

Reining in the Bulls with Michael Marx
Interview with Michael Khoo of Upshift Strategies
Recorded July 31, 2025

Name: Michael Khoo

Current Title: Co-Founder

Current Organization: Upshift Strategies

Current Campaign: Climate Action Against Disinformation (CAAD) Coalition

Campaign Title: Policy Co-chair, CAAD Coalition, Friends of the Earth

Summary: The Climate Action Against Disinformation coalition has focused on stopping social media platforms from over amplifying the marginal views of climate deniers, especially the ones paid by the oil industry. It advocates for transparency to expose the hidden ways that tech billionaires and fossil fuel companies attempt to create a false reality. The CAAD Coalition's objectives are to focus on protecting the broader information environment and preventing the intermediaries such as social media and advertising companies from promoting and monetizing lies.

00:03 Michael Marx:

Michael Khoo, thanks for agreeing to this interview about some of the issues that are surrounding artificial intelligence that might become the subject for corporate ethics campaigns.

00:15 Michael Khoo:

My pleasure. Thanks for having me.

00:16 MM:

I'm really grateful. Before we get into the interview, could you give us the name of your organization and your position?

00:26 MK:

Sure. I'm Michael Khoo. I'm the co-founder of Upshift Strategies, a communications strategy firm, but also the policy co-chair for the Climate Action Against Disinformation Coalition. And I started the disinformation program at Friends of the Earth in the United States.

00:45 MM:

All right. Great. Can you give me a one-minute summary of your recent corporate campaign related experience and especially what's kind of led you to where you're at right now?

00:56 MK:

Sure. This campaign that we developed has focused on reducing climate disinformation as a sort of big picture goal. Within that question, the obvious people spreading climate denial were the social media platforms that were algorithmically over amplifying the marginal views of primarily conservative right-wing people and oil industry paid people. Our objectives were to focus on the intermediaries, the social media companies. And from about 2020 to 2023, for that three-year period, we had a lot of really unprecedented success going to the companies saying, here's a small group of people that we've mapped out.

01:41 MK:

We can now do network analysis to see both the narratives but also the networks of who is pushing which messages and whether that's being done in what I would call a fair way, a fair way for the public commons. So we presented that evidence to Facebook, and they took some considerable action by building a climate science information center in order to counter that disinformation. It wasn't ultimately successful, but it was a pretty dramatic move of them to push that forward at the beginning. Then we went on to Twitter, got a policy from them to create a particular space on climate change conversations. We got Google to give us a demonetization policy, which is the other part of the problem, which is that disinformation is a giant, multibillion dollar industry of grifters and criminals.

02:35 MK:

And so, getting them to demonetize the industry. And then we helped Pinterest with their policy and TikTok gave us one. So we got all of the biggest of the big names of the big seven that we could hope for and pushed them initially for that first three year period to give us policies with the basic agreement that climate disinformation is a bad thing for society. And they want to help make a better, safer, online environment, information environment. So those are the good stories. There are bad stories to follow.

03:07 MM:

There always are, especially in the social and environmental movement. You, through Friends of the Earth, helped prepare a 2024 report entitled Artificial Intelligence Threats to Climate Change. What were some of the major findings of the report regarding the environment?

03:28 MK:

We decided to get into this because, as you know, the line between social media and artificial intelligence companies and technology rapidly was blurring. And we knew that all the things that we want, what we care about is the information environment. And AI instantly is going to be affecting the information environment. That was the initial promise, and it's certainly bearing true.

