

Hypocrisy or Adaptation: How BP
Defends Its Reputation in the Climate Emergency

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On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

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Nearly two-thirds of Americans believe the federal government is doing too little to mitigate the effects of climate change. An even greater percent of Americans favors taxing corporations based on their carbon emissions (Tyson & Kennedy, 2021). How then, does BP, despite depending on fossil fuels for its revenues, strive to promote a public reputation as a responsible global corporate citizen? As the globe is faced with continued record-breaking weather (Coumou & Rahmstorf, 2012), companies must address their strategy in preventing climate change. Thus, oil giants like BP, have reimagined their marketing strategies to retain good public standing. At a glance, BP's attempt at rebranding may seem truthful, it remains that they are rightly accused of greenwashing, that is, they use green marketing to deceive the public that their policies are environmentally friendly.

Review of Research

Corporate social responsibility is corporate self-regulation to serve social values (Sheehy, 2015). Over 90% of Fortune 500 firms incorporate social responsibility initiatives within their own brands (Luo and Bhattacharya, 2006). To protect their reputations, many companies make public commitments to social values, though how serious these commitments are is difficult to determine. BP incorporates these strategies to reclaim their image after causing the Deepwater Horizon oil spill due to gross negligence (Robertson and Krauss, 2014). None of these studies examine how well companies substantiate their claims of corporate social responsibility.

In a 2010 discussion hosted by the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, professors discussed how the proliferation and advancement of communications technology is producing a “network civil society” wherein citizens engage in discourse regarding policy. However, they also caution that the Internet can be a place full of conspiracies and cyber bullying. (Chaibong, et al., 2010).

Shiradastian, et al., found that when companies compromise widely held social values, boycott campaigns may be lodged against them, creating severe implications for companies. As such, companies have invested more heavily in creating strong relationships with the community through establishing a social media presence (Kumar, et al., 2016). This ideological rigidity and instant disapproval en masse has led those in the public eye to tread carefully.

With the rise of social media, companies and consumers have established a volatile method of two-way communication. On one hand, activists have a platform with which to voice their concerns, and on the other, companies can highlight or play down their contributions (or lack thereof) toward social values. Researchers have found that the use of social media can elicit a variety of responses among consumers. Companies with a history of mixed environmental behaviors are less likely to promote their strides towards sustainability for fear of increased scrutiny (Lyon and Montgomery, 2013; Ashforth and Gibbs, 1990; Morsing, et al., 2008). Conversely, companies with historically negative environmental behaviors may disclose all of their environmental contributions (both good and bad), likely to highlight any positive contributions that would be overlooked otherwise (Reid, et al., 2009). These findings may shed light on why BP and other companies seeking to rebrand remain silent on social media.

Reception by the Scientific Community

The Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) is a national nonprofit who seek to use independent science to solve the issues that threaten the global community. One such issue is energy, to include both renewable and non-renewable. Consequently, the UCS remain critical of BP and investigate their claims to determine the validity of their sustainability goals. In the past, the UCS has criticized BP's hypocrisy, citing how their opposition to a proposed carbon

pollution fee “directly contradicted its consistent, well-publicized claim” (Mulvey, 2018). In response to BP’s publication of their annual report, the UCS noted that BP’s claims were more ambitious than that of their peers, such as Chevron and ExxonMobil. Though the “lack of clarity and detail around BP’s strategy and near-term plans... has made us hold back applause” (Pinko, 2020). More recently, to determine if BP’s claims could be substantiated, one of their scientists attended BP week, a three-day long conference wherein BP previously promised to provide specific, concrete details on how exactly the company will meet its pledge of becoming net-zero by 2050. The five metrics that the UCS used as a sustainability measuring stick were: near term emissions reductions, limits on offsets, accountability, beyond carbon, and climate policy. These metrics aimed to look at changes being made now which would translate to greater emissions reductions in the future, the quality of the carbon offsets BP invests in, how they would hold themselves accountable to these goals, if they would address emissions reduction needs beyond strictly carbon, and how consistently they advocate for legitimate climate science. After closely watching BP over the course of the three-day conference, the UCS bluntly reports that “on each of five key metrics UCS was tracking, BP failed to live up to the hype” (Frumhoff, 2020).

