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U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Natural Resources

Hearing on  
“The Role of Public Relations Firms in Preventing Action on Climate Change”

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Chair Porter, Ranking Member Moore, and members of the United States House Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about the role of public relations firms in preventing action on climate change.

My name is Melissa Aronczyk. I am an associate professor at Rutgers University in the School of Communication & Information. I am the co-author of a book titled, *A Strategic Nature: Public Relations and the Politics of American Environmentalism*, published by Oxford University Press in January of this year.<sup>1</sup> The central finding of our research for this book is that the public relations industry has, for several decades, been a major actor in the strategy, planning, and execution of campaigns to influence public opinion and policymaking around environmental issues.

Indeed the history of American public relations can be seen as a history of battles over how to control high-stakes environmental problems. It began in the early twentieth century, when monopoly companies in environmentally compromising industries like rail, steel and coal faced opposition from Americans worried about their size and power. Corporate public relations emerged from this concern, charged with a mission to restore the public image of these companies.<sup>2</sup> Many pre-World War II public relations campaigns focused on downplaying the environmental harms caused by corporations in their communities such as air and water pollution or waste management. In the second half of the twentieth century, as Americans became more and more aware of the ecological harm caused by extractive industries, corporations became symbols of destruction and targets for political reform.<sup>3</sup> Again, public relations counsel played instrumental roles in restoring a positive reputation to companies and their activities, emphasizing their contributions to society and downplaying their harmful environmental impact in public, in the courts, and in government forums.

Today, many public relations firms working for fossil fuel interests actively prevent public awareness and government action on climate change. And they are using many of the same strategies they developed decades ago.

To understand how these strategies have been developed and executed, I examined company and trade association archives, Congressional hearing transcripts, professional journals, and industry

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<sup>1</sup> Melissa Aronczyk and Maria I. Espinoza, *A Strategic Nature: Public Relations and the Politics of American Environmentalism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Roland Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul: The Rise of Public Relations and Corporate Imagery in American Big Business*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

<sup>3</sup> David Vogel, *Fluctuating Fortunes: The Political Power of Business in America*. New York: Basic Books, 1989.

reports. My co-author and I conducted approximately 75 one-on-one interviews with public relations counselors, industry representatives, strategic communications experts, government representatives, and environmental advocates; and attended industry and professional association events. My statement is drawn from this material.

I would like to make three major points about the role of public relations firms in preventing action on climate change.

**1. Public relations for fossil fuel companies is about much more than messaging or marketing.**

PR firms working for fossil fuel interests act in many roles and do much more than merely communicate their clients' intentions to the public in media campaigns such as advertisements or commercials. Over the last five decades, PR firms representing fossil fuel clients have also been responsible for tasks such as planning and hosting public events for clients and their supporters; monitoring and countering legislative and regulatory attempts to control environmental problems; creating pro-industry coalitions and front groups to give the appearance of multiple sources of support for fossil fuel production; and surveilling and delegitimizing groups and organizations that support action on environmental and health problems including climate change.

Public relations is not just about marketing or advertising. My research into PR firms working for fossil fuel companies shows that they engage in strategic and long-term planning, provide ongoing counseling and representation, and conduct opposition research and targeting on behalf of their clients. Public relations firms often present themselves and their work in terms of facilitating or amplifying ideas or information. In fact, public relations is not only communicating ideas and information but *coming up* with those ideas and *creating* that information. They also create opportunities for that information to circulate, while actively downplaying information that does not support their strategy.

Public relations is also not just about reaching public audiences. Despite the label of "*public*" relations, PR firms target multiple stakeholders behind the scenes at local, state and federal levels, including citizens, journalists and policymakers. Distinctions among the business of public relations, public affairs, lobbying, and advocacy are often not observed in practice.

