

## Fool Me Thrice:

### How the Oil Industry Has Avoided Responsibility for Over a Century of Climate Damages

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Since the early 1900s, the oil industry has doggedly prioritized pursuing profits over mitigating their growing negative impact on the environment. Despite having been some of the earliest individuals to study and become aware of the potential ecological harm at the hand of extensive fossil fuel extraction, transportation, refinement, and usage, oil industry executives have worked tirelessly to prevent the popularization and acceptance of this knowledge. This paper discusses the various strategies historically employed by oil companies in their crusade against government regulations and social disapproval, including feigning concern and expertise, deflecting, and, most prevalently, misinforming and casting doubt. Though all of the aforementioned approaches have been used in conjunction since the 1900s, enabling the formation of an intricate and believable narrative, this paper seeks to isolate particular instances in which each form of manipulation was notably productive for the industry's agenda.

First, oil executives sought to establish credibility and sympathy by releasing a paper detailing the industry's internally initiated research on air and water pollution. In 1954, a paper entitled "The Petroleum Industry Sponsors Air Pollution Research" was published in the *Air Repair* journal, detailing the oil industry's decades-old history of environmental concern, as evidenced by the formation of numerous task forces and specialized research groups, such as the American Petroleum Industry (API) itself and its various subdivisions,<sup>1</sup> as well as its self-disciplined limiting of sulfur dioxide emissions.<sup>2</sup> In the words of the author Vance N. Jenkins himself, the goal of the article was to "describe the pollution prevention activities of the

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<sup>1</sup> Vance N. Jenkins, "The Petroleum Industry Sponsors Air Pollution Research," in *Air Repair* (1954), 145.

<sup>2</sup> Jenkins, 147.

petroleum industry *which have resulted from the recognition, some thirty years ago...that water and air pollution would become a very serious problem* in certain portions of the nation unless well-planned actions were taken to prevent it.”<sup>3</sup> However, the ecologically minded report was not as sincere as it presented itself to be.

To start, Jenkins was not an uninterested third party, but rather the Executive Secretary of the API’s Smoke and Fumes Committee. However, this connection is only disclosed as a small footnote at the bottom of the first page: this technique of conveying information that presents the oil industry in a favorable light through a seemingly unrelated party bolsters the credibility of the disclosed information and thereby greatly reduces initial scrutiny and the questioning of motives. Continuing, portraying the oil industry as both proactively researching potential oil-related pollution and self-enforcing economically costly restrictions of its own volition attempts to garner sympathy from readers by presenting the industry as an environmentally conscious ally, not an enemy. In the closing words of his report, Jenkins commits to conveying this message, praising oil executives for refusing to exploit a supposedly profitable yet environmentally harmful loophole in a recently passed law limiting sulfur dioxide emissions. On oil companies not exploiting this loophole, he writes, “The fact that they have not done so and have no intention of doing so is good evidence that the petroleum industry is managed by men who want to be good neighbors, by men who will go more than half way in cooperating with enforcement agencies in order to be good neighbors...”<sup>4</sup> Thus, the 1954 article acted more as a public relations piece than an unbiased paper of scientific and historical integrity, likely intended to establish credibility and amass sympathy above all else.

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<sup>3</sup> My italics. Jenkins, “The Petroleum Industry,” 145.

<sup>4</sup> Jenkins, 149.

Second, oil executives sought to deflect the blame for greenhouse gas emissions onto other sources, thereby minimizing their industry's culpability. In a 1970 Imperial Oil report, poignantly titled "Pollution is Everybody's Business," the author, an Imperial Oil chemical engineer named H. R. Holland, attempts to misdirect attention away from oil-related emissions by comparing "natural" to anthropogenic sources of greenhouse gasses while claiming that the former "dwarfs" the latter and that "concentrations usually are far below the critical levels."<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, in a table presenting the supposed sources of emissions and their respective total contributions, the only sources of carbon dioxide are ambiguously and deceptively listed as "Oxidation of Plant and Animal Matter" and "Combustion."<sup>6</sup> In this way, Imperial Oil downplayed its responsibility in changing the climate by using non-incriminating, vague language and emphasizing the natural existence of the greenhouse effect.

In another example, an Imperial Oil seminar in 1971 once again used deflection to try to lessen its culpability, this time taking aim at thermal electric plants, industrial heating, and the coal industry. The document states, "thermal electric plants are the largest contributions to total emissions by a large margin and are the largest contributors to sulphur oxides and particulates. Industrial heating is next..."<sup>7</sup> and "Coal is the worst offender contributing about 25% more nitrogen and sulphur oxides and about 15 times as much particulate matter as heavy fuel oil."<sup>8</sup> Whether they were pointing the finger of blame at other energy sources, such as thermal electricity or coal, or at nature itself, oil industry executives have made great efforts to draw attention away from their industry's participation in greenhouse gas emissions rather than

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<sup>5</sup> H. R. Holland, "Pollution is Everybody's Business," 1970, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Holland, 4.

<sup>7</sup> Imperial Oil Ltd., "The Economic Implications of Environmental Protection," 1971, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Imperial Oil, 3.

publicly admit their accountability, despite having known since the 1920s that they did, indeed, bear responsibility for the changing climate.

Lastly, the oil industry sowed seeds of doubt and misinformation throughout the common discourse surrounding climate change in order to discredit the crisis' urgency as well as its very existence. This favored and well known method of the oil executives, which involved manipulating public and political opinions on the topic of climate change, is well reported in the film *Merchants of Doubt*. In the documentary, a montage plays of oil executives appearing on mainstream, televised programs suggesting non-anthropogenic causes of climate change and otherwise denouncing the climate science they have been aware of since the 1920s. In one instance, former ExxonMobil CEO Lee Raymond asserts, "There is a natural variability that has nothing to do with man. It has to do with sunspots, it has to do with the wobble of the Earth."<sup>9</sup> In another, Bill O'Keefe, the Vice President of the aforementioned API as well as a board member of the Global Climate Coalition—another oil industry group masquerading as a climate-concerned party—contends, "I think that it's unfortunate that the science is so distorted and misstated..."<sup>10</sup> Continuing, these tactics are reaffirmed in the New York Times article "Industry Ignored Its Scientists on Climate," which suggests that oil executives took advantage of news and media neutrality to appear on equal footing with their adversaries: the oil proponents did not aim for accuracy but rather doubt and confusion while delivering their arguments, which allowed their side to flourish.<sup>11</sup>

In conclusion, oil company executives were some of the first to know about their industry's negative impacts on the climate, yet they were—and continue to be—the last to admit such as true. Through methods such as the fabrication of climate concern and expertise, the

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<sup>9</sup> Lee Raymond in *Merchants of Doubt*, 00:22:55.

<sup>10</sup> Bill O'Keefe in *Merchants of Doubt*, 00:22:45.

<sup>11</sup> Andrew C. Revkin, "Industry Ignored Its Scientists on Climate" in *The New York Times* (2009).

deflection of responsibility, and the spread of misinformation and doubt, the oil industry has been remarkably successful in swaying public opinions on the issue and thereby slowing the progress of climate protective policies. Fueled by economic and political<sup>12</sup> incentives, the oil companies' manipulative tactics are likely to continue. However, as the industry's history of lies and corruption continues to be unveiled to the public, one remains hopeful that a social transition is approaching, one that will no longer accept unsubstantiated reports but will demand accountability for all the environmental damage from which, since over a century ago, these companies have deliberately tried to hide and escape responsibility.

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<sup>12</sup> Naomi Oreskes in *Merchants of Doubt*, 00:30:35.