The UCS has also criticized BP’s continued affiliation with the American Petroleum Institute and other trade associations. BP and other companies anonymously fund these third-party groups so they can lobby and participate in public discussions in accordance with their desires without facing much in the way of consequences for their positions and actions (Brulle, 2014). In their *2018 Climate Accountability Scorecard*, the UCS asserts BP and other fossil fuel companies must be transparent about the ties to trade associations and third-parties to avoid complicity in climate deception (Pinko, et al., 2018). While BP has historically been affiliated with the American Petroleum Institute (API), each organization’s respective views on climate

policy have become misaligned. The API recently lobbied the U.S. government to roll back regulations on methane emissions, the greenhouse gas that traps the greatest amount of heat. Despite this misalignment, BP has chosen to remain affiliated with the group and has even remained silent regarding API's aggressive support for rolling back methane emission regulations. As BP reviews their position and relationship with API, the UCS urges them that "there is no more time to waste... set aggressive targets... and make good on your claims of support for science-based climate action" (Frumhoff, 2020).

Holding BP Accountable

ClientEarth is an environmental law charity that had lodged an unprecedented complaint against BP in early 2019. The organization "[claimed] the oil giant's latest advertising campaign is misleading consumers about its focus on low carbon energy" and sought to pursue legal action had BP not ended the campaign in question merely months after their complaint (ClientEarth, 2020b). Their complaint focused on BP's "Keep advancing" and "Possibilities everywhere" campaigns and was motivated by the company's juxtaposition of these campaigns that painted the company as one rapidly transitioning toward renewables while downplaying their contributions to the climate crisis (ClientEarth, 2020a). Had BP not elected to end these ad campaigns, ClientEarth's lawyers were told the complaint would have been approved by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and formal litigation would have been lodged against BP for greenwashing. OECD's decision that the first formal complaint against greenwashing was substantiated sets a precedent for future complaints against corporate greenwashing. ClientEarth lawyer Sophie Marjanac said, "[the] decision sets a precedent for people to use the OECD guidelines to hold companies to account for their greenwashing...

including in their advertising. Fossil fuel companies using advertising to mislead the public over their climate impact have been put on notice” (ClientEarth, 2020c).

The cities of D.C. and New York City have both separately pursued litigation against BP for intentionally misleading consumers. In June of 2020, D.C.’s Attorney General Karl Racine sued BP and three other fossil fuel companies for misleading consumers about the impact their products have on the environment. Racine accused these companies of concealing the fact that the use of fossil fuels threatens the health of residents and the environment. In a statement Racine said, “this suit [was filed] to end these disinformation campaigns and to hold these companies accountable for their deceptive practices” (Negin, 2020). Likewise, New York City has pursued litigation against BP and others under the same pretense of misleading consumers. Specifically, the city takes issue with the companies self-branding their fuel as “cleaner” and “emissions-reducing” when they have not been proven so (Reuters, 2021).

CorpWatch is a watchdog group that seeks to hold corporations accountable. At the beginning of BP’s rebranding campaign to “Beyond Petroleum”, the organization was highly critical of this paradoxical theme. BP stated Beyond Petroleum means “being a global leader in producing the cleanest burning fossil fuel: Natural Gas”. So, CorpWatch sought to validate BP’s claims and answer whether or not natural gas was demonstratively better than oil. They found that “In theory, natural gas emits somewhat less carbon dioxide than oil for the same energy produced. But when fugitive emissions, or leaks, are counted, the difference is slim to none” (Bruno, 2000).

