

Spin doctors have shaped the environmentalism debate for decades

“Green” public relations work has flown below the radar but made a huge impact

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The turbulent waters of strategic political communication lost one of its beacons, E. Bruce Harrison, in January. Unfortunately, D.C. strategists didn't see the light for the fog — or is that smog? — obscuring their view.

In his public relations work for hundreds of clients in Washington, across the nation and overseas, Harrison shaped the industry's response to mounting concerns about the state of the natural environment and the need to take steps to protect it. Through his popular books and magazine columns, his close ties in the media and on Capitol Hill and his extensive network of franchises in the United States, Europe and Mexico, Harrison taught a generation of companies how to “go green” and embrace sustainable solutions to environmental problems.

That Harrison's passing escaped the public eye says legions about both the public relations profession and the particular legacy that he left.

Over the course of his decades-long career in “green” public relations, Harrison was behind PR campaigns for some of the biggest environmental polluters of the 20th century — from General Motors to Monsanto to BP America. He also helped shape PR standards, reaching key audiences in an increasingly complex media ecosystem. From the early 1960s through the end of the 1990s, Harrison's behind-the-scenes maneuvers set the terms of engagement for business leaders and elected officials forced to confront and grapple with environmental problems.

Americans have long known about environmental damage caused by industrial pollution. The 1961 publication of “Silent Spring,” science writer Rachel Carson's exposé of the toxic hazards of pesticides, galvanized a shocked public to call for immediate action. “Silent Spring” fomented a groundswell of public reform aimed at reclaiming the rights of citizens to a safe, clean and healthy environment.

“Silent Spring” drove industries to react as well. For Harrison, who was head of PR at the chemical trade association put it at the time, this was Pearl Harbor for his people. The scale and scope of the PR response was unprecedented. The chemical and agribusiness industries threw themselves into the attack, preparing fiery negative book reviews, newsletter mailings, TV appearances by “expert” scientists and letters to news editors questioning the legitimacy of the book and its author.

The countercampaign backfired. The intensive media attention to the book brought its concerns into the White House and a deeply sympathetic Kennedy administration. Concern over environmental hazards only accelerated throughout the decade, colored by the thalidomide tragedy in Europe and punctuated by a massive oil spill in 1969 in Santa Barbara, Calif. Under President Richard Nixon, a flurry of environmental laws passed: the National Environmental Policy Act in 1969; the Occupational Safety and Health Act in 1970; and key amendments to strengthen the Clean Air Act and Clean Water Act in 1972. Together, these laws underscored the waning power of corporate interests to dominate the environmental conversation.

This was where Harrison stepped in. The industry's failure to avoid reform through antagonism taught Harrison an important lesson, one that guided his political strategies for the rest of his career. In the clamor for change, chief executives' hand-wringing over the "burden" of government regulation on business seemed increasingly tone deaf. It was not opposition but compromise that would win the day for his clients' brand of American environmentalism.

Intensely charming, soft-spoken and a quiet wit in person and by pen, Harrison set out to restore legitimacy to industrial expertise amid the growing power and visibility of the environmental movement.

In 1973, when Harrison founded his PR firm in Washington, it was the first public relations agency to focus entirely on corporate environmental issues. The E. Bruce Harrison Company's first client was a coalition Harrison created himself, the National Environmental Development Association. The ambiguously named coalition monitored pending environmental legislation, created fact sheets and newsletters and held conferences for its members — drawn from the chemical, mining and petroleum industries as well as labor groups, market-minded members of Congress and agricultural interests — all with a bone to pick over the restrictions of emerging environmental standards.

Together with trade associations, chambers of commerce and hundreds of companies and coalitions in the oil, chemical, automobile and tobacco industries, Harrison devised what he called "sustainable communication" strategies to create consensus and dialogue among warring parties to environmental problems.

He believed in the potential of open minds and transparent communication to solve seemingly intractable differences of opinion about air quality, vehicle emissions, indoor tobacco smoke and climate change. The problem was many of these issues were not just differences of opinion; they were scientific realities bumping up against corporate and political interests. And Harrison was working for the latter.

Harrison worked to position corporate environmentalism as a pragmatic alternative to environmentalists' hotheaded rhetoric. Through panels and round tables, commissions and conferences, Harrison helped create nonconfrontational, collaborative settings for negotiation over environmental, health and safety issues. By appearing to extend the olive branch in contentious environmental disputes, business could take on the role of the reasonable and rational party, while counterposing antagonistic response by environmentalists as unreasonable and extreme.

Harrison orchestrated grass-roots outreach at the state and local levels, mass media campaigns to promote companies' internal environmental programs and testimonials at regulatory hearings, all to ensure that business had a voice in environmental policymaking. The industry's ongoing quest for "balance" — an equal consideration of economic growth alongside environmental protection — was Harrison's bread and butter.

The ultimate goal was to foster soft commitments to sustainability instead of succumbing to the harder line of federal environmental rules. Recycling campaigns, Environmental Social Governance (ESG) performance metrics and eco-friendly consumer products preserved free-market optimism in the face of mounting pollution and greenhouse gas emissions.

Throughout the 1970s and '80s, via leadership roles in the Public Relations Society of America and the International Public Relations Association, his regular columns for trade journals and his hundreds of clients and coalitions, Harrison spread the gospel of “sustainability” as a reasonable response to environmental problems. This gospel went global at the 1992 United Nations Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. As communications counsel for industry participants at the conference, Harrison helped enact a Business Charter for Sustainable Development, a legally nonbinding code of conduct for the private sector that ended the conversation about U.S. federal environmental legislation for the next 20 years.

With the Coalition for Vehicle Choice, Harrison reframed the 1970s auto emissions debate from one of fuel efficiency to one of consumer preferences. With the Total Indoor Environmental Quality Coalition, Harrison hoped to convince company managers to let employees decide whether to smoke in the workplace. With the Global Climate Coalition, Harrison ran an extensive media campaign to question the science and point to the economic costs of mitigating global warming.

To this day, PR firms such as Edelman and FTI Consulting hold seminars for industry communicators on dealing with environmentalists and actively monitor their actions. And while environmental groups have upped their communications game in the last 10 to 15 years, their moral stance as Davids is no match for the deep pockets of industrial PR Goliaths.

Companies dealing with climate change today are still promoting economic or technological solutions to what is a profoundly existential problem. Initiatives such as B-Corp certification or former Unilever chief executive Paul Polman’s Imagine collective lean into sustainability communication while backing away from the kind of transformation that federal government regulations could provide.

This history owes much to the strategies of public relations professionals, whose fealty to compromise and balance still holds sway over our modern climate consciousness.

But the environment is not a business problem, or a political problem or a problem of publicity. It’s a problem for our continued existence on the planet. Solving that kind of problem will require moving past the carefully crafted language that pervades these debates and obstructs bolder, urgent action.

As the Biden administration works to reverse the devastating environmental rollbacks of the Trump era, they would do well to heed Harrison’s strategy — and decide whether compromise is the right path after all.