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RESEARCH ARTICLE

When Corporations Care: A Reassessment of the Debunking Paradigm in Environmental Communication

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ABSTRACT

When corporations, particularly those in the fossil fuel industry, profess to care about their audience, how should we analyze and evaluate this care? The common strategy by scholars and journalists is to debunk, or expose, fake or inauthentic messaging. In this essay, I argue that debunking prevents us from articulating the coordinates of care in environmental communication. I propose the adoption of a different critical stance toward corporate "green" communication, and offer some resources for achieving the objective of situating environmental communication as a care discipline.

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In December, 2016, the Trinity Family Life Center in Richmond, Virginia welcomed 300 local residents for a gospel concert and holiday toy drive. Halfway through the event, the music was switched off, and concertgoers sat down to listen to a panel discussion about the importance of fossil fuels in delivering energy to their homes. The event was part of an advocacy campaign called Fueling U.S. Forward, organized by the PR firm Hamilton Place Strategies. The Fueling U.S. Forward campaign began its mandate in spring 2016 to promote domestic oil and natural gas use among minority groups, especially those in communities where oil and gas companies do business. An article exposing the PR firm's tactics on behalf of hidden interests (the program is funded by the petrochemical giant Koch Industries) appeared in the *New York Times* in January, 2017, and was quickly picked up by left-leaning blogs and environmental organizations (DeSmog, n.d.; Tabuchi, 2017).

On the surface it is hard not to see this event as a form of manipulation; or at least, as "an exploitative, sad, and borderline racist strategy," as a representative from the Environmental Justice Alliance put it (Tabuchi, 2017). An expanded viewpoint complicates this narrative, however. The event was co-organized by the National Policy Alliance, an organization dedicated to public policy issues that are responsive to the Black community. It was the second event for which the NPA and Fueling U.S. Forward had partnered, the first being the historic 2016 National Black Political Convention in Gary, Indiana. (Fueling U.S. Forward also sponsored the 2016 RedState Gathering, an annual "grassroots activism" conference at which participants learn advocacy techniques.) A month after the Christmas event, three students at Northwest Halifax High School in Littleton, North Carolina received $1500 scholarships from Fueling U.S. Forward (Dixon, 2017). That same week, an event for the World Conference of Mayors and NPA's Leadership Institute in Florida featured a half-hour talk on energy by Fueling U.S. Forward representative Hubbel Relat (World Conference of Mayors, 2017). Relat was previously general legal counsel for the American Energy Alliance, a conservative advocacy organization. Fueling U.S. Forward was also a 2017 sponsor for Blacks in Government (BIG), a professional development organization.

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I begin with a provocation to make my point. What we have here is a case of fossil fuel companies conveying their presence, support, and recognition of the needs of an underserved community in North Carolina. The gospel singer on the stage in Richmond does not appear to the audience as a shill for the oil industry. The man posing for a photograph alongside student scholarship winners in the *Littleton Daily Herald* does not act like a political operative. There is no signage heralding Koch Industries at the training session for Blacks in Government. What the local public, the professional organizations, and the schools see is a show of support – a commitment to care – for the places and practices that matter to them. That this care is provided in the absence of similar demonstrations of support from the state of North Carolina or from the federal government is a crucial part of the picture.

This is a paradigmatic example of corporate PR at work. What can it teach us about the coordinates of care in contemporary life? If we are to conceptualize environmental communication as a care discipline, what role is played by the case of the Koch Industries' "caring" environmental communication in North Carolina? Addressing this question requires that we pay attention to the historical legacy of corporate-sponsored environmental communication and its deft intertwining with environmental communication by scholars, environmental leaders, and action groups (Aronczyk & Espinoza, 2022).

It also requires that we overcome the bounded thinking that structures our understanding of environmental communication. By this I mean the common assumption that there is a bright line between pro-environmental and anti-environmental communication, and that each is expressed by a particular group (i.e. only pro-environmental action groups issue pro-environmental communication, and only anti-environmental groups issue anti-environmental communication). This tendency is similar to the dynamics that attend the study of mis- and disinformation more generally, where the primary distinction made by critical scholars is one of intent. While there is value in examining the intent of communication (for instance, in assessing liability in public deception; see Wentz & Franta, 2022), such attempts are complicated by the contexts of advocacy that may structure the meaning made of such messages.

In this brief essay I consider a dominant and longstanding response by scholarly researchers, journalists and climate activists to the machinations of industry: the strategy of debunking. Abad (1978) describes debunking as "the task of looking *behind* the conventions of power and of laying bare the fallaciousness of official definitions of political reality" (p. 241). The impulse to expose and unmask the ruses of the powerful who work against the scientific, political and social necessity to address the causes and impacts of climate change and the threat of environmental destruction sits at the heart of the global climate movement and is the favored weapon of journalists as well as academics. This approach, though effective by many measures, prevents us from conceptualizing "care" in a transformative way, because it does not accept that there are multiple realities.

