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Spinning climate change: Corporate and NGO public relations strategies in Canada and the United States

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Abstract
This article examines the role of PR in the debate about global climate change. Seeking to move beyond a focus on PR as just the handmaiden of corporate power, the article documents the fluid role of professionalized communication in terms of its impact on both corporate and NGO actors and their activities, focusing on communication tactics and the influence of PR consultancies. Drawing from the debates around the transformation of the public sphere, the article argues that the climate change issue illustrates not only structural change but also a wider cultural transformation marked by the emergence of promotionalism as the dominant communicative logic of both powerful and institutionally weaker players. It is argued that although existing political and economic resources provide certain actors with significant advantages, these assets and the structural advantages they tend to accrue cannot alone determine the outcome of struggles over climate change policy and public opinion.

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Introduction

In September 2009, President Mohammed Nasheed of the Maldives told the UN summit on climate change that if swift action to combat global warming was not taken, the 300,000 people that live in his low-lying island nation ‘will not live. We will die. Our country will not exist’ (Hanley, 2009). President Nasheed was not alone in his urgent call for action to combat global warming. More than 100 world leaders converged at the UN summit to grapple with proposed solutions aimed at mitigating the rising sea levels, mass population displacement and extreme weather patterns caused by rapidly rising temperatures. Yet even as the UN warned that current emissions trajectories were speeding the world towards worst-case climate outcomes and world leaders warned that complacency was tantamount to ‘a global suicide pact’, the summit failed to produce any concrete commitments to resolving the issue (Potter, 2009). What the summit did produce, however, was a consensus among most world leaders that global warming was happening, its consequences were immediate and catastrophic and that it is one of the most important, if not contentious, domestic and international policy issues of the 21st century.

The politically contentious nature of the climate change issue came into full view just months later. In early December, weeks before the UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen (COP15), a computer hacker broke into the private email accounts of leading scientists at the Climatic Research Unit (CRU) at the University of East Anglia, UK. Most of the content of these messages consisted of private correspondence between the scientists; and although the substance of the messages would be taken out of context to maximize the political impact, they were still damaging. One excerpt suggested that the world’s most trusted experts conducted a methodological ‘trick’ to amplify the severity of projected global warming; another suggested there were efforts to systematically delete evidence that could undermine the established scientific paradigm; and a third suggested that leading climate scientists attempted to control the peer review process by bullying at least one journal editor who was willing to publish research challenging the scientific consensus about climate change. As the Guardian newspaper columnist and environmental activist George Monbiot acknowledged, ‘some of the messages require no spin to make them look bad’ (cited in Greenberg, 2009).

The so-called ‘Climategate’ debacle struck a blow to the credibility of the climate science establishment and gave its critics an opportunity to discredit the moral character and professional practices of climate scientists as well as validity of their claims. Climategate was the latest chapter in a very long history of antagonism between climate change adherents who accept the reality and seriousness of human-induced climate change and the contrarians that doubt or deny its existence. This is an antagonism that has intensified since the 1990s and become increasingly public in its orientation, as the scientific evidence for climate change has grown stronger (McCright and Dunlap, 2003). It is also one that does not promise to disappear anytime soon.1

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1 The text continues with further discussion on the history and implications of the Climategate controversy.
Climate change provides a fascinating case for investigating the emerging influence of public relations and professionalized communication in social and political life. As Mayhew argues, in the decades following the Second World War, ‘political consultants, media specialists, public opinion pollsters, professional grassroots organizers, specialized lobbyists, focus group organizers, specialists in issue research, and demographic researchers burgeoned in numbers and established increasingly specialized roles’ (Mayhew, 1997: 4). This process of specialization and the central role of professionalized communication in politics and social life has produced paradoxical outcomes. On the one hand, it has transformed public communication into an instrument for the strategic pursuit of private interests in a way that many observers see as manipulative and undemocratic. Miller and Dinan (2007: 11), for example, argue that public relations was created by the corporate sector ‘to thwart and subvert democratic decision making’. Others argue that the rise of PR has helped democratize communication by ensuring a steady flow of information across the political arena, the corporate sector and civil society (Davis, 2000a). Hiebert (1966: 7) argued that ‘without public relations, democracy could not succeed in a mass society’, and for McNair, ‘the public relations function is a necessary dimension of the modern political process, which has overall become more democratic, and not less’ (McNair, 1996: 53; cited in Weaver et al., 2006: 14). For these and other writers, PR plays a legitimate, if problematic, function in what Weaver et al. (2006: 7) call the ‘information management machinery of democratic societies’.

