the heart of the conversation: Mottley stressed the consequences of finance and adaptation continuously falling short of both promises and needs (specifically, failing to deliver the annual \$100B pledged to the Global South): *'Failure to provide this critical finance and that of loss and damage is measured in lives and livelihoods being lost in our communities. It is immoral and unjust... 'When will we as world leaders address the pressing issues that are truly causing our people angst and worry – be it climate or vaccines? Simply put, when will leaders lead? Our people are watching and taking note.'*



Mottley’s call, and the prominence of the issue of financial support were further reinforced by the #ClimateJustice marches happening globally on November 6th and 7th (#uprootthesystem, #endclimateimperialism).

Even at the very beginning of COP26, climate finance was slowly becoming omnipresent and imposing itself as the theme that tied the conversation together. As the graph below shows, when we chose to follow the finance theme online it led us to the heart of a climate justice narrative:



Using sentiment analysis to observe the Twitter conversation around Climate Finance, the data strongly trended towards themes that support the broader shift to a “Climate Justice” narrative.

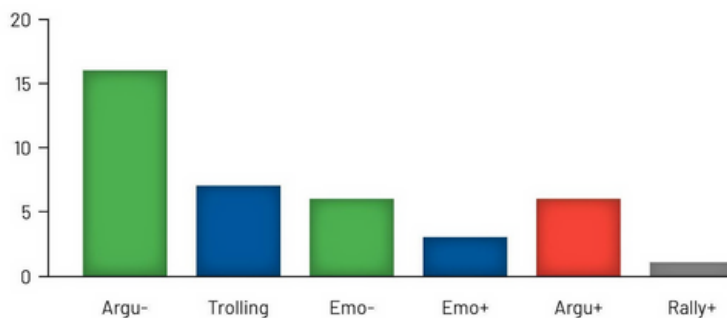
B. #GFANZ vs #ShowUsTheMoney

With finance (and access to finance) a key obstacle to a fast transition, any positive announcement on financing the path towards net-zero should have been welcomed. Yet what we note across the online conversation is that, any #GFANZ announcement taken as bold by COP26 leaders, was immediately attacked by the COP26 conversation.

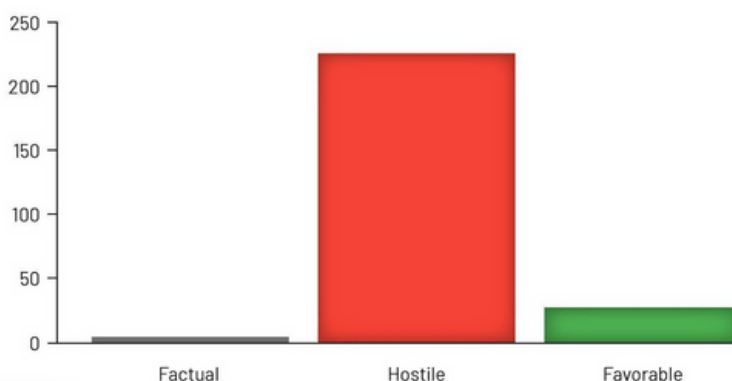


Mark Carney's announcement regarding financing the shift to net-zero through 'trillions' being made available is a case in point: his announcement was met with at best scepticism and, at worst a level of defiance that both signalled and widened the mistrust between the COP elite on the one hand, and ordinary people and climate activists on the other. The number was all at once perceived to come too late (referencing the commitment of the climate agreement), but also to be too large to be credible.

Carney replies by categories

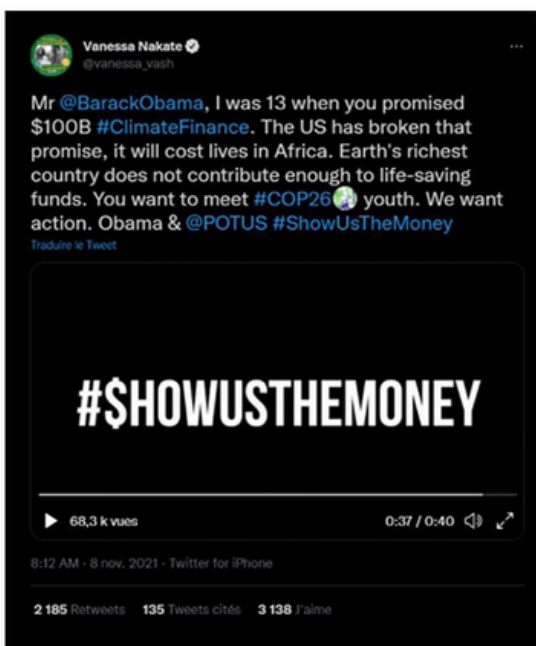


Carney replies by sentiment



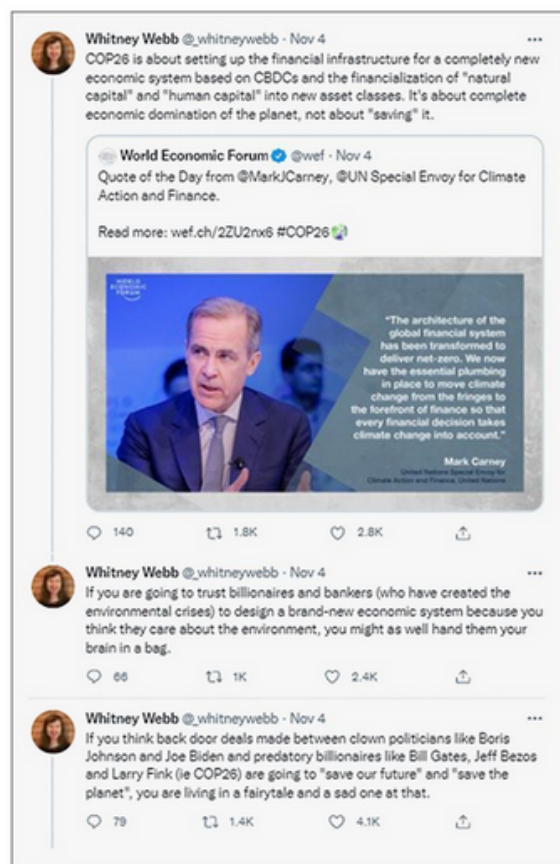
The reference to 'trillions' was taken to be fantastical, and therefore yet more hot air after years of falling short on much more achievable numbers. Finally, regardless of its 'reality', the extraordinarily large sum was almost unwieldy—how would the financing be delivered? How would the financing be provided at the facility level? Using what infrastructure?

