

DAILY COMMENT

WHEN “CREATIVES” TURN DESTRUCTIVE: IMAGE-MAKERS AND THE CLIMATE CRISIS



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If money is the oxygen on which the fire of global warming burns, then P.R. campaigns and snappy catchphrases are the kindling. Illustration by Lia Liao

Past sins are past no more: an overdue historical recalibration is under way, with monuments being pulled down, dorms renamed, restitution offered. People *did* things, bad things; even across the span of centuries, they’re being held to account, and there’s something noble about that. The Reverend Robert W. Lee IV, for instance, recently backed the removal of his famous ancestor’s statue from Richmond, Virginia. The memorial, he wrote, “is a hollow reminder of a painful ideology and acts of oppression against black people. Taking it down will provide new opportunities for conversations, relationships and policy change.” Such a response raises an uncomfortable question: What are *we* doing now that our descendants will need to apologize for? Might we be able to get ahead of the sin this time?

The most urgent practical question currently facing the species is almost certainly whether we can rapidly transform our energy systems and stop pouring greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. Chief executives of oil companies keep the conflagration going, but the industry doesn't work alone. Last year—before the final fully intact ice shelf in Canada collapsed into the Arctic Ocean; before record fires killed or displaced nearly three billion animals across Australia; before the world measured its first reliable hundred-and-thirty-degree-Fahrenheit temperature, in Death Valley, California; before that state faced the largest fires in its history; before at least five tropical cyclones spun at once through the Atlantic—I wrote about the role that banks, asset managers, and insurance companies have played in supplying the capital required to keep the fossil-fuel industry humming. In the months since, those industries, pressed hard by activists, have begun to shift; giants such as BlackRock have announced sweeping new policies, even if they're still far from matching their rhetoric with action.

Now I want to focus on another industry that buttresses the status quo: the advertising, lobbying, and public-relations firms that help provide the rationalizations and the justifications that slow the pace of change. Although these agencies are less significant monetarily than the banks, they are more so intellectually; if money is the oxygen on which the fire of global warming burns, then P.R. campaigns and snappy catchphrases are the kindling.

Climate change is sometimes compared to the Holocaust or to slavery, because all three have killed and degraded human lives on an almost unimaginable scale. But the comparisons are, at their root, wrong, at least on moral terms—among many other things, for most of the more than three centuries that people have been burning fossil fuels, they had no idea that they were damaging the future. Coal and oil and gas were seen as—and, at one time, probably were—more liberating than oppressing for the societies that burned them, despite the pollution they produced. It was just around three decades ago that the heat-trapping molecular structure of carbon dioxide, and hence the “greenhouse effect,” became a pressing public issue, and, by that time, fossil fuel was one of the world's largest industrial enterprises. The burning of fossil fuel wasn't evil in its origins, in other words—no one need feel guilty for having been a part of it, which is good, because all of us in the rich world are, even if we have solar panels on the roof and a Tesla in the garage.

By this point, however, we know precisely how dangerous the continued combustion of hydrocarbons is. And we have seen that there are affordable alternatives to them. Indeed, solar and wind power can now be produced more cheaply than fossil-fuel energy. And we've seen great investigative reporting lay out the fact that the big oil companies have known of the causes of climate change since at least the nineteen-eighties, and worked actively to deny them or cover them up. Clearly, that was immoral. So what do we say in 2020 about the people who are still helping the oil majors and the gas utilities in their efforts to slow a transition to clean energy?

I'm not talking here about coal miners or natural-gas pipeliners or people who work at filling stations, much less people who drive cars or heat their homes—they participate in a world that they didn't create. But lobbyists and P.R. firms develop promotional campaigns for the industry, and people are starting to hold them accountable for it. In August, Storebrand, a ninety-one-billion-dollar asset manager based in Norway, divested from companies including ExxonMobil and Chevron precisely because of their lobbying activities. “Climate change is one of the greatest risks facing humanity, and lobbying activities which undermine action to solve this crisis are simply unacceptable. The Exxons and Chevrons of the world are holding us back,” Jan Erik Saugestad, Storebrand's chief executive, said.

What's interesting about many of the current P.R. campaigns is that they don't involve classic climate denial. Outside of the Trump Administration and the right wing of the Republican Party, that's now a dead letter. You could no more persuade a

Madison Avenue agency to argue that carbon dioxide is harmless than you could persuade it to argue that Black lives don't matter. Instead, these campaigns often look for ways to leverage people's environmental concern in service of precisely the companies that are causing the trouble.

