

U.S. House of Representatives
Subcommittee on Oversight & Investigations, Committee on Natural Resources
Oversight Hearing: The Role of Public Relations Firms in Preventing Action on Climate Change
14 September 2022

Responses to Questions for the Record by Democratic Members

By Dr. Melissa Aronczyk, Associate Professor
Rutgers University

Submitted to the Subcommittee on Oversight & Investigations
5 October 2022

Responses to Questions for the Record by Democratic Members
Dr. Melissa Aronczyk, Associate Professor, Rutgers University

Submitted to the Subcommittee on Oversight & Investigations

5 October 2022

Questions from Representative Porter:

1. As a researcher, you study the “grassroots” groups—commonly referred to as “astroturf”—that PR firms help the fossil fuel industry assemble to oppose the policies they don’t like. How would you describe the difference between true grassroots groups and astroturf groups such as these?

Grassroots advocacy is a style of organizing and mobilizing groups of previously unorganized constituencies to have a voice in decisions that affect them. As the term “grassroots” suggests, this organizing is considered to be a “bottom up” approach, a “weapon of the weak” that brings ordinary citizens into the political process.¹ Many analysts consider the grassroots advocacy of 1960s American public-interest groups to be a model for contemporary organizing to allow citizens to speak out and enact change on major legislative and regulatory issues.

In the 1970s and 1980s, business groups began emulating the tactics of grassroots advocacy, using public relations firms to create and manage top-down “subsidized publics” that are financed by their corporate clients.² These subsidized publics, known today as “astroturf” groups, appear as bottom-up or local citizens’ initiatives, but use industry resources to develop “a coherence, focus, and elevated profile that they would not have on their own.”³ As a chief Washington lobbyist for Ford Motor Company put it, “We’ve taken a page out of the public-interest lobby by using our local people to influence Senators and Congressmen.”⁴

In some cases, astroturf groups are not even subsidized publics but are rather empty vessels. For instance, a website may promote the existence of a citizens’ group that does not in fact exist. More often, astroturf groups are made up of sponsored actors. The actors may be either professionals (paid operatives), client employees, or ordinary individuals who have been mobilized by the group’s efforts online or in person. There may also be unpaid non-affiliated individuals or groups who associate themselves with the astroturf group. Some professional public relations firms today promote their specialization in astroturf lobbying. The PR/lobbying

¹ Walker, Edward. *Grassroots for Hire: Public Affairs Consultants in American Democracy*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

² Ibid.

³ William K. Carroll, ed. *Regime of Obstruction: How Corporate Power Blocks Energy Democracy*. Edmonton, AB: AU Press, 2021, p. 199.

⁴ Peter H. Stone, “Learning from Nader,” *National Journal*, 6 November 1994: 1342-1344.

firm Bonner & Associates, founded in 1984, was among the first to specialize exclusively in astroturf lobbying for corporations and trade associations.⁵

The standard register of these groups' communication is populist and community-based. For example, an astroturf group sponsored by the American Petroleum Institute, called Energy Citizens, has as its logo, "Citizens Like You – Raising Their Voices." The populist register in which many of these groups and campaigns operate is effective in organizing unaffiliated individuals and mobilizing them for political action. For this reason, it is important not to dismiss them merely as "fake" groups but also to examine how they attempt to create cultural and political legitimacy for fossil fuels.

For example, the *New York Times* reported on the astroturf group, Fueling U.S. Forward, which is sponsored by Koch Industries. This astroturf group hosted a gospel concert for local residents in Richmond, Virginia; participated in a training session for Black civil service employees; and offered scholarships to students at local schools.⁶ These are real events, with real people; but the motives are disingenuous, entirely oriented toward promoting fossil fuels and the companies that produce them.

A key distinction that needs to be made is that subsidized speech is not free speech. The lack of transparency of so-called "subsidized publics," that is, astroturf groups, interferes with the political process and the formation of public opinion.

2. How do the tactics used by PR firms and outlined throughout the hearing and in the Committee's report constitute climate disinformation? How could we improve transparency so that the public better understands where this information is coming from?

Greenwashing is a prominent and highly problematic form of climate disinformation. Greenwashing can be defined as attempts by industry groups to make their products or practices seem more environmentally friendly than they really are. Public relations firms and advertising agencies have been responsible for crafting promotional campaigns for their fossil fuel clients that engage in greenwashing in the following ways (among many others):

- minimizing, omitting, and/or reframing key information about firm-level or industry-level commitments to action on climate change;
- downplaying or diminishing the role of the firm or industry in climate change;

⁵ Stephen Engelberg, "A New Breed of Hired Hands Cultivates Grass-Roots Anger." *New York Times*, 17 March 1993. <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/03/17/us/a-new-breed-of-hired-hands-cultivates-grass-roots-anger.html>

⁶ Hiroko Tabuchi, Sensing Gains Ahead under Trump, the Kochs Court Minorities. *New York Times*, 5 January 2017. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/05/business/energy-environment/koch-brothers-fossil-fuels-minorities.html?_r=0

See also Camille Vargas, "Fossil Fuel Advocacy Campaign Offers Scholarships to African-American Students." *The Daily Tar Heel*, 6 March 2017.