In sum, the questions raised the fact that the promise was too big, too late, too incredible, and lacking in practicality. Given the involvement of the financial sector in the financing of fossils, the sector has little credibility and is not trusted by the public either to deliver the money (they are perceived as greenwashing) or to be able to justify where the money will come from. In addition to raising the hypocrisy of a financial sector that has prospered thanks to money made on oil and coal activities (but still trying to buy their place alongside 'the good guys'), online publics are also concerned that it is taxpayers that will disburse the trillions.

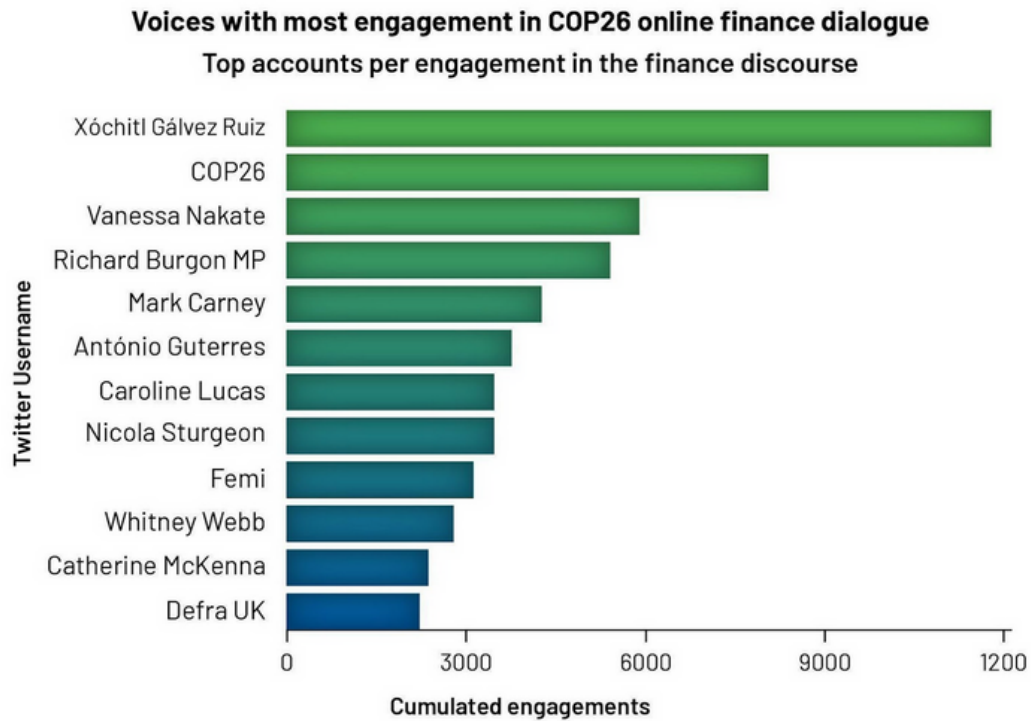


A deeply anti-technocratic rhetoric and an even deeper lack of trust in financial institutions and in their ability to deliver positive outcomes dominated the conversation.

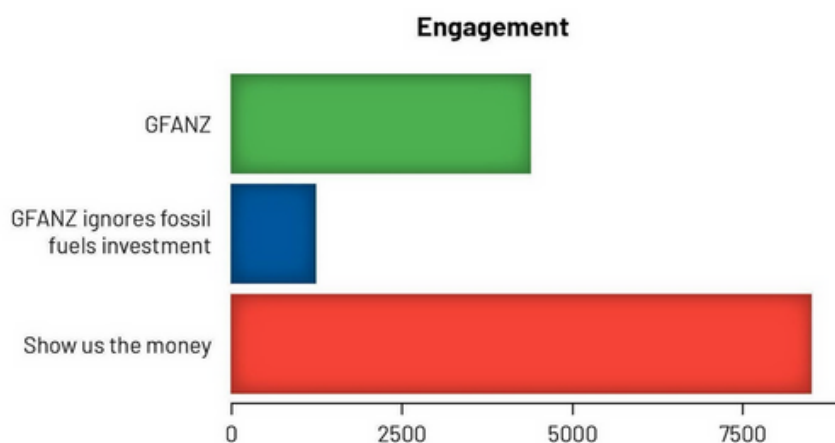
The online discussion around these topics was extremely critical of governments and the tone accusatory. The mistrust toward finance to deliver on its promises led to a vast activist campaign (led by Vanessa Nakate and Greta Thunberg) demanding that finance #Showusthemoney.