The practice of debunking, somewhat like its journalistic cousin, muckraking, is founded on Enlightenment beliefs in rationality and attendant democratic principles of transparency, objective truth-telling, and the public interest. By exposing the true "facts," held up against the "fictions" of powerful or corrupt opponents, researchers aim to educate message recipients and influence their judgement in order to effect change in the civil and political spheres. In the climate context, debunking has become its own kind of industry, with climate action groups, journalists and researchers working to uncover "secret," "hidden" or "dark influence" narratives by political and industry groups (e.g. Leonard, 2019; Mayer, 2016; Institute for Strategic Dialogue) and reframing climate denialism in terms of climate disinformation. A related strategy is to "prebunk," or preemptively warn audiences of common mis- or disinformation tactics in an attempt to inoculate or immunize them against further attempts to mislead (e.g. Lewandowsky & van der Linden, 2021). The metaphors of inoculation and immunity idealize the notion that properly educated audiences will no longer be susceptible to attempts by "bad" actors to manipulate the "truth" about climate change.

The inoculation/immunity metaphor is unfortunately problematic in a number of ways. For one thing, it recalls the (long debunked!) hypodermic needle model of media effects, which proposes that audience behaviors are directly correlated to the media messages they receive. The suggestion that audiences are "brainwashed" into thinking and acting a particular way in the presence of media messaging has been undone many times. It is relevant that such a model was proposed in the shadow of the First World War and re-introduced in the Second World War, when propaganda campaigns reached their apex in the twentieth century and the need to divide the world into allies and enemies was paramount. There is no small irony in the fact that despite media scholars' rejection of the hypodermic needle model of communication effects, we continue to re-create it in our attempts to overcome it through debunking and pre-bunking. By assuming that disbelief in science is the product of bad messaging, and that better messaging will undo that disbelief, we reproduce symptom, cause and effect of hypodermic needles – conditioned, manipulated, controlled audiences. This approach ignores the considerable research on audiences and effects that focuses on meanings made.

A second problem is that this critical practice reinforces politically expedient but inaccurate binaries between good and bad: good and bad communication, good and bad audiences, and good and bad actors. We need to recognize that this binary is itself a strategic act meant to emphasize degrees of distance between the disinterested researcher and their self-interested objects of research. That this binary glosses over the complexity of organizational commitments, overlapping allegiances, and cultural diversity characteristic of public life reveals the limits of this strategy, especially in the realm of the imperative to care.

A third problem posed by the debunking impulse is related to the moral evaluation implied by such binaries: that the researchers, journalists and activists know something that ordinary people do not; and moreover, that they perceive the world more clearly, with sharper judgment, and can adjudicate between the authentic and inauthentic experience of others. In these evaluations we can perceive a lack of reflexivity – indeed, a lack of care – on the part of the researcher. It is not sufficient to negate strategic industrial or political communication as a "fake" form of environmental communication. My scholarly concern here extends beyond the challenge of sifting out what is from what isn't environmental communication to what it actually means to care, and how this in turn affects the capacity for intellectual critique.

When a company professes to care about a community, it is very easy, and often correct, to classify that communication as disingenuous, manipulative, and harmful. But the implications of that classification are to discount the experiences of the scholarship recipients and the professional development groups and the gospel concert attendees. Imagine, for instance, that a researcher approached the community members who received a scholarship, or attended a sponsored training event, or listened to the concert, and told them that the "real" reason they had been cared for is that Koch Industries sought to buy their consent to operate unabated in that community. What do we do with the concert, the scholarships, the professional training? How do we compound the way a community *feels* about those experiences of care with the information that they are dupes – and moreover, that the researcher has no alternative source of support to offer?

Considerable research in science communication has focused on the role of organized interests and influential industries and individuals to impede the communication of scientific evidence. This research has demonstrated how professional communicators working for companies in polluting sectors like fossil fuels, tobacco and pesticides have shaped what we know about the natural environment for over 100 years. Much of this research deals with the manufactured controversies around environmental science and especially the science of global warming (Ceccarelli, 2011; Freudenburg et al., 2008; Michaels, 2008; Oreskes & Conway, 2010). This research has given us strong evidence of how doubt, uncertainty or ignorance around science is promoted by industry actors, government agencies, political figures and even scientists whose interests are opposed to environmental regulation or legislation.

The framework of manufactured controversy around climate change has become far more sophisticated than its initial iterations debating whether or not climate change was "real" and whether its proponents could be trusted. Climate denial now takes multiple strategic forms, and researchers have moved to create taxonomies of a variety of claims amounting to climate contrarianism (Boussalis & Coan, 2016; Coan et al., 2021; King et al., 2022). Still, these perspectives maintain the debunking impulse.

