

# FUELLING THE FLAMES

YouTube monetizes climate disinformation



#### Introduction

In 2022, an area of tropical forest the size of Qatar was lost to deforestation in the Amazon. Globally, we are seeing unprecedented wildfires and rising temperatures. Governments are scrambling to meet their climate pledges in order to stop runaway climate change – all while tech companies like YouTube monetize disinformation that is only exasperating the crisis. From videos pushing disinformation about Amazon deforestation, climate change and Indigenous land rights, Youtube is breaking its very own policies, and even profiting from this harmful content.

Well known Brazilian and global brands like Lyft, Calvin Klein, Budweiser, Panasonic and Samsung, as well as environmental and human rights groups like Friends of the Earth UK, UNICEF and the Peace Corps, are appearing next to extreme climate denial content and conspiracy theories, effectively pouring money into the pockets of conspiracy theorists and climate deniers. Ekō researchers found top name apparel, electronics, and drink brands appearing next to videos suggesting actor Leonardo DiCaprio funded non-governmental organizations to commit arson in the Amazon. Other false claims include that the rainforest is too humid to catch fire, and that man-made global warming is a lie.

The research comes as YouTube is under growing pressure from advertisers after <u>revelations</u> that ads placed on third party websites as part of YouTube's True View system were hidden from audiences who had little or no interaction with them – leaving advertisers feeling scammed, while YouTube raked in the profits. The research by AdAlytics adds to the growing sense among advertisers that the industry is spending millions on programmatic advertising but has little control on where ads are placed.

Over a four week period, Ekō researchers reviewed a sample of 60 videos containing disinformation and conspiracy theories about Amazon deforestation, Indigenous rights and climate change. 40 videos in the sample were in Portuguese and 20 were in English. Of the sample of 60 videos, 41 were monetized, and researchers identified over 150 brands appearing alongside the material.



Ekō researchers were able to corroborate if the YouTube channels in the research were monetized by reviewing the channels' source code. Researchers analyzed the code string "is\_monetization\_enabled" in order to confirm whether a channel was being monetized by YouTube. Researchers then used the social analytics tool <a href="Social Blade">Social Blade</a> to estimate the earnings for each YouTube channel using common industry <a href="Cost Per Mille">Cost Per Mille</a> (CPM) metrics.

#### **Key findings**

- A network of conspiracy theorists and extremist influencers are being given free rein to push disinformation – some of which are clearly in breach of <u>Google's own policy</u> of monetising videos that "contradict authoritative scientific consensus on the existence of and causes behind climate change."
- The channels in the sample earn a combined estimate of \$636K to \$10.1M annually through monetization.
- The channels in the sample had over 40 million subscribers and the videos have racked up over 5 million views.
- Brands such as Lyft, Salomon, Calvin Klein and Tommy Hilfiger as well as companies promoting solar panels and even Friends of the Earth UK ads are appearing next to videos denying man-made climate change and rejecting the existence of Amazon forest fires.
- High profile climate change deniers are still racking up millions of views on YouTube. Right wing channels like NewsMax, the Heartland Institute and others are hosting well-known figures from the climate denial movement like Ricardo Felicio, Marc Morano and William Happer.
- Researchers found several more big brands next to videos peddling the
  conspiracy theory that foreign governments, media and other 'bad'
  actors are lying about Amazon deforestation in order to secure access
  to the wealth of resources there, and are setting fire to the rainforest to
  boost fundraising efforts.

The research comes as several high stakes legislative battles are waged in Brazil, and where the proliferation of disinformation and conspiracy theories are helping to derail efforts by the Lula Administration to advance policy agendas around Amazon protection, Indigenous land rights and social media regulation.

Pro-Bolsonaro allies in the lower house of Brazil's Congress passed the

controversial bill 490/2007 earlier this year. It potentially opens the door to road-building, mining and other large scale industrial operations; allows the government to reclaim land from Indigenous communities as well as invalidating historical Indigenous claims to their ancestral lands.

The proliferation of disinformation on YouTube is softening political and public opposition to the plans, and increasing the chances of it being voted through the Senate and becoming law.