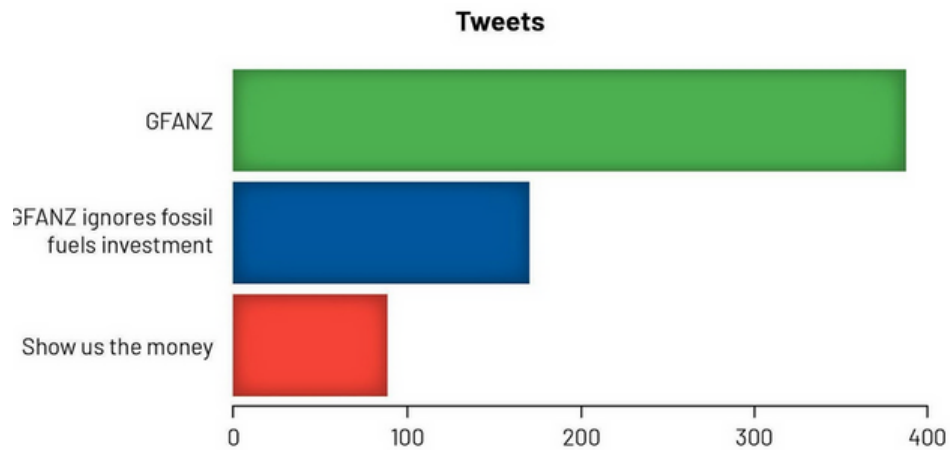


The finance conversation became dominated by #Showusthemoney successfully promoted by grassroots activists. In this graph we can see that despite lower numbers of tweets asking to “show us the money,” it led to a large number of engagements and reactions stressing the concerns around this issue by a large part of the online public.



The distribution of engagement for specific influencer voices on Twitter was not equally distributed, and likely tied to relevance of the specific issues each of these top influencers were speaking on. These engagement levels could be further correlated with specific “messaging moments” through subsequent analysis.





While pure volume of content was weighted towards existing narratives around GFANZ and fossil fuel investment, the activist narrative around “Show us the money” dominated in engagement.

The discussion on finance and the vast array of themes it contained acted like a funnel on the conversation online.

The discussion on GFANZ, and the echoing #Showusthemoney led to the discussion of loss and damage – and this conversation was emblematic of the narrative build up to climate justice.

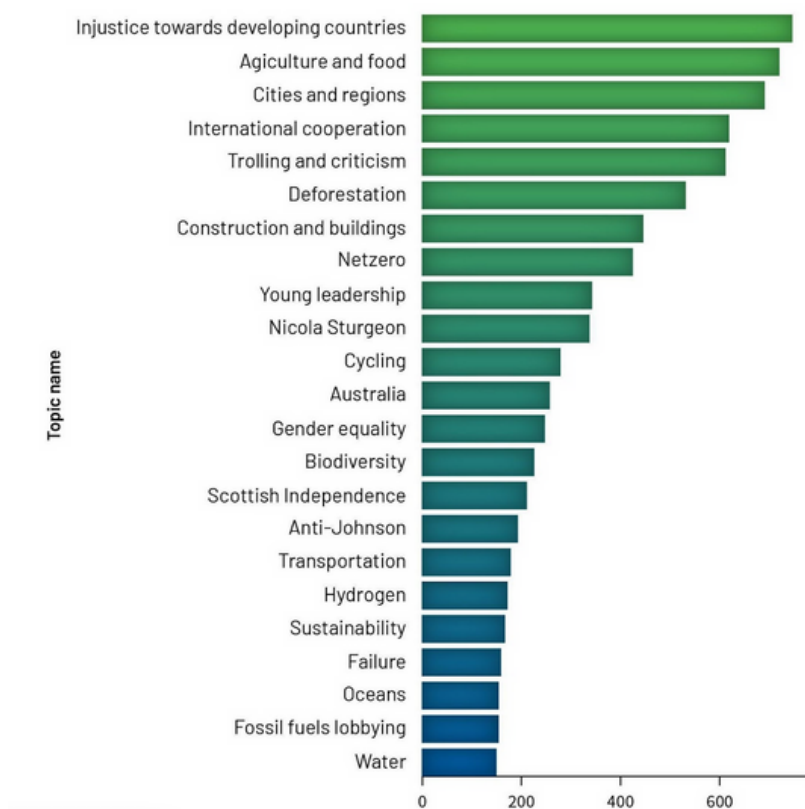
All of the thematic roads under the finance heading led to the larger theme that came to dominate COP26’s online conversation: climate justice.

C. Shaping the loss and damage conversation: all roads lead to climate justice

Reinforcing the climate finance narrative were the repeated and connected calls for compensation for the loss and damages incurred by poorer and climate vulnerable nations (for example Antigua & Barbuda coming up with legal action for Polluter Pays principle) as a result of fossil fuel exploitation and climate change created by the Global North, poor returns on extracted resources, and an absence of climate planning and mitigation measures from wealthier nations.

To capture the conversation around Loss and Damage we looked at the online conversation around Article 6 of the Paris Agreement. Trending narratives around Article 6 included calls for transparency and equity around indigenous rights. Narratives revolved around criticism of carbon markets as a false solution (a narrative that also bled into net zero legitimacy concerns), as well criticism of the failure to include human rights as a focus of many negotiating texts and a general fear that the same would happen with Article 6, where equity is key.

Top online discussion themes during final days of COP26



List of narratives around injustices endured by developing and Global South countries

A key moment in the online reaction came in response to the Leader's speech by the Prime Minister of Barbados Mia Mottley on November 1st, just as COP kicked off. It seemed to set COP on a different track and made the most of the fact that the G20 had placed climate finance at the heart of the conversation: Mottley stressed the consequences of finance and adaptation continuously falling short of both promises and needs (specifically, failing to deliver the annual \$100B pledged to the Global South):

*'Failure to provide this critical finance and that of loss and damage is measured in lives and livelihoods being lost in our communities. It is immoral and unjust.'...
'When will we as world leaders address the pressing issues that are truly causing our people angst and worry – be it climate or vaccines? Simply put, when will leaders lead? Our people are watching and taking note.'*

Mirroring reactions to Prime Minister Mottley's comments, calls to address 'injustice toward developing countries' were regularly voiced during COP26 protests and Fridays for Future protests. The theme dominated social media narratives on the last day of COP.