One strategy led by industrial actors and political allies has been to develop environmental or climate initiatives that promote the spirit of collaboration or compromise. "Going green," as one strategic consultant termed the practice, allows polluting companies to position themselves as part of the solution instead of part of the problem. Initiatives such as industry–environmental organization partnerships, green certification programs, environmental-social-governance (ESG) investments, and educational materials have since at least the 1970s aimed to demonstrate that corporations care about the environment. More recently, the appointment of a chief executive of a national oil corporation in the United Arab Emirates to preside over the 2023 United Nations Climate Change Conference underscores the extent of corporate influence over so-called "green" discourse.

Critical scholars examining the mutualism of such corporate political communication have employed a neo-Gramscian framework to make sense of this problem (Jaeger 2017; Levy, 1997; Levy & Egan, 2003; Levy & Newell, 2005; Wright & Nyberg, 2017; Wright et al., 2021). Jaeger (2017) argues that corporate interests reframe environmental problems to conform to their own perspective, appearing to cede to environmental concerns while formulating solutions that protect corporate profits and prevent civil society response. He uses the case of recycling to show how companies individualized the problem of waste by transferring responsibility to the consumer and sidestepping state regulation. This "campaign of hegemony" succeeded in representing corporate interests as being in the interests of everyone, decreasing resistance through the manufacture of consent. Levy and Newell (2005) examine the relative failure of international environmental politics as a result of neo-Gramscian "coalitions and compromise that provide a measure of political and material accommodation with other groups, and [] ideologies that convey a mutuality of interests" (Levy & Newell, 2005, p. 50).

While the "manufacture of consent" framework inherent to this ideological critique allows for greater nuance than the stark binaries of truth and falsehood employed by debunking methods, it remains silent on the question of what to do when the care extended by a corporation is *felt as care* by its recipients. Clearly, the ability to identify a "causal nexus" between deception and public harms is vital from a legal perspective (Wentz & Franta, 2022). A growing number of lawsuits against fossil fuel companies specifically seek evidence of "sophisticated disinformation campaigns to cast doubt on the science, causes, and effects of global warming" (Supreme Court of Hawai'i, 2023) in order to claim damages for affected jurisdictions. It is unclear, however, whether such legal remedies will influence the viewpoints of those for whom the corporation has appeared as a source of support. Indeed, we have to entertain the possibility that complaints alleging that defendant companies have violated consumer protections could become fodder for corporate promotional campaigns intimating that plaintiffs don't "care" about communities like they do.

Instead of focusing only on the power of corporations to delude us, I propose that we turn our attention to the power of corporations to move us. As inauthentic as their efforts at care may be, we discount at our peril the genuine feelings that may be fostered. Companies are deftly trained to connect with and mirror our desires, to promote attachment to their products, to foster community and even love. Instead of focusing solely on the uncovering, the exposure, the "ah-ha!" of critique, what if we attended to the ways these feelings have been carefully tended to, and offer those feelings through other means?

In a previous essay (Aronczyk, 2020) I argued that this is what Bruno Latour (2004) meant when he invoked the contrast between matters of fact and matters of concern. In his famous essay, Why

Has Critique Run Out of Steam? (2004), Latour laments the debunking impulse that has dominated critique, asking,

> Can we devise another powerful descriptive tool that deals this time with matters of concern and whose import then will no longer be to debunk but to protect and to care … ? (Latour, 2004, p. 232)

I now realize that to move from a culture of skepticism to a care-centered empiricism, as Latour encourages us to do, is not a straightforward commitment. Abad (1978) reminds us of the issue at hand:

> A proper debunking, I claim, is one which fulfills two mandates: methodologically, it leads social scientists to understand, in as objective a manner as possible, the forces which govern political action; ethically, it impels these same social scientists to seek alternatives to conventions and definitions which foster the arbitrary alienation of large numbers of people. (p. 241)

It is the latter claim, the provision of alternatives, that has fallen out of the impulse to debunk that attends critical scholarship on (anti-)environmental communication. Beyond the subversion of exposure, scholars, journalists and action groups must give us resources of hope that move us beyond mere awareness of fallacies. Put simply: We need not just something else to care about, but another way to be cared for. In the absence of *both* an awareness of the import of lived experience and of the provision of alternatives to care than those on offer, critical analysis will not yield the desired transformation.

This is not an apologia for the environmental communication of corporate actors. We have more than enough evidence that industrial actors, particularly in the fossil fuel industry, do *not* act in the public interest, do *not* honestly represent the dangers associated with their products, and do *not* intend to make the kinds of transformative changes required to address the climate crisis and environmental destruction. The lawsuits and regulatory initiatives seeking accountability by fossil fuel companies on that basis are important and necessary. My point is that by failing to take note of the recipients of these corporations' community efforts, we fail to recognize the contours of care as felt experience. And by exposing, unmasking, or uncovering the ways these people have been duped and tricked, what we are really doing is invalidating their experience of being cared for. If truly we seek transformation, we must locate it in more than just our sense of satisfaction in pulling back the curtain on other people's illusions. We must offer an alternative performance that enriches and supports our society as we attempt to move into a new climatic regime.

Disclosure statement

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