Another reason that public relations is such a broad system of influence has to do with the kinds of tactics it uses. For instance, so-called "astroturf" lobbying is a practice whereby public

relations counselors manufacture the illusion of grassroots support, sometimes by mobilizing and managing local constituencies that are sponsored and funded by the PR firm's fossil fuel clients. The PR firm then uses these constituencies to participate in media campaigns, on-the-ground events, and public policy forums.<sup>4</sup>

A [New York Times investigation](#) in 2020 revealed an instance of astroturf lobbying in the fossil fuel industry. The *New York Times* found that the PR firm FTI Consulting was behind the grassroots groups Texans for Natural Gas, the Arctic Energy Center, and the Main Street Investors Coalition. These appear as “separate efforts to amplify local voices or speak up for local people”; but rather they are “part of a network of corporate influence campaigns designed, staffed and at times run by FTI Consulting, hired by some of the largest oil and gas companies in the world to help them promote fossil fuels.”

In sum, public relations firms working for fossil fuel companies can engage in a broad spectrum of activities with considerable influence in the public and political sphere.

## **2. Public relations for fossil fuel companies coordinates strategies and distributes risk across industries.**

Public relations plays a very important coordinating role across industries and sectors. Unlike trade groups, which are limited in scope to a single trade or sector; or chambers of commerce, which are restricted to their constituency, PR practitioners move freely among different trades, issues, and geographies. They maintain multiple affiliations and coordinate across them. They build expertise and knowledge about how environmental problems affect different industries and regions and transfer this knowledge across their client base.

This flexibility allows PR firms to remain hidden in the process of advocacy. PR counselors can engage in intelligence-gathering about political action on several environmental issues and share it across different industries. They coordinate across multiple companies and sectors involved in fossil fuel production and develop broad strategies to counter action on environmental problems as they evolve. These strategies are not publicized, they are not transparent, and they are not regulated.

Furthermore, public relations firms are embedded in a wide network of influence. They may represent not only a fossil fuel company but also the trade association to which that company

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<sup>4</sup> Edward T. Walker, *Grassroots for Hire: Public Affairs Consultants in American Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

belongs; or they may develop their client's strategy in tandem with industry councils or organizational boards that the fossil fuel company client belongs to. Those groups in turn will support and execute the PR strategy for different audiences. This allows individual companies to minimize the reputational and financial risk of speaking out against climate action in public or in formal settings such as congressional hearings. Because this coordinated infrastructure of anti-environmental action is operating behind the scenes, members of the public and lawmakers have no way of knowing if the campaigns operating on behalf of fossil fuels are real or manufactured. These activities not only reduce citizens' trust in the political process; they distort democratic discourse.

**3. Public relations for fossil fuel companies has worked to influence public opinion and policymaking around environmental problems for over fifty years.**

One of the most striking findings in my research is the continuity of strategies developed and executed by public relations firms for fossil fuel industries. The playbook used by public relations firms today to influence public opinion and political action on climate change was developed at least fifty years ago. Industry reports from the early 1970s document how public relations firms provided so-called "economic education programs" to help industry clients convey the value of their products to the American people. At the same time, these firms were engaging in such activities as: conducting opposition research to counter regulatory and legislative action; using key intelligence-gathering contacts in government agencies and other organizations that influence public policy on environmental and energy issues; and conducting pro-industry media campaigns and public campaigns that downplayed the health and environmental risks of climate change.

Much of the evidence for the existence of these long-term PR strategies comes from the millions of internal corporate documents publicly disclosed during litigation against the tobacco industry in the 1990s. The reason these documents are so relevant to today's hearing is reflected in the three points I have made today. Many of the public relations firms that created strategies for tobacco companies to downplay the impact of their products in the 1980s and 1990s are applying those same strategies now on behalf of fossil fuel clients. We have a record of compromising behavior by specific public relations firms, with devastating effects on the health and welfare of the American people. But until now, the PR firms themselves have remained out of sight. Today's hearing allows us to broaden our understanding of PR firms' accountability when it comes to downplaying the threat of climate change and the role of their clients in causing it.

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