This article explores some of the different roles that PR has played in the climate change debate in the United States and Canada. We adopt an agnostic position that seeks to push past the descriptions of PR as merely the handmaiden for corporate power, in order to better understand how different actors use PR techniques and strategies to gain support for competing climate change policy agendas. In particular, we are interested in exploring how both climate change adherents and contrarians have mobilized PR practices and made use of the services of PR consultancies.

The article is organized in two main sections: we begin by providing a sensitizing conceptual framework that situates the expansion of PR in relation to debates over the structural and cultural transformation of the public sphere. In the second, more substantive part of the article, we present a discussion of the different PR strategies and tactics that have been used by corporations and NGOs in their efforts to influence policy and public opinion, with evidence taken from the Canadian and US contexts. We conclude the article by stepping away from the particularities of the case to consider some of its wider implications for the study of communication and democracy.

A critical perspective on PR

PR practitioners are commonly portrayed in the media as a threat to the public interest. Journalists often describe the PR practitioner as a sleazy ‘influence peddler’ whose modus operandi is to trip up journalists in their pursuit of truth and spoil the democratic debate by insinuating themselves into every aspect of public policy-making (Crittenden, 1998; Nelson, 1989: 95). As DeLorme and Fedler (2003) recount, this hostility emerged in the early 20th century when following the First World War, the press launched a campaign against ‘space grabbers’ (i.e. publicists), whose influence, they feared, would...
sharply reduce advertising revenue. Such dismissive characterizations are not at all a contemporary invention. One can look to antiquity, especially Plato’s famous critique of sophists as orators who would be sufficiently pleased ‘to have discovered the knack of convincing the ignorant that he knows more than the experts’ (cited in L’Etang and Pieczka, 2006: 363). From journalists to philosophers, PR practitioners have been characterized as rhetorical mercenaries: hired guns who advance corporate and government interests often at the expense of public benefit. Consequently, practitioners often find themselves on the defensive, protesting against journalistic clichés about manipulation and spin, and claiming that they are not a secret cabal of propagandists with mysterious powers but facilitators of public discourse who help businesses, governments, nonprofits and other organizations communicate with one another, with the media and with citizens more broadly about issues and events that are of interest to all (e.g. Neil, 2009).

We approach PR as a mode of communication that is part of a continuous process of conflict over political and economic power, but also as part of a wider struggle around the production and use of social meaning whose outcomes are more contingent. Our approach is located in relation to Habermas’s theory of the public sphere and the critical debates this framework has produced about the corrosive effects of PR on democracy.

**PR and the transformation of the public sphere**

Habermas (1989) argues that during the 17th and 18th centuries, in countries like Britain and the liberal democracies of continental Europe, citizens were able to gather in common places (coffee shops, pubs, salons) in order to debate issues of public interest in a way that was innocent of political and economic influence and power. Though Habermas acknowledges that a gap existed between the ideal of unrestricted participation and actual practices of widespread exclusion (Habermas, 1992; see also Fraser, 1992), he argues that the public sphere did allow for some degree of open expression of ideas at the boundary of the political arena and civil society. Yet as corporate capitalism became hegemonic, the public sphere was ‘re-feudalized’ – turned back into an arena for the public display of power, privilege and prestige, as it had operated during the pre-modern era. This re-feudalized public sphere, Habermas argues, came to be dominated primarily by corporations and political actors that were seeking to ‘procure plebiscitary agreement from a mediatised public by means of a display of staged or managed publicity’ (Habermas, 1989: 232). It is by no means inconsequential that the advertising and PR industries would burgeon in number and influence in the wake of this change (Cutlip, 1995; Ewen, 1996; Mayhew, 1997).

