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THE STRANGE CASE OF CLIMATE CHANGE AND MR EDELMAN—A PUBLIC RELATIONS GIANT CHANGES ITS MIND

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One of the world's biggest public relations (PR) corporations, Edelman, is in crisis. Caught out when other major PR concerns announced in 2014 that they would no longer work for climate-change deniers <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/aug/07/edelman-pr-climate->

[change-denial-campaigns](#), the group encountered further difficulties last month when word spread that it worked for the American Petroleum Institute (API) through a subsidiary, Blue Advertising. Tax filings disclose that API paid Edelman US\$327.4 million between 2008 and 2012 <http://time.com/3668128/lobbying-advertising-public-relations/>.

In return for this largesse, Edelman schooled API in award-winning campaigns <http://www.blueadvertising.com/#/american-petroleum-institute> designed to avoid the charge of climate-change denial.

Let's drop in on API's website: 'While the world relies on oil and gas for most of its energy and is likely to do so for years to come, emissions from their production and use have raised concerns. These emissions may be helping to warm our planet by enhancing the natural greenhouse effect of our atmosphere' http://www.api.org/policy-and-issues/policy-items/environment/climate_change. Here's my tendentious translation: "We keep you warm, cool, connected, and mobile—so don't regulate us. We, too, worry about the environment and will fix it before we ruin it."

In responding to the controversy, Edelman did what it might advise a client to do: claimed to be misunderstood, sacrificed an executive, announced that it believed in climate change, and divested from Blue Advertising [http://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2014/aug/19/climate-change-denial-flip-flop-public-relations-firm-edelman](http://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2014/aug/19/climate-change-denial-flip-flop-public-relations-firm-edelman;);

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/18/business/media/edelman-pr-firm-is-taking-steps-to-address-faux-pas-.html>; <http://www.edelman.com/p/6-a-m/edelmans-position-climate-change/>;
<http://www.holmesreport.com/latest/article/edelman's-american-petroleum-institute-assignment-set-to-end>.

Let's get real: Greenpeace's *Dealing in Doubt* reports are remarkable indictments of PR supporting climate-change denial

<http://www.greenpeace.org/usa/Global/usa/report/Dealing%20in%20Doubt%202013%20-%20Greenpeace%20report%20on%20Climate%20Change%20Denial%20Machine.pdf>. The industry routinely funds astroturf organizations (*faux* grassroots activism) and coin-operated think wankery (failed academics) that appeal to everyday experience and junk science and against democratic regulation underpinned by scholarly advice

<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/wcc.191/abstract>;

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17524032.2013.812974#.VOpvU1OUf7c>.

Edelman oleagiously refers to astroturfing as 'third party technique'

<http://www.bmj.com/content/326/7400/1205> and is the author of a "Grassroots Advocacy Vision Document"

<http://www.greenpeace.org/canada/Global/canada/file/2014/11/GRASS%20ROOTS%20ADVOCAY%20VISION%20DOCUMENT.pd>
that incarnates civil-society mimesis on behalf of corporate distortion.

Such conduct runs contrary to the US PR industry's code of ethics. Its list of 'improper conduct' includes "'grass roots" campaigns or letter-writing campaigns to legislators on behalf of undisclosed interest groups' and 'employing people to pose as volunteers to speak at public hearings and participate in "grass roots" campaigns'

<http://www.prsa.org/aboutprsa/ethics/codeenglish/#.VOrW-VOUf7c>.

Edelman has form in this regard, across many industries. In tobacco, it dedicated decades to combating medical science, encouraging simpleton smokers to continue their deluded indulgence <http://www.corporatewatch.org/company-profiles/edelman>. In pharmaceuticals, it spruiked spurious studies guaranteeing hair regrowth to gullible guys

<http://www.bmj.com/content/324/7342/886.1>. In chemicals, it set up supposedly grassroots campaigns for Monsanto *contra* critiques of genetically-modified food

<http://connection.ebscohost.com/c/articles/991649/public-relations-role-manufacturing-artificial-grass-roots-coalitions>. In retail, it paid operatives masquerading as cross-country campers to blog favorably about Wal-Mart car parks and store managers

<http://adage.com/article/news/edelman-eats-humble-pie/112588/>. And in the extractive sector, its collaboration with Trans Canada sought to discredit anyone questioning the Energy East pipeline <http://www.greenpeace.org/canada/Global/canada/file/2014/11/Astroturf-background.pdf>.

We also recently heard that Edelman registered record profits in 2014: US\$812 million, up 8.2%

on the previous year. The company noted in particular that it helped universities deal with the impact on public opinion of sexual violence on campus
<http://www.prweek.com/article/1334277/edelman-boosts-2014-global-revenues-82-812-million>.
Right.

Just over a month ago, Edelman launched its latest “Trust Barometer Survey,” which disclosed that ‘half of the global informed public believe that the pace of development and change in business today is too fast, that business innovation is driven by greed and money rather than a desire to improve people’s lives and that there is not enough government regulation of many industry sectors’ <http://www.edelman.com/insights/intellectual-property/2015-edelman-trust-barometer>. Doesn’t this make the case for subjecting its own segment of society to democratic scrutiny?

PR gets a bad press because it does PR: legitimizing the illegitimate will do that to a body of knowledge or profession. Hence the industry’s paradoxical obsession with ethics: ‘We are faithful to those we represent, while honoring our obligation to serve the public interest’
<http://www.prsa.org/aboutprsa/ethics/codeenglish/#.VOrW-VOUf7c>.

The bizarrely-titled Word of Mouth Marketing Association (truly) promises that its members will ‘make meaningful disclosures of their relationships or identities with consumers in relation to the marketing initiatives that could influence a consumer’s purchasing decisions’

<http://www.womma.org/ethics/womma-code-of-ethics>. Note that the word ‘citizen,’ which should apply given the attempt to forestall democratic regulation of industries, is invisible.

Thirty years ago, Edelman’s founder proudly announced a mission for the 21st century: ‘We have to prove by our performance that public relations is not a devious kind of work, a covering up, a cosmeticizing or distortion of reality’

<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0363811183801805>. His legacy makes the very case its patriarch hoped to disprove.

The Edelman-API romance may be over, but it’s difficult to know what the promised divestment signifies in terms of personnel and money. Perhaps I found an answer in a Hong Kong bar as I finished this piece. A white expat announced to a waitrand that ‘You’re listening to two, three professional bullshitters.’ Indeed.



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