The research also comes as the Lula Administration continues to diligently work to pass tough new laws to regulate social media, such as PL 2630/2020. The attempted coup on Brazil's capital on January 8th, and the role of YouTube, Facebook and other social media platforms in facilitating the anti-democratic uprising led Lula's Administration to fast track strict new regulations to rein in powerful tech companies. The bill has been subject to intense lobbying by the tech industry, <a href="Led by Google">Led by Google</a>. Google has gone so far as <a href="Lobby">Lobby</a> to hire former right-wing Brazilian President Michel Temer to lobby lawmakers to oppose Brazil's Fake News bill, which seeks to force social media giants to regulate fake news and disinformation on their platforms.

This report only strengthens the case for legislation that prevents platforms from monetizing and profiting from disinformation and lies that are subverting the legislative process.

# YouTube is monetizing conspiracy theories about Amazon deforestation and Indigenous land rights

Many of the videos Ekō researchers identified were related to a conspiracy theory initially promoted by former Brazilian President Bolsonaro while in office, when he falsely accused non-governmental organizations (NGOs) of

starting forest fires in the Amazon, in order to manufacture a crisis that will allow the groups to boost their fundraising.

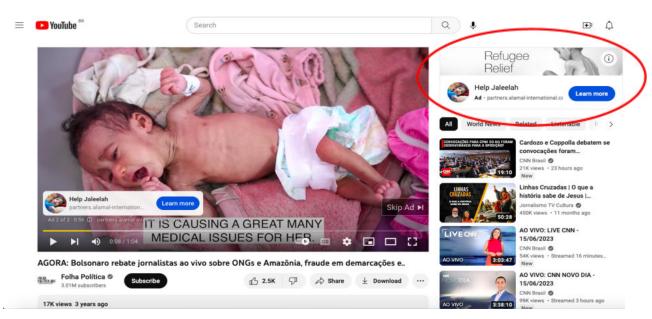
• In this <u>video</u> and <u>this video</u> Folha Politica, a well-established right-wing outlet in Brazil with more than 3 million subscribers, repeats the conspiracy pushed by <u>Bolsonaro</u> that NGOs started fires in the Amazon and used them to advance their fundraising and policy goals. The videos combined total over 27,000 views and the channel's yearly earnings are estimated to be between \$37K - \$590K. Several high profile brands' ads appear next to the videos including Lyft, the Peace Corps, refugee charity Alamal International, as well as well-known Brazilian brands like NotCo, Buscopan, and Gol airlines.



Ad for Lyft appearing next to disinformation video claiming NGOs started the Amazon fires

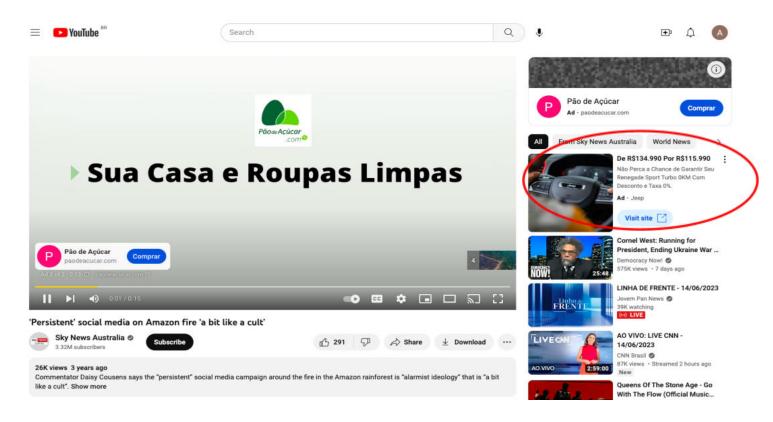


Ad for The Peace Corps appearing next to disinformation video claiming NGOs started the Amazon fires