- calls for the inclusion of indigenous peoples went viral;
- as did calls for a new, younger and more inclusive leadership;
- narratives surrounding the injustices endured by the Global South were amplified by hashtags such as #AdaptationDay and #IndigenousPeoples.

During, and especially by the end of the COP26, we observed that Article 6 topics were supplanted by 'Injustice toward developing countries.' A strong signal that activists' framing of the topic did dominate in terms of visibility, despite official COP's attempts to address and occupy a terrain that was considered critical for stakeholders by the end of COP25.

VI. New leadership and new demands

A. The boldness of COP26–online

Part of the distinctiveness of this COP, is that its online version was not what we expected: We expected the main challenge to come from climate detractors, and while this challenge was there, it was a) more muted than we expected; b) it did not set the tone for the online conversation in which criticism came at least as much from pro-climate civil society.

We didn't really know what to expect from activists or the broader interested public, but what we saw was a strategy to wrest certain key themes (especially around Finance and Loss and Damage from the hands of the official COP) and challenge the COP's framing of these issues—often alongside some of the key figures of the Global South like PM Mia Mottley.

COP26 therefore became a bit of a 'space of struggle', and also a space in which climate activists (as well as those simply interested and committed to climate policy) would strive to set the terms of a conversation that they anticipated to be a let down.

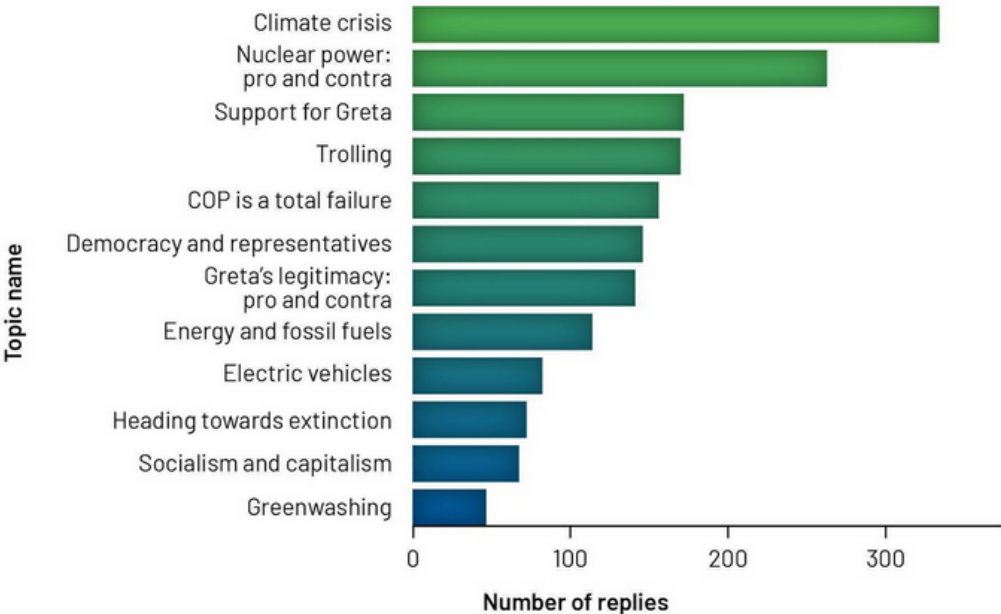
While COP21 in Paris went out of its way to accommodate civil society actors and activists, and, for the first time in COP history, created an area dedicated to civil society. COP26 was set to be confrontational from the get-go. Even in the public imagination, COP26 would confront the ghosts of COP21, the scene for a duel was set. What we saw for the first time at COP26 was 'unofficial COP' really challenge 'official COP—and rather than do so from outside the tent, online media brought the conversation into the tent and shaped it.

B. Challenging the established order: towards a “post-Greta” collective leadership?

By analysing tweets from activists, we note that Greta is mentioned continuously; She is a key symbol, or meme, in the conversation – yet an increasingly polarising one too. Take for instance the replies to Greta’s now infamous ‘blah blah blah’ tweet below:



A Thunderous Tweet From Greta: The Reactions?

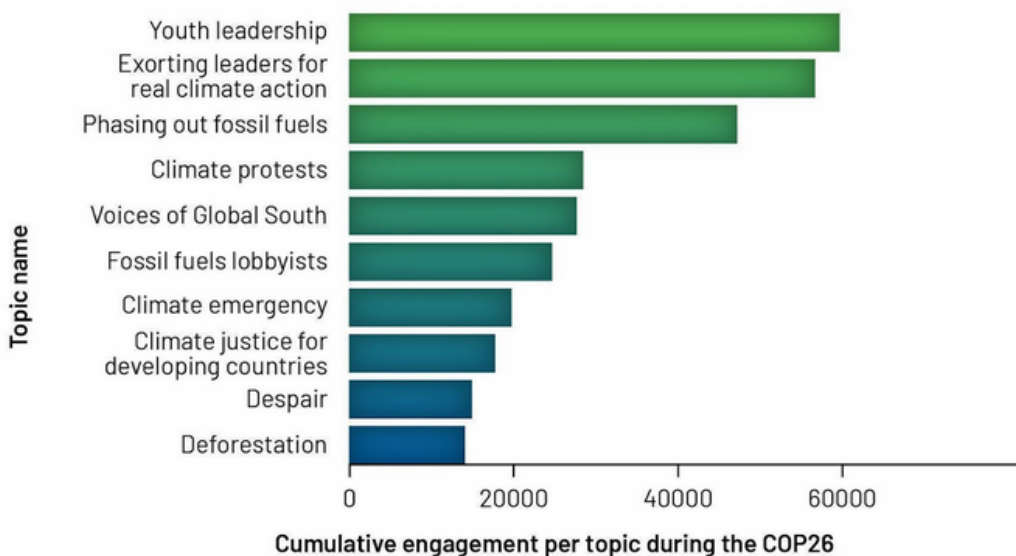


The analysis highlights a few things. First, there are as many replies in support of Greta as remarks criticising her (trolling). This finding is even clearer when we look at the engagement with replies: Trolling gains in importance with people either agreeing or denouncing trolling Greta. Second, the themes that arise in the replies are emotional and divisive, and lead to larger debates on issues such as nuclear power (in second place).

