

Forum: UNEP.

Issue: Monitoring the influence of Big Oil Industries' disinformation campaigns.

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Introduction

Oil companies evade moral responsibility on climate change by deflecting issues and reframing arguments to avoid legal and ethical accountability

Starting in the early 1970's, when mass oil companies only became more of an essentiality to the world of today, and progressively so, they began hiring atmospheric scientists to understand weather-related risks to their equipment and assess the environmental impacts of new projects. These scientists, however, such as Edward Teller (1) began to observe how fossil fuels lead to a build up of atmospheric carbon and hitherto accurately predicting catastrophic events such as the melting of the Arctic.

It wasn't until the late 1980's however, that the rise of public awareness began and demands for governmental action were called upon. It is then when oil industries would begin to fund what will become decades-long a multibillion-dollar PR campaign to discredit their own scientific discoveries by using fallacies such as ad ignorantiam to falsely exaggerate doubt or uncertainty to disprove and dismiss scientific claims entirely.

"Thus, oil companies shifted the conversation away from actual science and turned it into a debate about protecting freedom.. Transforming fact into a hot button political issue," said Stephanie Honchell Smith in her TED talk about how oil companies shape the climate conversation. (2)

An example of this is the popularization of the phrase "Carbon footprint" by companies such as British Petroleum to shift climate responsibility on to the consumer rather than the industry.

Industries such as this one employ lobbyists to attend UN Climate meetings, allying with oil producing countries to soften the drawbacks on fossil fuel production.

Oil companies actively deny misleading the public, but the ongoing debate on the best course of action remains on how best to tackle the situation whilst finding a middle ground between the needs of the people and that of our earth.

Definition of Key Terms

Lobbying

The act of influencing a political policy or influencing policy makers in the pursuit of one's personal interests.

Disinformation

The intentional spread of misinformation or false facts, or intentionally misleading to create doubt or confusion

Net-zero emissions

A goal where the amount of carbon dioxide emitted is balanced by removing an equivalent amount from the atmosphere, often criticized when used without substantial action.

Renewable energy transition

A global shift from fossil fuel dependency to a dependency on ethical energy sources such as renewable energy sources including solar, wind, etc.

Public relations (PR) campaigns

Coordinated efforts by corporations to manage their public image

Background Information

Historical context

Big oil corporations have always known about the climate issue regarding fossil fuels, in 1957 for instance, Humble, now commonly known as ExxonMobil proved their awareness on the connection of their actions with climate change when they published a paper on the dispersion of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and oceans. Moreover, in 1968 major fossil fuel companies including Shell, ExxonMobil, BP and more had a report prepared for them at the Stanford research institute which highlighted the consequences of climate change and its causes (3) which finally lead to, in 1995 the formation of the GCC or global climate coalition, a coalition formed by fossil fuel companies as an opposition towards climate change and combating attempts at policies with intentions of reducing gas emissions (4) who, despite it's intentions, admitted in an interal memo that "the scientific basis for the greenhouse gas effect cannot be denied." (5)

Corporations involved opted against adapting towards the circumstances and decided to employ 5 main strategies to continue their denial of the claims of climate change in efforts to reduce responsibility and continue business. These strategies include (3);

The Fake Includes the production of counterfeit science and publication of false or misleading claims intended to manipulate the public such as the ExxonMobil petition in 1998 which denied climate change and was even responsible for tricking many scientists into signing it, passing it off by using the same style as the Proceedings of the National Academy of Science (3)

The Blitz Involves the harassment of experts if they voice a point of view that may differ from the interests of the company. A prime example of it involves a letter sent from Exxon Lobbyist to the Bush administration demanding certain climate scientists removal from positions of power including the head of the IPCC's; Robert Watson and other US climate scientists.

The Diversion The manufactured and manipulated uncertainty about scientific facts and shifting blame on other things or people so to avoid responsibility. Information council for the environment, a coalition formed by coal companies had a campaign plans for the 1990's for instance reads point 1 as "Reposition global warming as theory (not fact)" (6).

The Screen The purchasing of credibility or support from renowned academia such as the 1.2million USD donated to Willie Soon, a malaysian astronomer in research fundings after he publicly stated "You cannot argue convincingly or prove that there are any significant worries about the sea Ice conditions in the Arctic." in 2008 (7).

The Fix Where companies manipulate government officials or processes to inappropriately influence policy. Since 2007 ExxonMobil has donated 1.9 million dollars to politicians in US congress who deny climate change including the donation for the inauguration of Donald Trump (3).

Political controversy

Political and international attempts at discussing disinformation campaigns have not focused solely on ending the disinformation war on Oil companies, rather they have focused on reducing greenhouse gas emissions as a whole, aiming to focus on the bigger picture which consequently affects fossil fuel companies both in their manipulation within these decisions and the result of them.