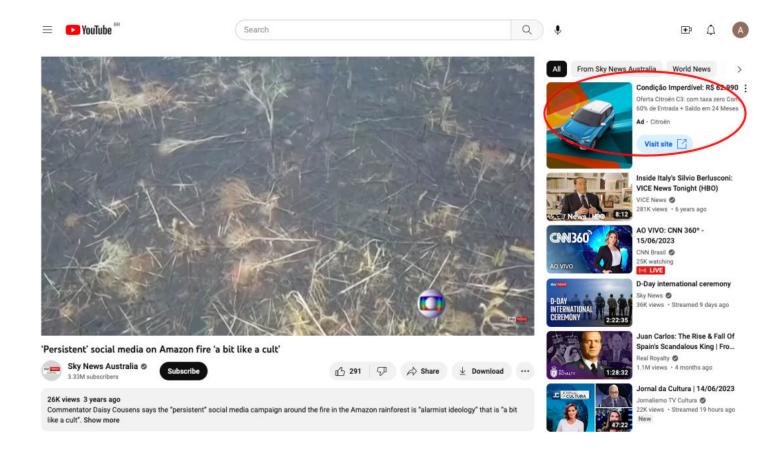


Ad for Alamal International appearing next to disinformation video claiming NGOs started the Amazon fires

This video and this video by climate skeptic media outlet Sky News
 Australia states that the Amazon rainforest isn't in danger nor is
 deforestation a problem, and that the Amazon fires are 'lies'. Together
 they have over 100,000 views and carry ads from global brands like
 Jeep and Citroën. The channel's estimated yearly earnings are between
 \$330.9K - \$5.3M.



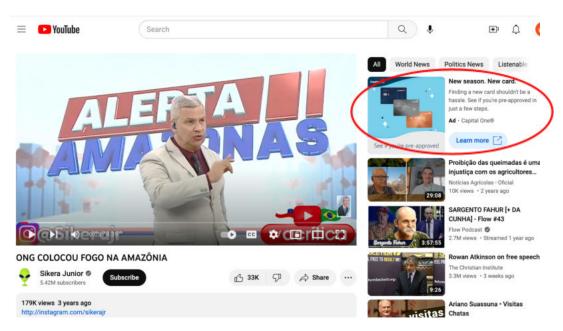
Ad for Jeep appearing next to disinformation video claiming that the Amazon fires are lies



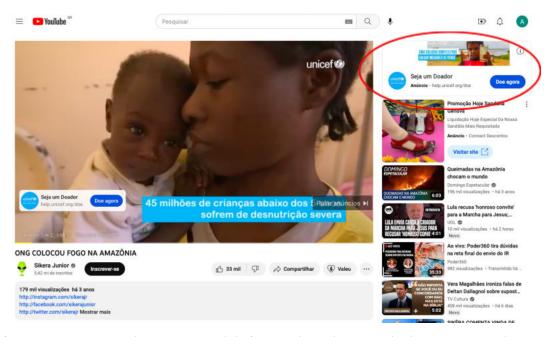
Ad for Citroën appearing next to disinformation video claiming that the Amazon fires are lies

• This video also pedals a popular conspiracy theory from 2019 that volunteer firefighters with links to NGOs deliberately started fires in the Amazon rainforest for fundraising purposes. Even though several firefighters were initially arrested, the case was eventually dismissed. Several videos circulating on YouTube continue to push this conspiracy theory. Ads from UNICEF, the NBA's Golden State Warriors and Capital One as well as several Brazilian brands like Skol appear next to the video. The video totals 179,000 views. The same influencer, Sikera Junior, in a second video repeats the same conspiracy theory that NGOs were igniting fires and filming it in order to fundraise from international organisations. Major global brands like Budweiser, Billie razors, Windstar

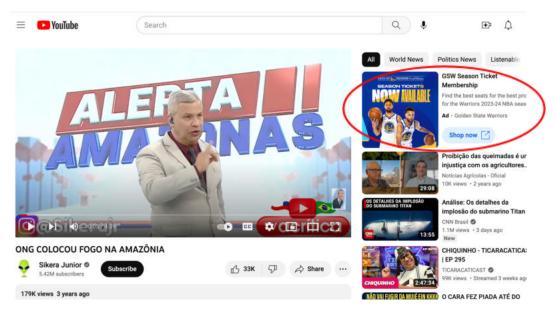
Cruises and Rexona (Unilever) appear alongside this video. It's estimated that yearly earnings of the channel are between \$22.8K - \$365.4K.