During COP26 Greta Thunberg shaped the conversation once again and the conversation continued to have a tremendous influence on social media; but she also experienced and created growing polarisation.

We noted a shift toward the theme of climate justice – both offline, but majorly so in the online conversations we monitored. This shift signals in part, a move away from an argument designed to raise awareness of climate change – and thus based overwhelmingly on a call to ‘listen to the science’ – to one defined by a call for justice. In this greater focus on climate justice (which is inclusive of Greta), we note the emergence of a new, broader group of young leaders representing the voices of the Global South.

The boldness of their rhetoric and of their strategy suggests that such activists may be less and less seduced by the idea of just ‘taking part’ in what they called a ‘greenwashing festival,’ and more inclined toward taking direct action, further challenging established climate elites. The graph below highlights the key topics with which activists engaged. We note The dominance of the theme of ‘Youth leadership,’ which just overtakes appeals for leaders to act. An important signal, as activists ask for more power, for a place around the table – and their audiences support them. We simultaneously see new interests in the Global South creeping up to the top (‘Voices of Global South,’ ‘Climate Justice for developing countries’).



We also note that joint actions on the part of Greta and the new young women leaders from the Global South vastly increases their scope of action. Through campaigns such as the one below. Greta, Vanessa, Dominika, and Mitzi gathered 1.8M signatures calling for urgent climate action from around the world.

Although this new group of young women still garners less overall engagement than Greta given their smaller followings, what engagement they do have proves to be less polarising. Greta Thunberg continues to make headlines (and drive a section of the online conversation), but she may be increasingly only one part of a new generation of activists (many also female and also young but), often non-white, and often with one foot in the culture of the global North and one foot in the culture of the Global South.

Their dual belonging gives them dual legitimacy and an enhanced capacity to articulate their demands for climate justice – they are both part of the ‘givers’ and part of the ‘receivers.’ They are the heirs – and companions – to Greta Thunberg, but are even more explicitly political about climate justice, highly personalised (through various identities – born again Christian, Latina, mixed ethnicity amongst others).

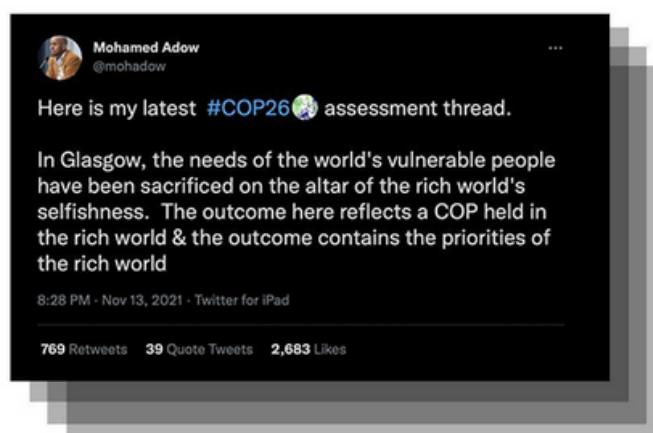
The online conversation suggests that Greta’s brand and action continue to be extremely important. As the trail-blazer in the youth climate movement, her weight and authority are largely unchallenged. However, she is joined by other voices and that may suggest a turning point in civil society leadership.

Conclusions – COP26 and the turn to climate justice

Our findings, when taken in combination, suggest a number of key conclusions and potential lessons for COPs to come.

First, the conversation online at COP26 moved from a general emphasis on climate science (articulated effectively and loudly in online conversation by activists such as Greta Thunberg) to an emphasis on climate justice – in other words a shift away from a climate awareness frame (rooted in scientific arguments) to a much stronger frame of practical action and climate justice. This shift may well have developed over the past few COPs, but our tracking shows that the emphasis was much more pronounced in this one.

That is not to say that increased interest in activist framing, such as Greta Thunberg’s encouragements to ‘follow the science,’ were any less present, this is still foundational; but the exhortation is to focus on the ‘how’ and the ‘who’ of climate policy. With a greater focus on access, inequity, representation and practical financial issues that all converged around the theme of climate justice. This move away from the tug-of-war between believers (in climate change) and non-believers (in climate change) signals in part the fact that outright denial is fading (though perhaps less so in the US), but above all a move towards an argument between the ‘active’ vs the ‘passive’ (the latter being the greenwashers, the delayers, the rich, the North)—again creating the space for a different kind of formulation of wins and losses as in the tweet below:



The confrontational way in which the reality of climate injustice was put on the map suggests that COP27 will be driven by such demands, and an even greater degree of boldness in demanding climate justice – especially given the setting.

Green split?

While we were anticipating the possibility of competition between the myriad activist and civil society groups at COP26 – we found little of that. If anything we found surprising unity (as shown by the various campaigns).

The split we did find was between the climate elite inside the tent and the climate challengers outside the tent – and extremely active online.

This split is both healthy and problematic in various ways. It is healthy because it signals the importance of a bold, practical, inspired and inspiring new generation of climate activists who are not willing to simply look on. As we develop in the previous section, they have been formidable in placing shortcomings in full view and exercising pressure.