Of the many environmental groups critical of companies such as BP, none have come to blows with the company as much as Greenpeace, a global, independent campaigning organization that seeks to expose global environmental problems and promote solutions that are

essential to a green and peaceful future. Starting in 1999 in response to BP's rebranding campaign "Go Green" conflict between these organizations has grown two-fold (García, 2011). One of Greenpeace's focuses is reducing the detrimental effects BP has incurred in the lives of those living adjacent to the Gulf of Mexico. In a documentary they funded, *The Rising*, Greenpeace explored the aftermath of the Deepwater Horizon spill and the effects of dispersants released by BP to break-up and sink the oil. In BP's cleanup efforts following the spill, employees have been quoted saying, "We asked for respirators and they told us that would be an act for termination ... Our bodies were covered in oil — and still no personal protective gear" (Manning, 2016). Besides their mistreatment of their workers, BP released a dispersant known as Corexit, a substance whose official safety data sheet warns of "immediate (acute) health hazards" (Safety Data Sheet Corexit® EC9500A, n.d.). Despite this, communities near the Gulf have been kept in the dark about its harmful effects and have been unknowingly exposed to toxicity levels 52 times greater than just the oil alone ("Gulf of Mexico clean-up makes 2010 spill 52-times more toxic", 2012).

Greenwashing does not just exist within the petroleum and natural gas industry; it also permeates the automotive industry. Looking toward the Volkswagen Emissions Scandal, we see a situation that may mirror what BP may face in the future. In 2014 scientists at West Virginia University set in motion the Volkswagen Emissions Scandal when they published their study that found that two Volkswagen diesel vehicles contributed significantly higher emissions than EPA standards (Bauer, 2018). These findings prompted the EPA to work in concert with California Air Resources Board who found that these vehicles produced "nitrogen oxides up to 40 times higher than allowed" (California Air Resources Board, 2015). In January 2016 The United States Department of Justice, filed a civil action against Volkswagen and other companies for selling

vehicles. After Volkswagen CEO Michael Horn's admitted to the company's attempt at concealing the truth, the Department of Justice lambasted the company for "knowingly and willfully [deceiving] emissions tests" (Bauer, 2018). If ever such lies of omission or blatant deception were to be uncovered about BP, this case would set the precedent for formal litigation by the government on behalf of the EPA.

Perception Management

BP's recent pledges toward sustainability are an attempt at managing public perception rather than climate change mitigation. As a direct result of the Deepwater Horizon scandal and increased calls to action on climate, BP seeks to obtain "corporate environmental legitimacy" (CER). Which is defined as the "generalized perception or assumption that a firm's corporate environmental performance is desirable, proper, or appropriate" (Bansal and Clelland, 2004). Ultimately, BP is pursuing a perception of environmental legitimacy validated by their stakeholders through the green narratives they are trying to establish. The increased CER demands of their stakeholders has drawn BP into the process of impression management. Through this process, the organization seeks to negotiate the company's image with their audience by selectively disclosing what they think will appease their consumers (Bansal and Kistruck, 2006). Responses to institutional pressures like this can elicit various responses from organizations. These include compliance, compromise, avoiding, defying, and manipulation (Oliver, 1991).

The green narrative BP is pushing for their organization is a way for them to draw attention away from the environmental harm they commit. BP's conformity to environmentalism aims to take advantage of unassuming and unskeptical consumers. This green veneer the

company puts forth is a method of managing outside perceptions, decoupling their negative environmental impact from their supposed substantive climate change mitigation (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). In their attempt at decoupling, BP has implemented symbolic management, a set of practices used to gain social legitimacy and consensus (Lyon and Montgomery, 2015). Via these practices, BP systematically disguises their empty green claims and policies as sustainability statements despite their inability to carry them out (Farrell and Rabin, 1996; Ramus and Montiel, 2005). Absent from BP's communications on sustainability progress is any hint of limitations or obstacles. As in the public sphere, such admissions of an incapability is a weakness (Matejek & Gössling, 2013). Thus, the narrative pushed for by BP is one of uncompromising and unyielding achievement, where technological innovation triumphs over the obstacle that is nature (Starkey and Crane, 2003).