Ad for Capital One appearing next to disinformation video claiming NGOs deliberately started fires in the Amazon

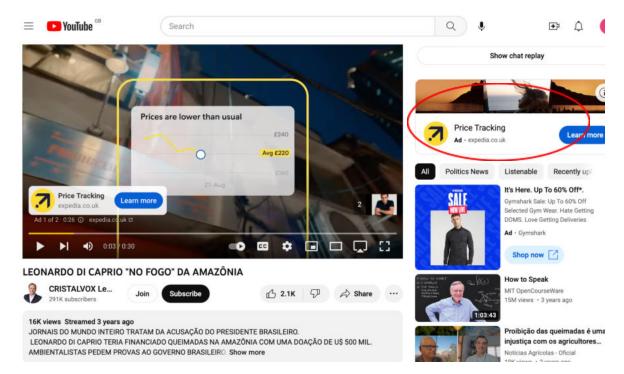


Ad for UNICEF appearing next to disinformation video claiming NGOs deliberately started fires in the Amazon



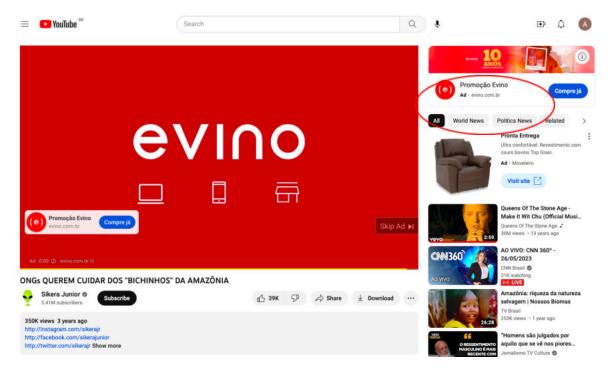
Ad for the Golden State Warriors appearing next to disinformation video claiming that NGOs are in the Amazon to simply extract gold and other minerals

• And this video promotes another Bolsonaro conspiracy that actor Leonardo di Caprio's donation of \$500,000 to NGO World Wildlife Fund would have funded the organization committing arson in the Amazon. The creator also compares the organisations working in the Amazon to the terrorist group ISIS. This video has over 16,000 views and global brands like luggage retailer Monos, Verizon, Expedia, Hoka, and Brazilian brands like Revista Oeste appear alongside it. When Ekō researchers typed "Di Caprio burns" in the YouTube search bar, the auto-complete recommended "Amazon" suggesting that the conspiracy theory is firmly established on the platform.



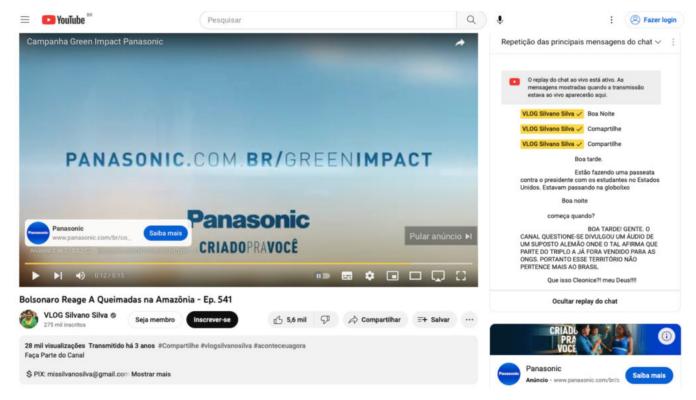
Ad for Expedia appearing next to disinformation video claiming that actor Leonardo di Caprio donated to an NGO which deliberately started fires in the Amazon

• Another <u>video</u> by Sikera Junior claims that NGOs use environmental concerns as a cover for their true motive: to extract and profit from resources in the region. The video also claims that the extent of forest fires and deforestation is either over exaggerated, or denies that it is happening at all. The video also falsely claims that NGOs are trying to extract resources like gold and niobium. It now totals 350,000 views and the channel itself has 5.4 million subscribers. Ads from major Brazilian brands like Evino, Dr Consulta and Empiricus are displayed alongside the video. The channel makes an estimated <u>\$22.8K - \$365.4K</u> earnings annually.