And it is worth noting that the divide between these groups cannot be reduced to ‘elite actor’ vs ‘activist actor’. At times activists from wealthy countries might join forces in online debate with elites from developing countries, thus disagreeing with their own country’s elite, ‘pro-climate’ leaders (Mark Carney is a case in point and considered illegitimate by many activists from the Global North, who readily rally to the PM of Barbados). Much of this centres on the contested terrain of climate justice which provides a lens through which

positions of power must be read. Further understanding the development of different frames, tactics and approaches across the pro-climate movement will be important moving forward, and the raucous nature of online conversation provides a meaningful space to see the evolution of the movement play out.

But this split is also worrisome. First and foremost because it undermines the legitimacy of those who are leading the negotiations, and thus their capacity to elaborate, implement and gain consent for possible policy. Whatever their shortcomings and however timid, the fact is that these policies have even less of a chance of being implemented if there is a universal pile up on those who are negotiating them. Second, the split is problematic because, while COPs have never had a vocation to be popular jamborees, the negativity vis-a-vis the process on the part of pro-climate voices (be they well-known or not) creates a situation in which climate policy’s main and most visible global event, appears disconnected from the public(s). This undermines not only climate action, but also all multilateral institutions – precisely at a time when these will need to fulfil a greater role. The accusations so often formulated against national institutions will increasingly be formulated against those multilateral institutions that are designed to address WICKED problems – such as pandemics or climate change. The key question is how to avoid the split becoming an unbridgeable gap that undermines the actions of both sides. This needs to be tended to, creatively, for the next COP. It may be time to rethink the shape of the COP tent.

A growth in polarising rhetoric across the board

In keeping with the previous conclusion, the result of the strategy we observed on behalf of COP26-Online, has two main consequences. On the one hand, as we outlined above, it allows for a reframing of climate mobilisation.

The flip side of the coin however is that defiance towards the financial sector, corporates, and governments contributes to a rhetoric that can easily be amalgamated with that of the populists.

By fanning the flames of distrust toward a mix of elites (finance, business, media, governments), such a framing can replicate the more toxic aspects of populist politics and play into their hands.

The objectives of each side are vastly different, but in the context of online conversations the worthiness of Thunberg et al's objectives and messages may get lost and, at worst, get used by climate policy detractors and populists to argue that *everyone* mistrusts elites, and that their own stance is nothing but the 'common sense' of the people who are tired of being lied to. The risk is for the polarisation present in so many other sectors – between those who trust and those who don't trust elites – to undermine the sphere of climate action.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, although populist anti-climate mobilisation was no match for the focus of climate activists and pro-climate civil society in COP26-Online, we know that deniers, detractors and delayers are mounting considerable challenges to climate policy. The COP-26 forum was not something they chose to engage much with. But their actions are continuous and effective as other research makes clear.

In particular the close ties between climate scepticism and the more nationalist wings of mainstream conservative parties is something that deserves greater attention – perhaps not in the context of COP.

The UK and the US seem to be at the forefront of these developments – the UK's net Zero Watch party and its ties to the Conservative party, the US Republicans continues support for Trump views (including climate views) are obvious examples of where the cultural and political climate challenge is going to take place. But in continental Europe too (with one of the world's most ambitious climate change policy packages) this is developing as well. The culture wars have not yet reached the same prominence or stridency, but the issue of climate, in the context of the broader energy crises is already being used as the new frontier between hard-line

conservatives (anti-liberal, 'anti-woke') who style themselves as defenders of ordinary freedoms and choices, and pro climate policy activists and governments.

Furthermore, the focus on climate justice is also something that they are more likely to pounce on – as financing other countries' transitions is a stance they will seek to counter. The more climate justice becomes prominent as a theme and as an objective, the more likely detractors of all kinds are likely to mobilise against it. There is the distinct possibility that as this gains in prominence (especially at the next COP)

that detractors will be far more ready to mobilise. Especially if Biden were to find himself in an even weaker position (the US midterm elections are to be held on November 8th, at the very beginning of COP27 – it is unlikely that Biden is going to do well, and it is even more unlikely that he will be able to give COP his full attention).

Populist dynamics on national stages will bleed into international UNFCCC space. So future COPs face even more heightened risk of being politicised and co-opted by populism. Just as the new Green leaders run out of patience.

Looking ahead to COP27

Some of the analytical observations concerning COP26 offer clear indications of where organisers and other interested parties should consider focusing:

- Greater focus should be paid to how online discourse around COP convenings integrates with the in-person meetings. This can address access and inclusion issues, and also speaks to the criticisms of "elites" not listening to broader voices. Given the increase in online engagement with COP as a platform, this is not an area to be ignored.
- Given the context of COP27 and the trends from COP24 – 26 observed in the project, by all accounts engagement and advocacy with COP27 will be greater than ever. Unique issues of human rights and equity are also likely to emerge and be prominent in online discourse. The implications of this for the organisers and interested parties are important.
- More embracing of public engagement, particularly online, particularly in the ongoing pandemic, can only serve the legitimacy and reach of COP as a platform for galvanising public support for climate progress.

Annex

We focused on the following key geographies: the US, the UK, and seven EU countries (France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Denmark, Sweden, and Spain). We monitored tweets and other social media across all languages, but the conversation around COP26 was 'global' and heavily biased toward English anyways.

To understand the flow of narratives, the team employed both human specialists and machine learning. The human team was a mix of sociologists, historians, data scientists, and other specialists.

Timelines for listening

This project was initiated in the summer of 2021. For the purpose of listening to active conversations on climate issues in the period before and during COP26, the project was active from August to December 2021. For the purpose of drawing historic context on prior online conversation around the COP summit, we engaged with dialogue going back to early 2018. (7)

Analytical focus areas targeting

Formulation of topics of interest inquiries was extremely diverse. The overall framework for interest area inquiries came from the project hypothesis developed by the collective team from E3G and Counterpoint.supervision team. However implementing these hypotheses required latitude in terms of identifying and gathering relevant data.