<https://www.dailytarheel.com/article/2017/03/fossil-fuel-organization-provides-scholarships-to-rural-african-american-communities>

- widening gaps between climate-related pledges to national or international climate agreements (e.g., the 2015 Paris Agreement) and actual actions;
- promoting technologies or innovations to mitigate climate change that are unproven or underdeveloped (e.g., not scalable to industry-level needs);
- promoting “scenarios” for climate mitigation that downplay the industry’s accountability;
- creating and deploying industry-based metrics or certification (i.e., voluntary regulation) while acting against formal regulatory frameworks;
- creating public-private partnerships with environmental groups to build brand reputation without engaging formally in climate action;
- promoting alternative approaches to fossil fuel production while hiding the presence of ongoing business models that rely on fossil fuel production.

Greenwashing is a particularly insidious form of climate disinformation because it relies on misleading or deceptive rhetorical tactics that obscure the causes and consequences of climate change for the public.

The public relations and advertising industries are largely unregulated industries. This is one reason fossil fuel companies rely on them to create information and influence campaigns. A second reason is that these firms operate largely behind the scenes. Most ordinary citizens are unfamiliar with the workings or even the names of major public relations firms and advertising agencies. The lack of transparency is a major reason that oil and gas companies look to PR to help them fight their battles.

The public and policymakers have a right to know who is behind the strategies, groups and campaigns that are organized and managed by public relations firms, ad agencies, and other third-party enablers. To avoid a distorting influence on the communication and understanding of climate change impacts, groups and campaigns funded by oil and gas companies should be required to disclose this funding as well as the names of the third parties involved in brand-building, strategy, and message amplification.

PR firms are experts in the business when it comes to long-term planning and strategy to promote industry viewpoints. For over 50 years, PR firms have developed strategies to deny, delay action, or sow doubt about climate change. They can coordinate across industry sectors like oil and gas, chemicals and pesticides, mining because they have had clients in all of those sectors. Many of the same PR firms are using the same strategies for the same clients 50 years later.

Regulating the norms and practices of public relations and advertising for fossil-fuel clients would be one important step to improve transparency so that the public and policymakers understand the motivations behind climate change messaging. A second step would be to

regulate what kinds of claims are allowable and which should be disallowed in promotional communication. Unproven technologies, misleading claims, or other distorted attempts to build brand reputation at the expense of accurate messaging should be regulated to limit climate disinformation.

3. In your research, you have identified deceptive rhetorical framing and tactics commonly used by PR firms on behalf of their fossil fuel clients to undermine critics. Did you observe any of these rhetorical tactics being used during the hearing?

During the hearing I heard a lot of anti-climate rhetoric from opposing committee members. I was struck by how their rhetoric echoed anti-environmental frames that PR firms have used for over 50 years to promote fossil fuel clients. They are used to undermine positions of support for climate action; and they have had a long-term effect on how the public is misinformed about the role of fossil fuels in American society. My co-author and I describe each of these frames in our book, *A Strategic Nature: Public Relations and the Politics of American Environmentalism* (Oxford University Press, 2022). I list here 11 of the frames, with quotes taken verbatim from the hearing, for the record:

i. Fear.

[In reference to a ballot initiative regarding Proposition 112 in Colorado]: “Your agenda, if carried to its logical conclusion, would involve the people of Colorado rubbing their hands together to stay warm. And in the coming winter months and with natural gas prices at a 14 year high and getting higher, they just might have to do that now.”

“When you have sources like wind and solar that aren’t reliable in the sense that they’re either spiky or they have times of the day when they when they aren’t working, it makes the grid more fragile. It is less resilient. It is unstable. And you will see things like blackouts, brownouts, or in some cases, a complete failure.”

“I experienced the blackouts in February of 2020 at a time when the weather conditions in Montana were about 20 below zero. And the folks in Texas were experiencing the same types of issues, and we witnessed the near collapse of the entire power grid.”

“If you want to see devastating consequences for the environment, see a grid collapse. See what that looks like when people are then burning whatever they can get their hands on to heat their homes or to cook food.”

“Raul. A welder. He was the son of migrant workers who worked for ancillary support services for the oil and gas industry. He worked with his two sons. It was all about opportunity, jobs, future growth for him and his family. If that [ballot initiative] had passed, it’s likely his livelihood would have been shut down.

ii. Tradeoffs between the economy and the environment.

“A single working mom sees her electricity bills skyrocket. Her power is shut off. It affects her quality of life. That’s a trade off. Are we willing to do that to our fellow citizens?”

“It is costing families more and more to buy groceries from eggs to the cost of bacon, to fill up our gas tanks and keep the lights on at home.”

