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Greening the Media

Shame, ExxonMobil. Shame.

ExxonMobil knew about climate change but hide it from us

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ExxonMobil (once known as Standard Oil, then Mobil Oil) is the world's largest publicly-traded extractive corporation. The company has long been subject to rumor and investigation into its role not only in contaminating the world's air, water, and earth, but polluting our media with falsehoods about climate change as well.¹

And its executive class becomes very testy indeed if anything it says or does is questioned by scholars. Such executive rage goes back a long way.

Charles E Lindblom was a renowned advocate of pluralism in political science during the 1950s and '60s. He argued that the US political system, with its myriad of checks and balances, ensured that different social groups had varying successes in the political economy without there being a pattern of domination. Sometimes business won, sometimes labor did, and sometimes the environment.

Then Lindblom turned against his true love in the 1970s.² Why? He acknowledged that pluralism was a nonsense. Labor and the environment kept getting a poor deal and business kept, well, winning. He wrote a book and an op-ed in the New York Times to this effect.

His punishment? The executive class at the company denounced him in the New York Times in an op-ed page advertisement.³

That was just part of decades devoted by ExxonMobil's executive class to arguing against academic knowledge that it deemed threatening. A recent analysis of almost 200 documents circulated privately or publicly under the corporation's various names has disclosed a pattern of obfuscation, denial, and mendacity over the last forty years—including in its New York Times advertorials.⁴

ExxonMobil's internally-circulated papers tended to be the truest the researchers examined, in the sense that they hewed closely to the science of climate change. Conversely, those meant for external consumption emphasized imaginary problems with the science. In short, "83% of peer-reviewed papers and 80% of internal documents acknowledge that climate change is real and human-caused, yet only 12% of advertorials do so, with 81% instead expressing doubt." So when it came to informing themselves about the risks and opportunities posed by global warming, the executive class confronted reality and shared it with their chorines. The public was given an entirely different story.

Last year, a third of our states' attorneys-general announced that they were considering an investigation into racketeering charges against just such companies for their private acknowledgement versus public denial of climate science. ExxonMobil stands, well, firm, against such charges, and cites its record of promoting climate-change research. Does this remind you of anybody? Maybe tobacco company executives lying before Congress about the health effects of their murderous industry?⁵

The fact that corporations both sponsor and distort research is hardly news. Right across medicine and the sciences, we have seen increased reliance on corporate and state priorities, and a culture of widespread—if far from universal—theft and corruption, tendencies that require policing across the world as associated practices suffuse top journals.⁶

Such corruption occurs everywhere that corporate interests dominate. Consider the recent finding that one in ten papers in leading medical outlets are the work of communications companies, which provide ghostwriting services, funded by pharmaceutical corporations, that deliver material to academics and clinicians—then pay them for signing it.⁷

A notorious case was Wyeth (now owned by Pfizer) promoting its deadly drug Prempro. Pfizer describes academic publication as a means ‘to support, directly or indirectly, the marketing of our product.’ Unsurprisingly, marketing rather than science determines how to develop many new compounds. The following questions are typically posed: will a drug be declared a counter to depression or ejaculation; which scholars will be chosen to front it and produce consensus over its benefits; and will it be announced in journal x or y? Similarly, the tobacco industry has had a “special” relationship the International Society for the Built Environment, a front organization.⁸

It should come as no surprise that ExxonMobil’s executive class has rushed into print to lambast the authors of the recent study into their academic treachery.⁹ They just can’t help themselves, smearing the authors and providing no reasons of any kind to undercut their actual research. They did the same thing they had visited on Lindblom almost forty years earlier.

When 80% of the company’s research proves the reality of climate change, and is used for its own planning process, but 80% of what it tells the public goes against that truth, something is wrong. Deeply wrong.

Just before the corporation was trying to destroy Lindblom’s reputation, in 1975, Bruce Springsteen sang of “that giant Exxon sign that brings this fair city light.”¹⁰ Perhaps it did; but the sign shed little light on the climate crisis that the firm’s executive class knew was well underway.

And that guy Rex Tillerson; you know the one—our Secretary of State. He ran the firm for a decade until last year, and used to send out messages about climate change under a pseudonym.¹¹ Any comment, old boy? Or are you rather busy dealing with the international fallout from your great and glorious leader flattering those “very fine people” who like to march with the Klan and the Nazis?¹²

Shame, ExxonMobil. Shame.

1. <http://graphics.latimes.com/exxon-arctic/>

2. <http://www.nytimes.com/1978/01/04/archives/the-business-of-america-is-st...>

3. Mobil Oil. (1978, February 9). “Business and Pluralism.” New York Times: A21 .

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