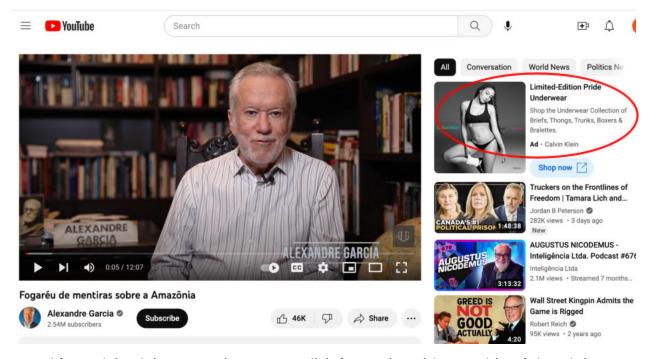
Ad for Evino appearing next to disinformation video claiming that NGOs are trying to extract resources from the Amazon

• A video by far right influencer, Silvano Silva, pushing the conspiracy theory that the extent of Amazon fires is overstated by NGOs, celebrities and foreign governments trying to advance their own agendas. Silva goes on to claim that Amazon forest fires are entirely the result of natural processes, and that deforestation has not increased overtime. Silva has 275,000 subscribers and the video was viewed 28,000 times and the channel has estimated earnings of up to \$18.2k per year. Panasonic as well as big Brazilian brands like Localiza, and Movavi appear next to the video.

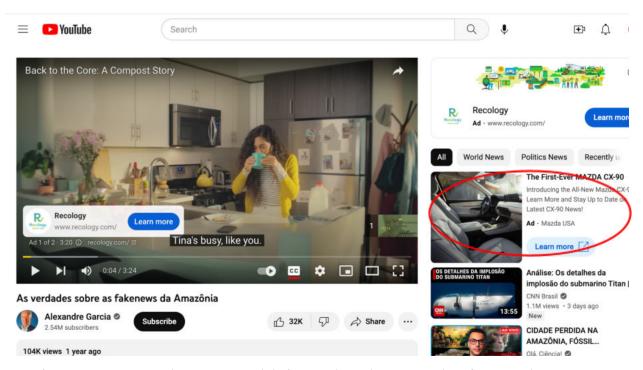


Ad for Panasonic appearing next to disinformation video denying deforestation and claiming Amazon forest fires are entirely the result of natural processes

• In this <u>video</u>, far right influencer Alexandre Garcia, pushes the false claim that high humidity levels make it impossible for the rainforest to burn. He also denies that Amazon fires increased during President Bolsonaro's time in office. The video has 219,000 views. In a <u>second video</u> he repeats these claims. The channel has estimated yearly earnings of between <u>\$14.6K - \$233.4K</u>. Prominent global and Brazilian brands like Recology, Calvin Klein, AAA, Mazda, Motorola, and Alaska Air are featured alongside the video.

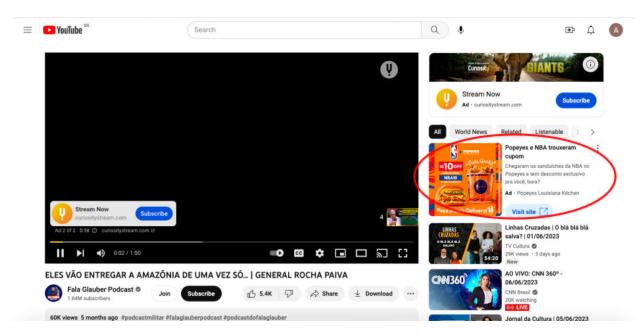


Ad for Calvin Klein appearing next to disinformation video pushing false claims around forest fires in the Amazon



Ad for Mazda appearing next to disinformation video pushing false claims around forest fires in the Amazon

• Podcaster Fala Glauber's YouTube channel gives airtime to right wing military figures claiming foreign interests are driving a plan to take over control of the Amazon to extract and profit from its natural resources. The interviewee falsely references a UN vote to turn the Amazon into an international sanctuary akin to Antarctica. The two episodes here and here together have nearly half a million views, and host ads from brands like Jeep, Popeyes, Selina.com, GWM, ClickUp, and Rentcars.com. The channel is monetized and receives an estimated \$107.1K - \$1.7M in yearly earnings.