03:50 MK:

So we looked at the challenge, the onset of AI from two lenses. One was the information environment and how it would make disinformation worse, or how it could and how it certainly was going to make everything much more opaque, where you had less and less understanding

of who was giving you which answers. And the second half of it, which was really quite new for us as sort of policy people focused on the information infrastructure, was the energy costs of artificial intelligence, which we can see since we wrote that report are astronomical, causing for the first time a spike in US energy use for some in twenty years, stressing the grid, causing reopening of gas plants, nuclear plants, etcetera. And half the reason we went after that half of the conversation was because if you look at the PR campaigns of all of the tech leaders, they all say AI is going to make you live forever. It's going to do this and that. All sorts of promises are going to eliminate poverty, and it's also going to save the planet. And everyone does it exactly like that, like a "dot dot dot" ... and save the planet. We're going to solve climate change with AI. And the people who say that also happen to be people who have no understanding of climate change, no background in it whatsoever. But they have this faith, this very religious faith in their technology that it will just be so smart, it will solve all problems.

05:18 MK:

So we really were deeply offended by the callousness by which the claim was to be made that they would save the environment with no basis for it whatsoever. And we deconstructed some of the claims of what AI could do for the planet. And that was one interesting part of it. The other part is just to look at the raw amount of energy that was being poured into this at a time when we have energy shortages, that we have a shortage of renewables coming on the board? And do we want to be having such a massive expansion of energy use that has effects on communities, effects on water, effects on now we see local ratepayers, in addition to just land use things for any of the communities that live in that area.

06:03 MK:

So a pretty broad report, short and broad report to just lay the marker to say there was an information environment problem. There's an actual energy use problem. And over all of that, there was really a PR problem that they were using climate as a fig leaf to justify a whole bunch of other terrible things that they were doing to the planet.

06:24 MM:

Were there also some findings around artificial intelligence impact on democracy? I mean, I can see where all much of this and the disinformation would bleed into that, but was that also addressed?

06:38 MK:

That's exactly it. I mean, the argument or the findings really in that area are that artificial intelligence reduces the cost of disinformation to practically zero. So that is useful for people who are trying to destroy democracy. And instead of hiring an army of monkeys to be doing things like you see in the Superman movie, what you have is vastly fewer people. It reduces the cost of producing disinformation. That's one problem, just the production. The second is the distribution of it. And this gets into the opaque nature of how AI systems work, which is that they are much more closed than even the Twitter platform, TwitterX is. One of the good things of Twitter back in the day was they had an open API. And much of what we all know about the harms online came because of that open access.

07:41 MK:

We all got in, we researched, we could see who was causing which narratives and the harms that they were having. That, I mean, Dario Amodei will say himself in interviews that they're not sure how AI produces the answers it produces. They have a field of study called mechanistic determination, just to study what they created, what it's outputting, how it is outputting, what it's outputting, which is just absolutely insane for any other product or industry in history. Like, you imagine a car manufacturer saying like, oh, we don't know how the wheel got in that place and the engine got in that place. That is exactly what the machine that they built does do.

08:23 MK:

And that's a problem for us to understand. If you don't know what it's doing, you can't even begin to say what the harms are, nor even how you would change any of the harms. So the vastly greater level of opacity is a huge problem. And then I think the corporate concentration and marriage with the other platforms and looking at XAI and that interchange, the way Meta and Google have both deeply embraced AI as part of their information environment is dangerous. And you can see that search Google is a great example to think through because search had already been eviscerated since about 2018 when they decided to put the head of advertising on top of the head of search, which was really a terrible cataclysmic decision for those of us who want accurate information. And outside of AI, that has led to just a vastly worse experience in trying to find answers. And so they have now overlaid Gemini on top of that, which just only threatens to make things vastly more opaque. So you don't have understanding of the links of where any of the information came from. And it's threatening to actually redirect traffic away from more verified news sources. And you can already see that very strong trend going downward in that direction.

09:51 MM:

You know, what's so fascinating to me is that this report and your work, really has this kind of cutting edge issue nature in that there's this intersection between social media, artificial intelligence, and the threats to democracy, and the dynamic or the interplay of those. And it feels to me like as we go forward with corporate ethics campaigns into the future and civil society's efforts, that this really is going to be one of the top priorities that they've got to figure out how to deal with.