Let's start with a completely charming series of online ads that B.B.D.O. put together, in 2019, for Exxon. B.B.D.O. is one of the iconic ad agencies (it was frequently mentioned on “Mad Men”), responsible for everything from “Better Things for Better Living . . . Through Chemistry” (DuPont) to “Ring Around the Collar” (Wisk detergent). Building on a YouTube craze for videos showing cooks preparing tiny cakes and hamburgers, a creative team put together a series of four Web ads called “Miniature Science.” In the second ad, algae is grown in little dishes, cultivated in a tiny seawater pond, and kept circulating by a minuscule paddle wheel. After a few days, the algae is drained from the pond, and a pocket-size pestle crushes its cell walls to free its oil. Once the paste has been mixed with traces of hexane, sodium hydroxide, and methanol, it produces “a low-emission biofuel.” In the next installment, the mixture is used to propel a boat around a bowl. This algae biofuel, a sprightly narrator notes, could power “entire fleets of ships tomorrow.” In fact, the ad contends, algae could fuel “the trucks, ships and planes of tomorrow.” It concludes, “This is big.”

But it's not big. The algae tech dates back more than a decade, when a number of oil companies invested relatively small sums in the project. In 2009, Exxon partnered with a company called Synthetic Genomics to conduct research and figure out how to scale production; the oil giant estimates that, between 2008 and 2018, it invested about two hundred and fifty million dollars into biofuel technology. Some five years after that partnership began, Exxon was spending about a hundred million dollars *a day* trying to find and develop new sources of oil and natural gas and on other costs. Considering this, the algae money represents a rounding error: a few days' worth worth of capital expenditures from a company still fully committed to its legacy products. And, in any event, by the time B.B.D.O. was producing Exxon's ads, most other companies had ceased work on algae biofuel, because it had become obvious that it would never make economic sense. As the industry newsletter Oilprice.com put it, you'd need oil to trade at five hundred dollars a barrel—more than ten times its current price—for algae to ever compete with it. As a result, Exxon itself has essentially conceded that this technology won't amount to much. The company's latest forecast put off until as late as 2025 the date for actually producing algae fuel, and even then it will be producing just an estimated ten thousand barrels a day, or roughly 0.2 per cent of its refinery capacity. Meanwhile, a trial at Swansea University, in Wales, showed that, if you wanted to supply, say, ten per cent of Europe's transport-fuel needs with algae, you'd need growing ponds three times the size of Belgium. According to one blog, you'd need ponds covering eighteen per cent of the agricultural land in the United Kingdom just to cover Britain's transportation habits.

But, if algae has underachieved scientifically, it has dramatically overachieved as a greenwashing tool. The B.B.D.O. Web ads were the least of it; there were also TV campaigns and print ads from agencies such as Universal McCann. “If you look on ExxonMobil's Facebook or Instagram, you'd think that algae is all they're thinking about all the time,” Zoya Teirstein, a reporter for Grist, told the *Harvard Political Review*. According to Kert Davies, the director of the nonprofit Climate Investigations Center, Exxon began running algae ads during the 2016 Olympics, and has spent more than fifty million dollars buying TV time to tout the biofuel's wonders. Another example: a long “paid post” prepared with the *Times*' brand marketing team (the editorial and news staffs were not involved) which aims to explain “how scientists are tapping algae and plant waste to fuel a sustainable energy future.” As a researcher explains, “Eventually, we want to power something the size of UPS or FedEx's global fleet with renewable diesel. That would be pretty aspirational. It'd be a real ‘We did it’ moment.”

In fact, both UPS and FedEx are busily electrifying their delivery-truck fleets. (Amazon and Ikea, too.) As experts have been saying for years, a working climate future depends on the rapid electrification of almost everything—because, if something runs on electricity, it can be powered by the sun and the wind. A decade ago, that was still a hopeful idea, but, in recent years, as the price of solar and wind power has plummeted, it’s become an eminently practical one. It’s already true for domestic consumption, and increasingly it’s even the case for heavy industry, including steel production. Here is the energy expert Saul Griffith speaking to Ezra Klein, of Vox: “We don’t really have a vision for how to create the same amount of liquid fuels as we do today to drive our cars. So really the only answer if we’re going to continue to have a lot of cars is to electrify them. Similarly, we don’t really have an answer to providing heat to our homes that’s zero carbon unless we electrify. It’s really the only pathway that’s viable to get to zero carbon.” Again, a decade ago, this could have seemed a dream. But, as lithium-ion batteries have got more efficient, and electric vehicles have got cheaper, it’s now clearly the only way forward. And it has to happen fast: as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change pointed out two years ago, if we don’t make “fundamental transformations” in our energy systems by 2030—which the group defined as cutting emissions by nearly half—we have no chance of meeting even the modest targets set by the world’s nations in Paris five years ago. There is no time to waste.