Ad for Popeyes appearing next to disinformation video pushing false claims that foreign forces plan to take over control of the Amazon

In the last month, Brazil's lower house in Congress voted through bill PL490/2007, which would wreck the Amazon and indigenous land through large-scale industrial projects. Ekō researchers found some influencers spreading disinformation in support of the new legislation.

This <u>video</u> pushes the argument that the rainforest has no value unless its resources are exploited. He also claims that the bill will allow land disputes to be fairly settled between farmers and original land owners. The video has 2700 views and the channel's estimated annual earnings are between \$1.7K - \$26.5K.

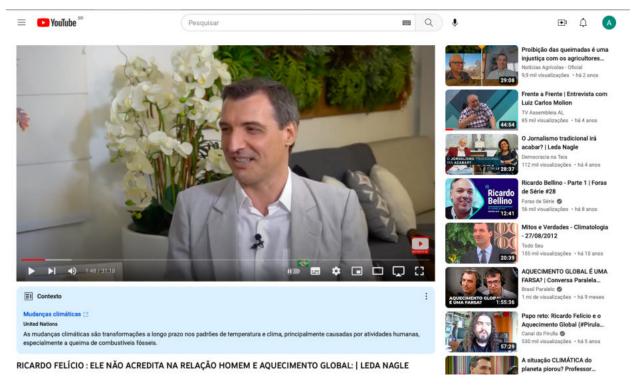
# YouTube's double standards: monetizing climate denial content

YouTube is still giving some of the most notorious climate deniers a platform and is monetizing their content with ads from big name brands, even though Google's own policy states that they won't earn ad revenue from content that is "contradicting authoritative scientific consensus on the existence of and causes behind climate change (e.g. climate change is a hoax, global warming doesn't exist, human activity is not responsible for climate change)."

YouTube has included information panels on many of these videos acknowledging that the subject of climate change is prone to misinformation. However much of this content still continues to be monetized.

• Ricardo Felício is one of the most notorious climate change deniers in Brazil and has spread climate disinformation for decades. His channel has 164,000 subscribers and is currently demonetized. However, numerous videos of Ricardo Felício spewing climate disinformation can be found on other monetized YouTube channels. In this video of Felício he claims that climate change is a hoax and the video has 186,000 views. Although Ekō researchers did not identify any ads on the video, the channel's source code confirms that it is monetized. The channel has estimated yearly earnings of between \$418 - \$6.7K. This video also features Felicio stating he doesn't believe climate change is caused by

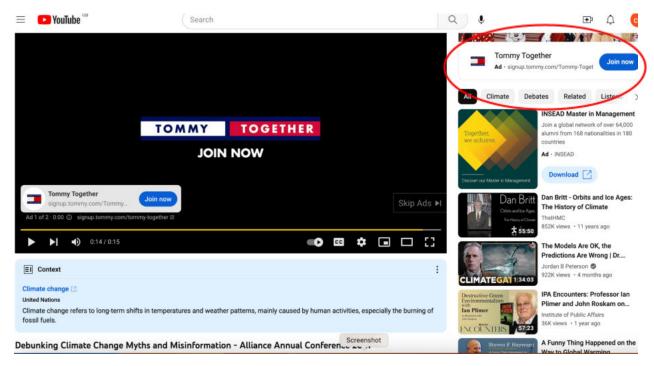
humans and that deforestation of the Amazon is a myth. The video has 380,000 views and the channel that hosts it has estimated yearly earnings of between \$7.5K - \$120.4K.



Ricardo Felício spreading climate and Amazon disinformation on a channel that has monetization turned on. Video features a YouTube information panel on climate change.

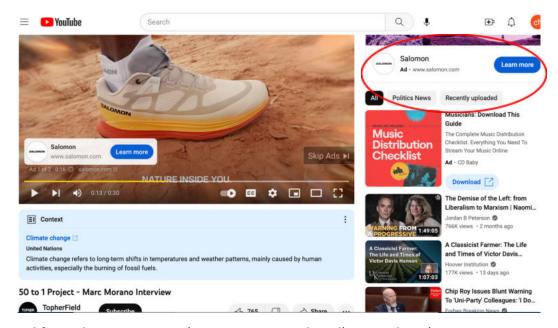
• This video featuring ex-Greenpeace founder and well-known climate skeptic, Patrick Moore, questions the scientific consensus on long term temperature changes and promotes the argument that more CO2 in the atmosphere will be beneficial. Ads from University of California Berkeley, Land Rover, and Mazda are featured. The video has 136,000 views and the channel that hosts it has estimated yearly earnings of between \$5.3K - \$84.1K.