One of the first semi-successful accords to reduce greenhouse gas emissions was the Kyoto Protocol which required 38 of the world's richest countries to reduce their emissions by a specific amount whilst less developed countries would receive funding to develop more environmentally friendly economies as a means to reduce global emissions. China pertained to the second group despite their historic level of economic growth at the time, which eventually, together with the high disinformation and manipulation tactics from multiple industries, would lead the United States to opt out and eventually shut down the Kyoto protocol making it too weak to advance. Furthermore, The United States would also follow to pass a resolution that opposed

any treaty committing the US to emission reduction if it did not also commit developing countries to the same standards. A follow up agreement was passed however in 2020 called the Paris Agreement which with similar goals and updated policies hopes to reduce gas emissions as a whole.

Countries and Organizations Involved

The Republic of the United States of America

The United States surprisingly holds an ambiguity on the topic. On one hand, the United States has been a leader, symbol and example for climate change initiatives mostly taking place during Biden's leadership where he swiftly rejoined the Paris agreement in 2022 (10), allocated approximately 369\$ billion USD towards clean energy, electric vehicles and climate resilience and other causes. Now however, under Trump's regulation, and in parallel to his previous actions under his previous presidency, the USA can be expected to take actions such as when the Trump administration rolled back over 100 environmental regulations and budget cuts on industries involved in climate research such as NASA, EPA, NOAA and more, making it a fundamental key for this discussion due to its power, but not reliable due to its avid switch of goals. The United States holds the title as one of the largest oil-producing countries in the world while still being one of the largest importing countries. (11)

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia is one of the largest oil producing countries in the world, and creating a large dependence on it economically, which hitherto, has shaped its approach to climate negotiations. Although Saudi Arabia did pledge to reach a net-zero carbon emission by 2060, critics have argued that the initiatives made to make it happen are accompanied by narratives that seek to justify prolonged oil production. (12)

Although Saudi Arabia has invested heavily in renewable energy products, it's ongoing expansion of fossil fuel production simply proves the discoordination between public climate commitments and private lobbying efforts (13)

The Russian Federation

The Russian Federation is one of the world's largest exporters of natural gas and oil, and its energy exports significantly influence European and global markets. Although Russia has made public claims on climate change and its importance, they have been heavily criticised for their lack of action regarding it. Russia has been known to portray renewable energy transitions as unreliable and economically harmful along with other disinformation campaigns often targeting energy policy debates in Europe and North America and commonly constructing narratives aimed at manipulating and undermining its public confidence in renewable energies (14) while emphasising on the need for fossil fuel imports which in turn protect its many state owned fossil fuel corporations.

The Kingdom of Denmark

Denmark is widely recognized as the leader for the renewable energy transition and remains one of the largest advocates against large fossil fuel corporations' disinformation campaigns. It is placed on the forefront of international climate research after it significantly invested in offshore wind energy (15). Additionally, Denmark has led several international agreements that aimed to end fossil fuel subsidies and increase investments in much needed technological advancements aimed at helping the cause. Although Denmark has proven to be quite headstrong about the topic, it, however, lacks support on a global scale and stronger alliances.

Timeline of events

1960's - THE SURGE OF CLIMATE RESEARCH	Oil begins to become an essentiality, growing major fossil fuel digging companies to expand and hire researchers who in turn discover the repercussions of and consequences of Carbon Dioxide and spike a nation wide concern on energy.
1970's - POPULARIZATION OF CARBON GAS EMISSIONS	Information begins to leak on the consequences of carbon gas emissions and people begin to worry and protest, demanding action and speaking for nature.
1980's - SURGE OF DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGNS	When things begin to become serious, oil campaigns attempt to dillude the public and diffuse the situation by forming multibillion dollar campaigns inspired off of Tobacco campaigns aimed at masking climate change as something "not to worry about"
1990's - DISSINFORMATION INTENSIFIES AND LAWS BEGIN TO PASS	As the issue intensifies, companies begin to hire lobbyists to diffuse to soften and weaken climate commitments such as the Rio Earth Summit, and the Kyoto Protocol is signed. Companies begin to strategize.
2000's - US REMOVAL FROM KYOTO PROTOCOL	The removal of the US by J.W Bush from the Kyoto resolution drives countries to continue strategizing about ad campaigns and portrayal of enviornmental cooperation whilst documentaries such as " <i>An inconvenient truth</i> " by Davis Guggenheim attempt to spread awareness
2010's - LEGAL BATTLES	Oil companies long term knowledge on the predictions of the consequences of fossil fuel are undercoverd thanks to Investigative reports from <i>InsideClimate News</i> and <i>The Los Angeles Times</i> along with the revelation of climate disinformation campaigns. The Paris Agreement is signed.
2020's - GLOBAL ACCOUNTABILITY	Reports studies and investigations continue to prove lobbying behind the scenes and campaigns against climate change while publicly being avid in its salvation