10:32 MK:

Absolutely. I mean, this issue has been intersectional from the get go in a way that I think goes beyond a lot of the performative way we use that word in a lot of the progressive movement. And we found this out by going to almost any policymaking body about it. So we will go to Capitol Hill in Washington, DC and say to the environment staffer, you need to take on climate disinformation or you're not going to pass a Build Back Better bill, for example. And they would say, "well, disinformation and tech systems -- you go talk to the tech staff. I got no time for this." So we go talk to the tech staff. They're like, "we don't care about climate change. We're just like an information policy here." And so they would play hot potato with the issue. And that's both the blessing and the curse of it, is that it is the responsibility of both, which

sometimes means it's the job of none. We found this actually then even much more deeply and kind of much more in a way that made us feel much better, we found this across the progressive movement, and we ended up joining forces with a lot of other people in coalition because what we found out is that the battle to stop climate disinformation from torpedoing the policy that all Americans want, the people globally want, that battle is the same as the battle to protect trans youth online. It's the same as the battle to protect healthcare workers from disinformation.

11:59 MK:

It is the same networks that are being abused by a small number of people. So if you solve the top level problem of having transparency, safety and accountability of our online products, you solve it for one, you solve it for everyone. And that really pushed us to come up out of our identities and our silos to say, for example, we got 16 environmental groups to sign on to this transparency legislation in the House that didn't mention climate change at all. And that was probably, what I felt like in some weird way, was one of the most successful things I've done in my career was to convince us to get out of our silos, to do something that is good for the whole, of which we will be one of many silos that benefit from it.

12:43 MM:

You know, one of the things that you remind me of is that one of my criticisms of the progressive movement is how siloed it has been for so many years. And, what this is forcing, climate change is forcing it, but now social media is forcing it, threats to democracy are forcing it, there's much more active intersectional dynamics across these civil society groups. Which leads me to the question, what were the recommendations, just in general -- I know there were many, but what were some of the major recommendations from the report that you all prepared on this?

13:23 MK:

Well, it's funny that the recommendations for the AI industry were almost cut and pasted from our previous tech work because what we try to do is try to get people to instead of thinking about technology policy to think instead about airplanes and sausages. So how do we regulate these very common products that both have threats and benefits for society? And out of every product we expect in society, we have a reasonable standard expectation of safety of the product. You want transparency of what's going on and you want accountability.

14:02 MK:

So a plane says that it's not going to go down. They have transparency because you can see a lot of safety systems that they have. And when a plane does go down, the first thing they share is the flight recorder, and they share that with the whole industry. The level of transparency that the airline industry had to create in the 1950s was born out of widespread fear of getting in this tube of metal to fly at 30,000 feet. And so they said, we're going to show you every little bit to guarantee your safety. And it is a phenomenal system when you look at that compared to, and I think that got mirrored in sausage making and McDonald's supply chain, that they became much more transparent in the 80s so that you can at least see things.

14:42 MK:

There's nothing perfect about either of those systems, but people were bought into the concept of safety, accountability, and transparency. So in general, we say, let's not think about AI or any technology as anything different from our normal expectations. So the first thing is those three parts. That's the highest level. There were some smaller or more specific things about how you focus on any particular network and what you do with networks that are behaving badly. But that's the top level of it.

15:14 MM:

Good. So let's transition into the priorities for NGO advocacy campaigns. How high a priority do you think this needs to be, and how critical are NGO campaigns to actually getting these changes, both in the industry and from the government with regulations?

15:35 MK:

Well, I mean, it's a bit self-serving of me to say this because I'm building a coalition of groups to be interested in it. But I have in the white paper that we wrote in 2018 to first kick this idea off at Friends of the Earth and then spread it to the US, the big green environmental groups, the basic single sentence case was you will pass no climate policy if you don't pass tech policy. So all of your other campaign goals and desires, they're all going to be crushed if we do not deal with the information environment, which is, and my threat was, look how rapidly this has been taken over from 2004 when the "Dean-iacs" nearly overtook the DNC from the Obama presidency, which was an Internet driven presidency, to 2016, when Trump and MAGA took over the White House and very much using social media in a different weaponized way. We had the initial advantage, and we absolutely lost it through a variety of different reasons that we could get into. We were in a new weaponized environment.