• The Texas Alliance on Energy YouTube channel hosts a range of climate skeptic content including this video titled 'Debunking Climate Change Myths and Misinformation". Ads for a solar panel price checking tool (solarsavingschecker.org), Tommy Hilfiger and a UK charity (the Donkey Sanctuary) all appear alongside the video. Although the channel is not monetized, YouTube is allowing ads to appear on the video.



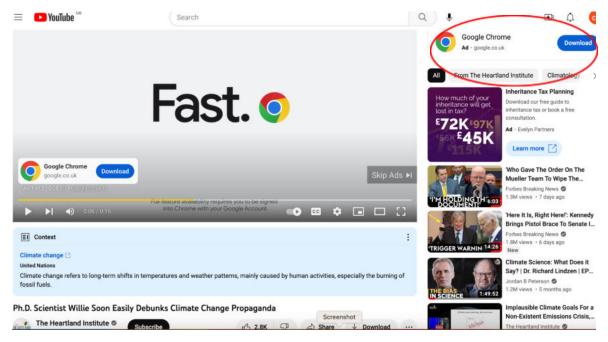
Ad for Tommy Hilfiger appearing next to disinformation video claiming to debunk climate change

Marc Morano is a leading climate skeptic and is featured in <u>this video</u>
defending the environmental credentials of fracking, suggesting there is
no need to shut coal plants. Ads from major brands like Salomon,
Georgetown University, as well as the Peace Corps can be found on the
video.



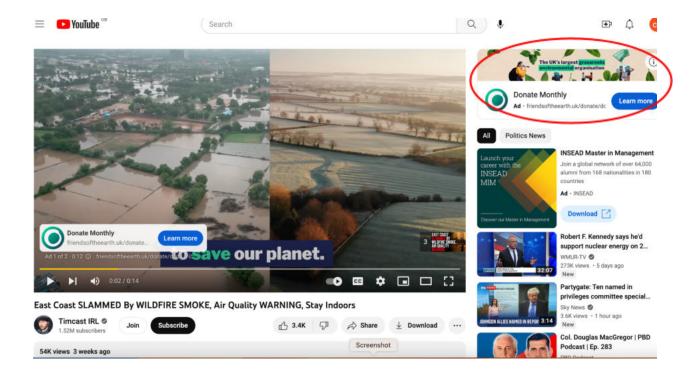
Ad for Salomon appearing next to popular climate skeptic Marc Morano

 The Heartland Institute's YouTube channel is a major purveyor of climate denialism and <u>this video</u> titled: "Ph.D. Scientist Willie Soon Easily Debunks Climate Change Propaganda" carries adverts from Miro and even from Google itself for Google Chrome - placing its own ads on a video that breaks its own policy.



Ad for Google Chrome appearing next to climate denial content

Tim Pool's Timcast IRL is a hotbed of far right extremism, including climate denial. In this panel discussion covering the wildfire-induced air pollution in the North East of the US this year, he rebuffs the idea that wildfires and other extreme weather events are increasing in frequency and intensity as a result of climate change. An ad from Friends of the Earth UK calling for donations to 'save our planet' appears as the pre-roll ad. The channel has estimated yearly earnings of between \$107.3K - \$1.7M.