Many of the messages meant to show the green turn the company has taken are plagued by vague rhetoric or irrelevant aspects intended to mislead consumers. Misleading symbols and imagery can be found across a multitude of BP's green marketing as part of their attempt to deflect consumers' attention from the truth (Cervellon, 2013). In an advertisement praising their commitments to sustainability, BP cleverly juxtaposes a conventional automobile, likely running on petroleum, with a picturesque field laden with windmills. Here BP showcases the "sin of irrelevance" (TerraChoice, 2010). By including windmills in the background of their advertisement, BP tries to subliminally persuade consumers to associate them with the company. Likewise, we can see covert green symbolism in BP's logo. While the logo at first glance seems to be a simple geometric shape painted in shades of green. It evokes imagery of the sun and nature and is meant to create a positive association between BP and the environment (Heaton, 2020).

Another sin BP commits, is the "sin of vagueness" through their new tagline: Beyond Petroleum (TerraChoice, 2010). The image BP conveys to their audience is that they are an honest company that cares for their consumers and the values they hold. The tagline, while catchy and memorable, holds no meaning. BP is unequivocally entrenched in petroleum and its consequences. Vagueness continued to be theme of BP's climate communications in their "It's a start" campaign. Wherein BP condensed humble platitudes to their favor, profiting from an enhanced environmental image despite still largely relying on petroleum rather than renewable sources (Frey, 2002). Moreover, these strategic moves were made in concert with the company's attempt to become a standout among their fossil fuel peers, setting itself ahead of those who were fixated solely on petroleum. The actions BP took to set themselves apart from their competitors implied BP took a moral high ground and that they were better than traditional oil companies (Cherry and Sneirson, 2011).

Accomplishments toward sustainability BP has claimed to have made are largely comprised of half-truths, and misdirection. As illustrated by environmental lawyers pursuing litigation on behalf of the campaign group ClientEarth, for BP creating a potentially misleading impression regarding the sources of their energy and their investments. A staggering 75% of the ads in their 2019 campaign promoted renewable energy, despite their actual investments being only 4% of their annual spending (ClientEarth, 2020). This misdirection hoped to take advantage of the average consumers' tendency to perceive such claims as absolute. In these cases, consumers are liable to extend their positive environmental impression of renewable energy to the dealings of the company at large (Russo, et al., 1981). The intentional spread of climate misinformation by BP is further substantiated by in *The 2018 Climate Accountability Scorecard*. Pinko, et al. (2018), found that BP along with other fossil fuel companies have continued

affiliating with third-party groups that spread disinformation about climate science and seek to block climate action. The green narrative BP has tried to build up is a form of deception meant to reinforce the positive image of BP as a green company (Starkey and Crane, 2003).

Conclusion

In separating themselves from their competitors by becoming one of the first fossil fuel companies to claim a change in organizational focus away from petroleum and gas, BP incited greater scrutiny on the global stage. The consequences of this greater scrutiny coupled with environmental disasters like the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill and the Alaska North Slope Oil Spill, each caused by negligence on BP's part, have resulted in their loss of environmental legitimacy. Through pushing their own green narrative and bold sustainability goals, they've struggled to reposition their brand back on the side of environmental good. Despite these attempts at reconnecting with their increasingly environmentally-minded consumers, vigilant scientists and watchdog groups are peeling back the green facade they've constructed and uncovering the truth about their disguise.

In BP's failed attempts at greenwashing, we can see that nowadays platitudes and empty promises are not enough to satisfy the demands of consumers. Organizations should make note of BP's failures in rebranding and understand that to truly connect to the values of their consumers, real, substantive work must be done. In this process transparency and humility is necessary. Admitting corporate limitations towards goal accomplishment should not be seen as a weakness, rather a testament to the trust between the organization and their audience.

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