And yet wasting time is exactly what we’re doing, because the renewable electricity that could stave off climate change is a huge threat to oil and gas companies. Consider another campaign, which began development in 2017. As *Mother Jones* has reported, the American Public Gas Association, a collection of utilities that supply homes with natural gas, launched a campaign called “Natural Gas Genius,” which was developed by the consulting and communications firm Porter Novelli. (Jack Porter and Bill Novelli were sixties- and seventies-era ad men, too—they worked together to market the Peace Corps.) The message of what the A.P.G.A. called the “refreshing, sassy” campaign was “I choose natural gas to live better,” and the firm found a mid-tier Instagram influencer to help disseminate it. According to the A.P.G.A., The campaign’s “target audience is homeowners who are looking to buy or renovate a home in the next five years. We are confident in the ability of this new type of message that speaks to the emotional aspect of natural gas, to help us achieve our goal of increasing consumer consideration of natural gas direct use in their homes.”

That is, they were trying to do the opposite of what climate science suggests. If you’re buying a new home or renovating an old one, you can install an electric air-source heat pump instead of a gas boiler. It will heat (and also cool) your home effectively and cheaply, and produce far fewer greenhouse gases in the process. You can also install, instead of a gas stove, an induction cooktop—an appliance whose use is growing rapidly in Asia and Europe. Not only will it boil water considerably faster and help with the climate; it will remove from your kitchen a flame that pollutes the indoor air and can harm your kids. According to a Rocky Mountain Institute report released earlier this year, “children are more vulnerable to air pollution due to several factors including their developing lungs and smaller body size. Children in a home with a gas stove have a 24–42 percent increased risk of having asthma.” The report states that new modelling from researchers at U.C.L.A. found that “cooking on gas can spike emissions of nitrogen dioxide and carbon monoxide to levels that would violate outdoor pollutant standards.” Indeed, “homes with gas stoves can have nitrogen dioxide concentrations that are 50–400 percent higher than homes with electric stoves,” the report notes, adding that even the Trump-era E.P.A. has acknowledged a causal link between short-term exposure to nitrogen dioxide and “respiratory symptoms.”

There’s not much question as to why the American Public Gas Association bankrolls the campaign—its members sell gas and it opposes natural-gas bans. (The A.P.G.A. president and C.E.O. David Schryver said, in a statement, “proposed gas bans are flawed, short-sighted and only serve to negatively impact homeowners by restricting consumers’ ability to choose a reliable, efficient and affordable energy source,” adding, “as publicly owned utilities deeply committed to their customers, APGA members

see themselves as responsible stewards of the environment and of their communities.”) Nor is there much question about why Exxon is growing algae. As the Massachusetts attorney general, Maura Healey, put it, in a recent lawsuit filed against the company, alleging that it has misled consumers and investors, “ExxonMobil’s relentless ‘greenwashing’ marketing campaigns target consumers with messaging regarding ExxonMobil’s purported environmental stewardship, corporate leadership in the realm of environmental and climate protection, and innovative clean energy research, while failing to disclose that ExxonMobil is spending little on clean energy development, and instead is secretly opposing actions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and ramping up production of fossil fuels that cause climate change.” (Exxon said, in a statement, that “legal proceedings like this waste millions of dollars of taxpayer money and do nothing to advance meaningful actions that reduce the risks of climate change,” adding, “our corporate advertising efforts highlight proof-points to extensive our [sic] R&D portfolio. . . . We’re investing in new technologies that have the potential to provide affordable lower-carbon energy.”) The effect was certainly pretty clear to industry observers. Muse by Clio, an ad-industry daily newsletter, reported that, if the miniature-algae campaign “burnishes the brand as it stares down rough headlines, or just softens the company’s image in general—well, that’s not small potatoes either.”

The sociologist Robert Brulle, who is a visiting professor of environment and society at Brown, has studied such marketing extensively. The campaigns, he said, are “integrated efforts that combine lobbying with P.R. ad campaigns, editorial writing efforts, outreach to sympathetic media outlets, and grassroots mobilization. There is pretty much no real difference in the aims of lobbying and advertising, as they are all part of a large-scale coordinated effort to shift public policy in a specific direction.” And that direction is always the same: go slowly toward the energy future, if you go at all.

But there is some question as to why ad agencies and P.R. firms—and creative talent in general—go along. They can make millions of dollars if they do, but that money’s not an existential issue for them, in the way that it is for the oil and gas companies. Fossil fuels remain an important part of the economy, but a rapidly shrinking one; in 2008, the energy sector—mostly hydrocarbons—represented 15.96 per cent of the S. & P. 500. Now that’s dropped to 2.34 per cent, and it’s the smallest fraction of the index. So there are other things that you could be sassy and refreshing about, other products you could miniaturize and make fun Internet videos about. Miniaturize shampoo!