16:42 MK:

So we said that in 2018. And to their credit, most of the groups were like, yeah, that does sound like an oncoming problem. Doesn't sound like mine, but sounds like a problem. I'll let someone come to a meeting once or twice. And so then, much to our horror, but also to our luck, January 6 happened. And finally, we got funding after that, where people realized that disinformation clearly had led to the January 6 violence. And there were real world impacts. If it's going to happen there, it's going to happen to us too. Our issues are going to get stormed, like the capital. So that helped us build it into a legitimate coalition.

17:19 MK:

But I will say, to this day, we have to fight for the staff people within our coalition to maintain their job description because even within organizations, it's like, "Is it a problem for the communications department? Is it the social media intern's problem? Is it the CEOs or the campaign director?" Or some people sent their IT director to the meeting, which we mapped them out actually on an org chart. And we got everybody who came to our meetings, like the highest and the lowest and the sideways people within an organization were all coming. And while that's flattering, it does indicate that it's nobody's responsibility. And so our job has to say

it needs to sit within a funded person who will say, this is what I'm going to do. I'm going to pull the organization together on this issue. I'm going to pull myself towards other organizations on the issue.

18:13 MM:

Just the fact that it's distributed across different departments in NGOs suggests that they don't quite yet understand the implications as well as the system that they're up against.

18:27 MK:

They didn't, and I think there's a big picture thing that obviously the progressives are waking up to, how we've lost our information environment. But it's a multilevel problem because we saw it within the organization, it's a problem. Within departments, it's a problem. Within the movement, it's a problem. And so that nobody knows exactly where it is. But everybody will agree with the first question. Is social media and AI a problem for getting your word out? Yes, everybody agrees with that. Or for moving policymakers, what we do about it then gets too complicated. Let me get out of here and tell me who's going to solve it. So our job has been to make sure that people understand it is core to their future. And it is only going to become a much, much stronger and worse issue now that we have a group of tech oligarchs, and fascists running the country. Those problems are only, and we can already see them, explodingly worse.

19:23 MM:

So that's a nice segue into my next question, which is what companies should be the immediate focus of NGO campaigns? For example, which ones are really linchpins for controlling AI, disinformation, social media, etcetera, that intersection?

19:42 MK:

There's the five or so major obvious companies that we have already campaigned on that still continue to be some of the most influential. You would probably only add OpenAI to Google, Meta, but even the use of AI within a lot of other smaller platforms. And obviously, TikTok is in there. It's a hard question to say which company to focus on because they are all trying to hide behind the worst of them, which would be X and their behavior.

20:19 MK:

You saw initially when there was a takeover of X that they laid off such a large percentage of staff and in particular, trust and safety. And that was followed by Mark Zuckerberg a year later or six months later, where he laid off some 75% of trust and safety. And that industry that was growing and robust has been vastly curtailed. So it's hard to focus on any one company. I'm pro regulatory for a reason.

20:54 MK:

I've always thought, and I think you and I, and actually in multiple decade conversations, have always thought that you push companies to a certain point. But the final solution is the people's will being expressed by democracy to put that into stone.

21:10 MM:

Yes.

21:11 MK:

And we're at the position now where the companies have almost no regulatory pressure whatsoever. In fact, you can point to the fact there has been no meaningful law passed on the large tech companies since the 90s. Nothing. And yet they sit there like the Marc Andreessens and the venture capitalists in that world who write these manifestos about how they've been bullied by the progressive, overly woke left and they're stifling innovation. Such deceitful language when these are people who have literally not had a single regulation passed on them. So I'm not hopeful for direct pressure on companies at this particular moment. It has worked in the past. It could work in the future. It could work in other countries. But right now, we are definitely focused on international regulatory pressure to rein in the broader markets across the world because the US is powerful, but there are only three hundred twenty million people. There's a good seven and a half plus billion people left on the planet who need to have a stronger voice.