Relevant UN Treaties and Resolutions

Keynote

It's important to note that the resistance to discussing Oil corporations disinformation campaigns is high and sensitive due to countries reliance and dependencies and the large economic weight they carry, moreover, the powerful lobbying force prevent major decisions to be made that target oil industries and countries are reluctant. It is therefor that the following relevant UN treaties enclose a more general aspect such as disinformation or climate change as a whole rather that its connection to each other to better handle the situation and tackle the issue through policy not targeted

General Assembly resolution 76/227

In December 2021 the UN General Assembly discussed the topic of Countering Disinformation for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms which the conference was later named. It was adopted without vote and surrounded a general theme of the digital age, discrimination, violence, the protection of freedom and the safeguarding of human rights while controlling disinformation. (8)

UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/73/284

The 73rd session of the United Nations General Assembly in March 2019 aimed to prevent, halt, and reverse the degradation of ecosystems worldwide and promote ecosystem restoration as a critical measure for sustainable development, climate resilience, and biodiversity conservation. The resolution urged all member states to take coordinated action and reaffirmed our SDG's, implementing the **United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)** and the **Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)** as the leading agencies.

UN Principles for the protection of information integrity

This describes the launch of Global Principles aimed at tackling disinformation on a global scale which highly hint at oil companies and highlight the importance of integrity to protect democracy. At one point in the conference MELISSA FLEMING, the Under-Secretary-General for Global Communications even remarked the “perilous times” and then “pointed to fossil-fuel pollution driving the climate crisis”. The Secretary-General concluded the session by outlining five core principles aimed at fostering a more humane information ecosystem (9):

- **Societal Trust and Resilience:** Building public confidence in the reliability of information.
- **Independent, Free, and Pluralistic Media:** Supporting diverse and autonomous media outlets.
- **Healthy Incentives:** Encouraging business models that prioritize human rights and information integrity.
- **Transparency and Research:** Promoting openness and scholarly inquiry into information dissemination.
- **Public Empowerment:** Enabling individuals to have greater control over their online experiences and personal data.

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

Kyoto protocol

The Kyoto Protocol was a United Nations Framework aimed at combating global warming internationally. It was initially adopted on December 1997 with 187 states signing in its favour and the resolution includes 4 main types of Greenhouse gases. The target agreed upon was an average CO₂ reduction of 5.2% in the year 2012, but the protocol eventually failed when the US decided to opt out, essentially weakening it and demotivating countries.

Paris Agreement

In December 2015, A similar course of action to the Kyoto protocol took place, acknowledging the now 1 degree Celsius increase in the Earth's temperature. 195 Countries reached an agreement to control greenhouse gas emissions and confront climate change in one of the first truly global agreements. This agreement decided on a review every 5 years on the international achievements, along with conferences for future targets and newly proposed measures.

EU code of practice disinformation

In 2018, the EU launched a campaign against disinformation as a response to widespread dissemination of false information during major political events, such as the 2016 U.S. elections and the Brexit referendum. Agreeing upon platforms identifying and removing false content related to political campaigns, public safety, health crises, and many more obligations. In 2022, however, the European Commission identified weaknesses in the code and decided to strengthen it by introducing stricter measures such as mandatory progress reports, independent audits, and financial penalties.

Possible Solutions

Delegates should keep in mind at all times their country's involvement and consequences on targeting the Oil industries since the topic has a large dissension. Delegates should remember to balance out the moral and ethical responsibility of allowing corporations to essentially take advantage of the world's situation, whilst keeping a strong head about the consequences to their member states' economy and the well-being of their people. Oil remains essential for many countries and delegates should acknowledge the consequences of both extremes. Keeping that in mind, delegates should look for a middle ground in their resolutions that include but are not limited to;

- Strengthening Transparency and Accountability Mechanisms
 - Including mandatory disclosure of lobbying and funding and full transparency from corporations when conducting scientific studies, advertising, or public relations, making it a punishable offence
- Enforce standardized climate impact reports
 - With the use of third party audits and follow ups, ensure that corporations are keeping track of their impact on global gas emissions and subsequently prevent oil industries from using "net-zero" pledges as cover for continued fossil fuel expansion
- Take an example from France's enforcement law in 2022
 - France's enforcement law in 2022 banned fossil fuel-related advertising unless the company demonstrates measurable emissions reductions.
- Fact checking systems.

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