Did the people making the ads understand the real goal? The account executives I asked, in e-mails, didn’t respond. (B.B.D.O declined to comment for this story.) At Porter Novelli, my queries were answered by Maggie Graham, the company’s global chief of staff. “As more is learned about natural gas,” she wrote, “the industry is adapting and our role is to help consumers know about natural gas as it pertains to their priorities, including environmental issues. As a firm, we continually assess new research and findings relevant to our clients, so that we can integrate it into our work.” On Thursday, the company announced that it had finished that assessment, saying, in a statement, “Porter Novelli is committed to regularly assessing evolving issues, the science that guides them and their impact on diverse, global audiences. As such, we have determined our work with the American Public Gas Association is incongruous with our increased focus and priority on addressing climate justice—we will no longer support that work beyond 2020.” The A.P.G.A. declined to comment.

That decision is a big deal—and it makes sense. The statement of ethics of the American Marketing Association instructs, “Do no harm. This means consciously avoiding harmful actions or omissions by embodying high ethical standards.” According to the Public Relations Society of America’s code of ethics, “We adhere to the highest standards of accuracy and truth in advancing the interests of those we represent and in communicating with the public.” The standards of practice of the American Association of Advertising Agencies states, “We will not knowingly create advertising that contains . . . false or misleading statements or

exaggerations, visual or verbal.” At this point, it’s practically impossible to represent the fossil-fuel industry without violating these canons.

And other people in this class of creatives are starting to recognize that the situation places new demands on them. In June of last year, Extinction Rebellion activists, mostly from France and Sweden, were arrested outside the Cannes Lions annual advertising gathering. “We are coming back here next year with ten thousand people,” an organizer said. The coronavirus pandemic cancelled that plan, but, a few months later, more than twenty small agencies signed a pledge to disclose work with the fossil-fuel industry as a first step toward divesting from those clients. Solitaire Townsend, the founder of the Futerra agency, which organized the pledge, said, in an interview, that three hundred firms have now promised to produce “climate disclosure reports,” detailing how much of their business comes from oil and gas firms. “Most of the big agencies are pushing back, hard,” Townsend told me, this month. “But every copywriter, ideator, designer, and strategist will have to pick a side. Creativity isn’t neutral.”

Townsend added that she’s heard every possible justification. “The worst one is ‘We need to put our own house in order first,’ from multinational ad agencies raking in millions of dollars but with a sustainability strategy appropriate for a kindergarten. That leads to meetings held in renewably powered offices, with recycled coffee cups and organic snacks,” even as the agencies work on “briefs to extend the influence and producing capacity of the fossil-fuel industry.” She went on, “And don’t get me started on Davos events, with ad execs announcing new creative partnerships to ‘inspire young people to climate action.’ The irony is staggering when you think about it: agencies who won’t even disclose if they work for fossil-fuel clients purporting to motivate the young people already out on our streets striking for climate action.” (This same dynamic is playing out in the legal profession, where law students at top schools have come together to rank the nation’s top law firms, and more than six hundred of them have pledged not to work for firms that represent fossil-fuel companies. Last winter, students disrupted recruiting events for Paul, Weiss, which represents Exxon, at Harvard, Yale, and New York University.)

Before the pandemic began, the growing opposition to banks and asset managers funding fossil fuels led to civil disobedience and protests. (I was part of a group arrested at a Chase bank branch in Washington, D.C., in January.) If next year sees an adequately distributed vaccine, it may also see that kind of nonviolent action at ad agencies. A newly launched project, Clean Creatives, is designed to “target precisely the voices who rent themselves out to the industry,” Duncan Meisel, of the N.G.O. Fossil Free Media, said. (I have volunteered with Meisel in the past, opposing oil pipelines.) He added, “We know it won’t be an easy fight—they’ve literally made their careers spinning bad stuff into good stuff, so we’ll have to be on our toes. But every fire and every flood makes clearer precisely what they’re doing—physics simply can’t be spun.”

Even with that kind of aggressive campaigning, success may depend mostly on whether the talent itself decides that it wants to keep working for an industry that’s on the wrong side of the century’s most urgent issue. “I very much hope our great-grandkids look back with benign bemusement on how any creative person could have wasted their talent on an industry about to become irrelevant. That would be the best possible outcome, as it presupposes we overcome this monster,” Townsend said. “The appalling alternative would be the creatives of today being considered craven propagandists for the most destructive industry in human history.”



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