Within these boundaries, each week throughout the project, these broad targeting criteria for listening were narrowed down into specific queries. As examples, these ranged from following the reaction to climate related crises such as the US Wildfires or the floods in Germany to the reactions to a specific COP26 declaration.

Notes on sources

As an exercise to understand the complexity of online discussion, the methods used as many sources as were relevant and efficient for our analytical purposes. This resulted in what some might call "slow data"; meaning that value is not derived from volume, but meaning.

(7) Depending on any given specific inquiry, the Pre-COP period was from March 2021 to October 30, 21, although some specific time comparisons varied. The "COP26" period is defined as October 31, 2021 to November 12, 2021. Additional collection of existing inquiries continued until December 1, 2021

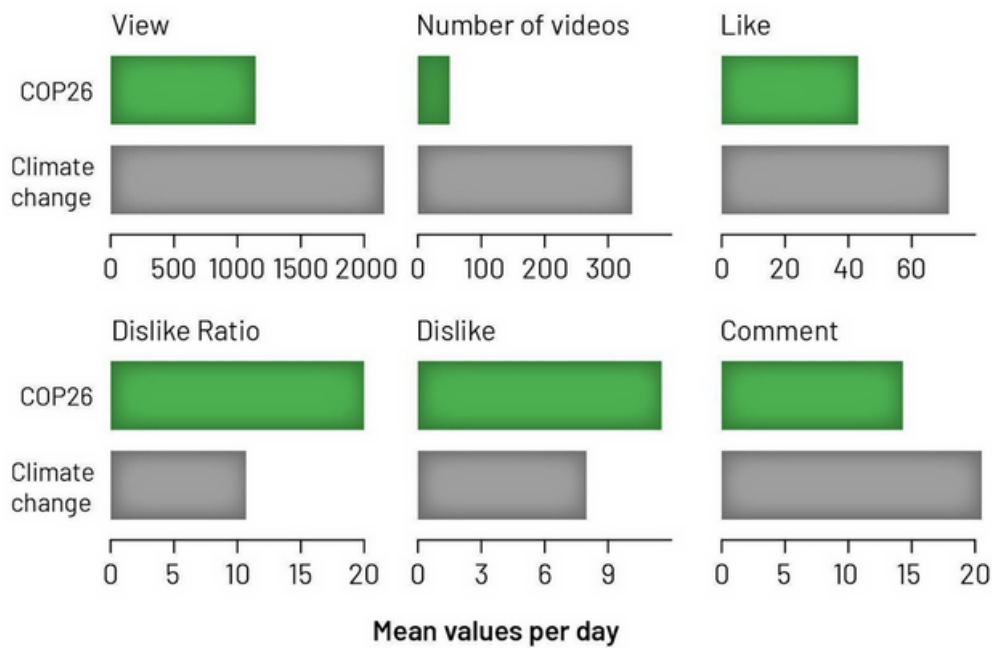
From the beginning, methods for inquiry were based on 'winnowing the haystack'. There was no shortage of data, but paying attention to collection meant effective targeting and clear filtering. The integrated team of analysts and data scientists worked daily to create queries that could meaningfully compare data from multiple sources to answer questions provided by policy stakeholders.

Our method required an opportunistic approach to data. As such, Twitter, with its open API and generous sharing permissions, was the primary source of dealing with active dialogue for collection and acted as a gateway to other sources. Broad based data from other platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and TikTok were collected based on their API accessibility, however targeted collection required effort by the human analyst team. YouTube in particular was an interesting source of insights despite requiring significant effort to sort manual collection. Reddit, Quora, Wikipedia and other smaller platforms were also queried where their open source data might have been relevant. The overall 'data pastiche' came from all of these platforms.

Traditional media sources were omnipresent as an influence in contextualising online dialogues. In specific instances, the research process identified specific media articles and sought to trace their reaction and influence online. More broadly, traditional media online outlets and their key influencer authors were included in the corpus of sources for collection across social media platforms. Active collection was also pursued across platforms including Wikipedia, Quora, TikTok and Reddit. Additionally, traditional media sources were used for both validation and as a means of tracking reactions/discussion in the above fora.

What types of conversations on what platforms?

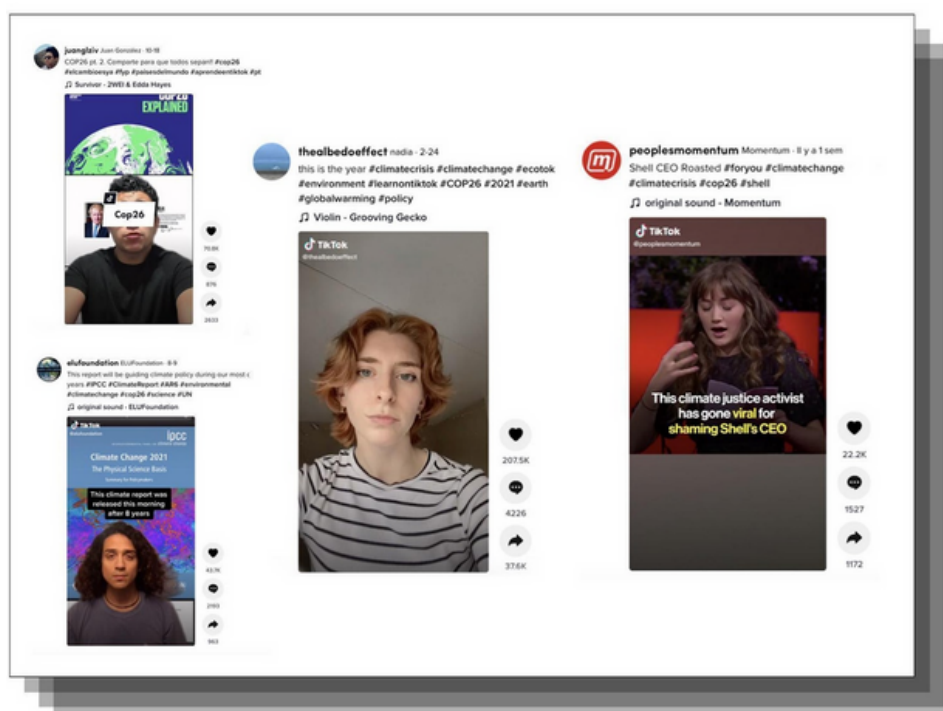
On YouTube, usually a bellwether for popular engagement, we found almost no User Generated Content (UGC) around COP 26 – far more on climate. In fact, COP26 trails climate change videos on all metrics (views, likes, etc)... except dislike. A strong signal that COP as signifier stirs up mainly negatives:



The **TikTok** story is interesting: While the number of videos on YouTube is higher, TikTok has a wider audience and broader engagement. TikTok also with its 'face to camera' mode seems to be used for more 'authentic' engagement: real people, demanding real change.

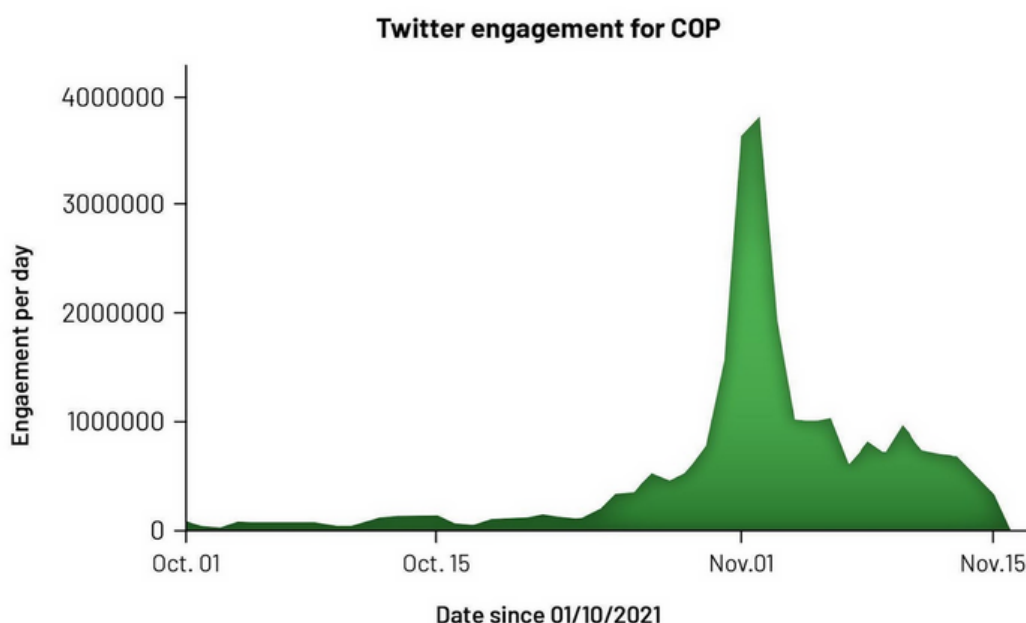
Highlight: Demanding Genuine Action on Tik Tok

The TikTok platform does not provide API access for automated collection. The manual collection scans focused on active discussion of COP26 which could be observed based on API availability. The trend of sentiments on TikTok were largely pro-Climate progress, but had a central theme of demanding action.



As for **Reddit**, with respect to COP 26, it is largely a place of localised dissent and criticism: Climate communities are much less concerned with –Online than local UK subreddits (like r/glasgow, r/ukpolitics...). For Reddit users, COP26–ONLINE is only one more international event with little impact on their life except when it takes place in their neighbourhood. Instagram provided the opposite of that—a small zone of positivity and enthusiasm largely the product of A-list celebrities, such as Blackpink, Leonardo Di Caprio or Aidan Gallagher which make it to the 8 TOP publications of COP26–ONLINE–Online.

Twitter, though, was by far the dominant platform for social media discussions during COP26–ONLINE – engaging all of the main actors involved in global climate politics, national representatives and activists. Although engagement was exponential during the time of the event, in the pre-COP phase there was little intersection between COP26 online discourse and other key climate conversations during this period.



The spike of engagement for COP26 on Twitter closely tracks to the period of the in-person convening. Prior to event, increases in traffic were mainly related to actors pre-positioning their organisations / individual policy frameworks. The follow-up period showed continued traffic but has not been analysed for sentiment.

The combination of low-volume traffic on popular social networks and the dominance of Twitter suggests that COP26 was not the focus of popular interest across a broader array of social platforms. Among the current leading social media platforms, Twitter has a bias towards users who are more connected with traditional means of policy discourse. Often the weight of Twitter discussions can be shaped by voices with strong linkages to traditional platforms such as TV or Print media, as these actors have more embedded followers and therefore the chance to influence debate. Therefore on Twitter, COP26–Online became a highly politicised event that set the scene for an elite conversation. Later in this report we discuss what appeared to be the beginnings of a leadership struggle between established climate agenda elites and a new generation of climate leaders.

Counterpoint

Counterpoint is a research and advisory group whose focus is on the social and cultural dynamics that drive politics and markets. Based in London, Counterpoint provides NGOs, businesses and governments with strategic insights on the new landscapes of risk and uncertainty.

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