Ad for Friends of the Earth appearing next to content denying the effects of climate change

#### Recommendations

- 1) Google should review and revise its policies to explicitly address climate disinformation and conspiracy theories around the climate crisis. Under the EU's new Digital Services Act (DSA), by August 25th Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs) like Google, which owns YouTube, will be legally required to comply with specific obligations, including what measures they will take to tackle disinformation, including climate disinformation.
- 2) Google must stop placing advertisements on content and channels that promote climate denial, effectively ending their profiting and support of climate disinformation.
- 3) Google must be more transparent about how and where advertisers' ad dollars are being spent and next to which content their brands are appearing. Currently, leading brands invest millions in YouTube ads, but their ad revenue is shared with creators who spread disinformation and climate conspiracy theories, contradicting the values and climate commitments of these brands.
- 4) Google should revise and broaden its definition of climate disinformation, which is currently too narrow. The current definition fails to encompass the full range of harmful content that obstructs global action to tackle climate change.
- 5) Google must bolster its content moderation systems and resources to identify and take down climate disinformation in all languages, including by hiring more content moderators with sufficient understanding of the local context; and providing them with fair pay and decent working conditions. Content moderation resources should match the number of users in each country/language.
- 6) Google should actively support legislative efforts, including supporting Brazil's PL2630 "Fake News Bill", to address disinformation. This includes the cessation of illegal lobbying practices in the country.

# Annex I: List of all advertisers found in the research

#### Major international/global brands/companies (32):

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Panasonic	Buscopan	Mitsubishi Motors	Clear men (Unilever)
Rexona (Unilever)	Budweiser	Jeep Motors	Popeyes Louisiana Kitchen
UNICEF	Citroen	Fiat	Verizon
Samsung	Mazda	Landrover	Capital One
Google Chrome	Salomon	Tommy Hilfiger	Hoka
ААА	Motorola	UC Berkeley	Marshalls
GWM Motors	Pan Am Flight Academy	Peace Corps	Golden State Warriors
Wall Street Journal	Hotels.com	Georgetown University	Alamal International Charity

### Major Brazilian brands/companies (21):

Droga Raia	Elo	Localiza	NotCo.	Evino	Dr. Consulta	iFood
Empiricus	Renner	Quinto Andar	Emma Colchões	USP	Lupo	Pão de Açúcar

Cobasi	PagBank/ PagSegur	Skol	C6 Bank	Turma da Mônica	Bradesco	Kavac
	0					

## Small to midsize brands (Brazilian and international) (35):

ClickUp	Hostinger. com.br	Movavi	DS Autopeça s	Vitarella	Rent Cars	Lojas Carrera
Revista Oeste	Origym	Gazeta do Povo	Métrica Topo	Orguel	Voupra.c om	Tenda Atacado
Flixbus	Selina.co m	Instituto Universal	Transfer English	Monday	Omint	1, 2, 3 milhas
Faculdad e Belas Artes	Alarmes Verisure	Descarpa ck	Contabiliz ei	Grupo Afeet	Casa Decor	Prio
Miro	Intuit	Alaska Airlines	Wix	Casper	Friends of the Earth UK	West Virginia University

### Lesser known brands (Brazilian and international (71):

Iron drone	Jornal saúde	Printi	The Wing Girl Method	Conversão Extrema	Colombo-H ard Imigração
Dr. Frederico Porto	Moveleiro	Pé saudável	Ravena Shop	Memozil	Brazer.com
Arquivo de Notícias	MyPulseTec	NuuBuo Official	Curso sobre com ficar rico	Ficar Mais Alto	Final Press Brew

Blazee	Maxi Oil	Arvoresfrutif erasemvas o.com.br	Casas Tokio	Portalsaude ms.com.br	Brasil Paralelo
CA Evento em SP	The Flirt Method	UE Study Germany	Aki Mania	Beleaf	Greentable
Grupo Nomura	Minha Casa na Loja	Connect Descontos	Vinejad	Hello Manual (calvície)	Trade China
Joyce Gumero	Oi Case	Instituto Greco	Rondon Imobiliária	Concerto Candlelight (Fever)	Curiosity Stream
Gamberini	Fractal Tour Moments	Rise Workout	Escola Verdade Histórica	Minimal Clue	Matt Walsh
NoGeoblock	Glico.co	Clean My Mac X	Inteligência Já	Sonofix	Off-Grid Power
O Segredo (livro autoajuda)	Inspire Uplift	Queima Diária	Wesley E-sports	Pina Parma	Epoch times
Data bricks	Better Help	NA-KD	Fceda	EcoFlow Official	Solar estimate.or g
Recology	Monos	Billie	Haverdash	Animal Equality UK	