22:28 MM:

Which is a nice segue into, I was going to ask about what government agencies and at what levels of government? You've mentioned already starting to work at the international level, understood. But I'm assuming national and at state levels as well? Especially given the current administration, you see a lot of shifting of strategy towards certain states that could really be themselves linchpins for kind of forcing change.

23:02 MK:

The state level is a great question, especially around AI, because recently we have had a number of state bills on tech policy from California to Minnesota, Vermont, New York, etcetera, and also throughout Utah. So the AI industry managed to nearly get into the last bill that got passed in Congress, a preemption against any state law against their industry. Any law -- it was absolutely unprecedented that that came so close to passing. This is a good day. Any law -- any democratically decided thing on a state level imposed on an AI company would be illegal. And so that's like water use, that's electricity rates. So there's pollution. We're not even talking about the information environment there, but also that.

24:03 MK:

So any harm that is caused by chatbots encouraging teens to kill themselves, like all those things, they're trying to prevent the natural thing that people say in America, that the states are the laboratory of democracy. They're trying to shut down the laboratory. And they were nearly successful in doing that. Where that goes is an open question if that comes back. They certainly said they're going to try and reintroduce it, even though they suffered that pretty humiliating defeat. So the states aren't very helpful for that one thing. There's some other things that state legislation can do, but the real solution is definitely for Congress to do it, not for the administration. I think we're all wary of giving the administration too much power and judgment on what are always going to be vague areas that people are still learning because it is

technology. I want it to have things that are enforced by Congress. And Congress has a very clear set of measures that we've all put in front of them on how they could regulate the industry again, just the same way we do a sausage.

25:14 MM:

Michael, given what you've said in terms of state governments and where the national government is right now in terms of even trying to limit state government action, it suggests a need for more of a public movement, to create that political pressure that ultimately legislators have got to move. Any sense as you look out there now, you're part of coalitions that are building, etcetera, are you seeing kind of a strategy going forward for building a stronger public movement? And by that, it probably goes back to one of our earlier points, greater connections between environment and labor and health and different sectors, silos of the NGO movement.

26:00 MK:

I would say, it still is pretty dark times going forward because what you're ultimately doing is asking Congress to do something. And that's obviously a challenge right now. But this issue has united people across such a cross section of different issues. So you have parents coming together for their children's mental health, for teen suicide. At the same time that you have groups concerned with seniors' rights, worried about the vast increase in online scams and targeting. At the same time, you have people who are focusing on climate disinformation like us or reproductive health providers worrying about the power of tech companies to be targeting people. So the coalitions that we've been a part of that this has naturally caused are as wide as the sea, because what we're talking about at the end of the day now is just simple power. And the tech lords who are now migrating into AI are concentrating both the power but broadening the breadth of that power. And so I really look at it in the same way. I just finished reading Brian Merchant's book "Blood in the Machine" a little while ago.

27:17 MK:

And looking at the Luddite uprising against the tech lords of the early 1800s in England, what all that uprising was about was just the abuse of power. It wasn't actually about technology. What we're all concerned about is the harms, and very few people being able to ignore increasing swaths of people who feel that they're being harmed by their technology. So that's a long way of saying, I see a very strong future, especially over the next ten years of this movement building, because you can ask anybody in this country about how they feel about their online safety or how they feel about all of these tech driven problems, and everyone feels worse about it by the year. And right now we have these poster children of very ill behaved and ill meaning people leading these companies.

28:16 MK:

And it just creates a very obvious problem that people are getting their money sucked out of their communities. They're getting abused by the technologies, by a very small amount of bullies. Every one of those stories, everybody there's no counterpoint where people are saying it's good other than a small number of Bitcoin bros who are also the same as the overlap with

the climate deniers. So we have the vast majority on our side and only increasing. And the last thing I say, it's weird to be working on climate change and tech policy at the same time when they're the two most apocalyptic issues I could think of right now. And I am a glutton for punishment and combining them both. But they are both things that have a long-term future where people are increasingly outraged by our lack of action and by a very small group of ill minded people and companies who are driving our country and our world into the ground.