“Natural gas and oil supports hundreds of thousands of jobs in Colorado, approximately 235,000 jobs. And your ultimate goal? To impose a fracking ban on our state threatens to destroy our economy and compromise our energy independence.”

Speaker to witness: “In your opinion, what would happen if the United States just stopped producing oil and gas, like many of these activist groups are clamoring for. What would happen?”

Witness response: “It’d be catastrophic. I’ll tell you what. You wouldn’t have this hearing today. Civilization, the economy, as we know it, would certainly collapse.”

“We’re in a situation now where one fourth of all Americans -- one fourth of all Americans in this country -- are in a situation where they have to decide if they’re going to cover groceries, if they’re going to cover health care costs, or if they’re going to pay their utility bills. We’re seeing record inflation and it’s a result of what’s happening, this, right here. Respondents who forgo necessary expenses, such as medicine or food, in order to pay an energy bill.”

iii. Speaking for the public.

“When we elevate the voices of hardworking Americans, it paints a stark picture of the increasing cost of daily life in our country.”

iv. Rational vs emotional actors.

“Any time you hear another voice...even if you disagree with it...it’s simply somebody in the public arena having a debate. You don’t like those people. I get it. But that doesn’t mean we don’t have valid concerns...it’s not disinformation just because you don’t agree with it...public policy organizations like mine [the John Locke Foundation], all we do is provide you the information. What you do with it is up to you. But we provide you the information so you can make sound public policy decisions.”

“I think one thing that’s important to note is that we can have free speech and stop the spread of disinformation if we stop with the grandstanding and just get to sensible policymaking.”

v. Everyday life.

“Think about the last two years with COVID. How many single-use syringes were necessary? And those come from... those were plastic that you could dispose of. That’s fossil fuels. The helmet that your child wears in any sports activity. I had a bike accident a couple of years

ago. A fossil fuel-based helmet saved my life. Glasses saved my eyes. It's in everything. They are in everything.”

vi. Truth/Facts.

“American voters deserve access to the facts so they can decide for themselves, and our First Amendment ensures that they can.”

“Data doesn't lie, and the facts show that this administration's energy policies are pushing people into poverty, are pushing jobs overseas.”

“I recognize the importance of sharing how the daily lives of Americans were impacted by misguided policies. We want truth. All of us want truth out there.”

vii. Delay.

“It's been demonstrated factually that the world is going to need oil and gas products for decades to come, not only for our energy, but because of all the byproducts that are also generated by each and every one of these.”

viii. Domestic security.

“Thanks to American's innovative and entrepreneurial spirit, we've demonstrated we can develop our resources wisely, provide clean, safe power, and be energy dominant free from independence on hostile regimes that may threaten our national security.”

“We have a global...gas catastrophic event going on in Ukraine right now with Russia, the evil empire that they are. So they have to then go away from that, the energy there. And so they go back to coal...And I just want to help us avoid that.”

“Could you describe the benefits of having oil and gas produced here in the United States with the highest environmental standards and labor standards, rather than imported countries like Russia, Iran and Venezuela?”

ix. Not me but you.

“When the Majority of this Committee starts trying to intimidate people into not bragging about their products...” [vs. fossil fuel companies intimidating environmental activists].

“Let's be clear on who's misleading the American people. The Biden Administration, acting as though their energy strategies are resulting in lower emissions and addressing climate change” [vs. fossil fuel companies misleading consumers].

x. Free speech.

“...Today’s approach by Democrats threatens the exercise of First Amendment rights...The ability to exercise political speech ensures all viewpoints are represented in policy debates. The Supreme Court goes to great lengths to protect speech, especially speech related to public issues...This committee should be wary of any attempt to stifle the exercise of free speech, regardless of whether or not the majority agrees with the viewpoint. The American people deserve better than a hearing intended to chill speech or salvage a botched investigation.”

“Americans, including those in the energy and environmental policy space, are rightfully troubled by the growing threat that their speech will be shut down by those who sit in politically powerful positions.”

xi. Threat of Socialism/Communism (China).

“Ms. Foster, your America Last Socialist Organization has repeatedly attempted to hit the oil and gas industry in Colorado, including through ballot initiatives.”

“Why isn’t the committee issuing subpoenas for PR firms that offer support for the climate change lobby, like the Sierra Club, who has repeatedly assured us that the genocidal Chinese Communist Party, even while they murder millions of people in concentration camps, is actually quite interested in working with the Democrats’ climate change agenda?”

“It would be helpful if people weren’t misled about electric cars. They are generally more expensive. We’re going to have so much lithium batteries that we won’t know what to do with it. It’s going to be a huge problem. We’re having to buy so much from China with regard to rare earth metals, but you can’t make a vehicle without some fossil fuels.”

“...as we speak here today, China is in the process of making fifty – 50! – of the largest coal plants in the world. With no protections...They obviously are not concerned with climate change. They are not concerned with polluting the world. And obviously, we right here are not concerned with them doing that either. We have the cleanest coal in the world and we have witnesses here today who can’t even determine if they would prefer natural gas over coal.”