29:15 MM:

You know, it would seem to me that a big part of the challenge too is activating charitable foundations who are the major investors in a lot of these movements anyway, and for civil society to really come together to map out what is that meta strategy for building this public movement, and then using that to inform, educate, and stimulate investments from those charitable foundations. Is that starting to happen?

29:44 MK:

Yes, I think that there is, definitely there. We've done a lot of communications with foundations to try and get them to understand this issue better. And there are a small to medium sized group of foundations who are taking this up and recognize that problem. But it's a drop in the bucket compared to the amount of money going to climate change writ large. And at some point, I try to say, let's think about it like a tithe, a 5% tithe out of everything that you're putting into the climate movement. Make sure 5% of it goes towards the infrastructure, the information infrastructure under which all your other campaigns are fed. So that argument has been successful with some and not with others. I think the obviousness of the argument just gets more clear by the day. So, I'm hopeful. But it is also a much more fraught environment now than it was when we started. I know people burning out and quitting. I know organizations that have gone under or are teetering on the edge in a way that they weren't. And I definitely know people who are very deeply and brutally targeted for simply documenting the rise of the use of the 'n' word, got one group, multiple lawsuits that have cost millions. And that's scratchy.

31:06 MM:

I'm thinking of groups like Media Matters and Musk and a myriad of lawsuits against them, which one could debate the justification for. But strategically, it seems to be a gaming of the legal system.

31:24 MK:

It is absolutely. And it sort of gets back to all problems are morphing into one problem for me now where like the buyout of the political system, we used to just think of like oil and gas and how much money they were funneling into each member of Congress. Yes, that's a problem. But it seems to be much larger now. And it is when you think of the judicial system of how that's been corrupted so the people can do judge shopping and go to whatever area they want where they get a relatively friendly, if not decidedly partisan judge. That process is so deeply anti-democratic, as is just the continual filing of lawsuits in states where there are no SLAPP laws. Coming out of this era, we have to pass anti SLAPP laws, a national law, as a matter of

fairness, that everybody gets access to equal justice. And there's very, I think, easy ways to explain it. But until you fix that, it really is incredibly costly and dangerous environment to work within. So that's a long way of saying there's other funders who are reticent of wading into a controversial era. And I just try not to invoke the 1934 Weimar Republic too often.

32:51 MM:

Michael, that's kind of a perfect place to bring the interview. Last question. Any last thoughts, recommendations, warnings regarding AI, the role of civil society, and corporate campaigns to address it?

33:06 MK:

I think I've given enough of the apocalyptic future -- things are going to get worse and that is a great opportunity, actually, to unite people because I think even MAGA relatives that I have long agreed with the outsized influence that the tech companies have over our lives and that everybody responds to the concept of fairness. And we are approaching an era of deep, deep unfairness where we have to respond to that. And the odd other statistic like Indivisible showing that there were triple the protests against Trump this time than there was last time.

33:47 MK:

If you read a certain segment of the news, you would not know that at all. You'd think it's all upside, DOGE is winning, etcetera. And if you really look at the numbers, you find that there's a groundswell that's already happening. It doesn't mean we're going to win in two years or even six. I don't know that future. But you know that people are getting more and more angry and are feeling more and more that the world is treating them unfairly. It is only our job to respond to just that fairness. And I think we're well positioned to do it.

34:23 MM:

Good. Michael Khoo, Friends of the Earth. Thank you so much. This has been a very insightful interview and discussion of artificial intelligence. I have a feeling there will be many more of these interviews as we go forward with this project, but thanks for launching it for us.

34:42 MK:

Thank you for the opportunity, and it's really nice to connect with you again.

34:46 MM:

My pleasure too. Take care.