The paradox of Habermas’s framework is not so much that he ignores the public sphere’s exclusionary character, but that he overlooks the implications of the fact that its restructuring occurred alongside growing success on the part of women, the working class and other groups in achieving greater access and publicity. Thus, what happened historically was not only a structural transformation of the public sphere, as Habermas describes it, but also a cultural transformation, as new groups gained access to voice their issues and concerns, and attempted to influence public opinion and political decision-making (e.g. DiCenzo, 2000). The public sphere was not only transformed into an arena of economic or corporate promotionism; it was also opened up to new political issues, problems and perspectives at the same time.
In a diversified, pluralistic and fragmented public sphere, knowledge claims proliferate on the basis of incompatible worldviews and epistemologies. It can no longer be assumed that there is any unity of reason acting as the point of departure and destination for public discourse. Public discourse is fragmented structurally and culturally as different, incommensurable forms of interest come into competitive play. In this context, the public sphere has become an arena of both economic promotion and social and political activism outside and beyond the institutionalized realm of party politics (Beck, 1997; Demetrious, 2006; Knight and Greenberg, 2003). The public sphere mediates a bilateral flow of communication between the system and the lifeworld. In its promotional form it functions as a conduit for the colonization of the lifeworld by system imperatives; in its subaltern form it enables the infiltration of the system by lifeworld problems, concerns and communicative frames of reference.

The dual character of a pluralistic, competitive public sphere characterized by promotionalism and activism means that the task of obtaining consensus through careful, deliberative discourse (the outcome of Habermas’s ideal type framework) becomes more complex and difficult, if not altogether impossible. This is compounded in a number of ways. In the first place, communication in the public sphere is increasingly mediated, meaning that debate regularly takes place not only in the parliament or town council chambers, but increasingly on the front page of the daily newspaper, on the nightly news broadcast and in the blogosphere. This gives a distinct advantage to those with power, prestige, money, social ties and organizational capacity (e.g. government agencies and departments, large corporations) in getting their message across, and puts less well resourced actors (e.g. NGOs and community groups) at a comparative disadvantage. The principal effect of this inequality is not only that it often allows power centres like governments and corporations to set the terms of debate, at least initially; it also means that these terms are normally set in the logic of self-promotion. Dissenting voices, whether institutionalized within political parties, in NGOs or looser activist networks, often find that they have to brand their identities and overhype their interests and perspectives in order to ensure media access, to influence the terms of their public representation and to maximize public attention and political effect.

Habermas’s theory of the public sphere offers a vision of democratic communication and civil society. Concerned with questions of truth and justice, he argued that a rational society is one where public opinion will emerge not from the power of partisan lobbying and the exercise of control over the terms of public debate, but on the basis of an open discussion, i.e. a dialogue about what constitutes the collective good. For Habermas, public relations practitioners, regardless of the institutional space they occupy (corporate, government, NGO), operate in ways that are anathema to democracy. Their communicative activities are driven not by standards of reciprocity, but by sectional interests and an unrelenting need to win the framing war by securing political and cultural advantage over their adversaries. Truth, rightness and sincerity, the operating principles of ethical, dialogical communication, are sidelined by strategic priorities in which all communication is designed not to promote the exchange of ideas and arguments, but ‘to achieve ends at the expense of other people’ (Mayhew, 1997: 35). While this transformation in the play of communication may have occurred at the initiative of corporate and state power, it has been reified and reproduced by non-elite actors as well, including NGOs.
Global warming and corporate PR

In February 2007, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released its Fourth Assessment Report on Climate Change. The largest and most vigorously peer-reviewed scientific undertaking in history, the report was ominous and unequivocal: global warming is occurring, it is ‘very likely’ caused by greenhouse gas emissions resulting from human activity, and its effects – the vast melting of Arctic ice, an extreme and dangerous rise in sea levels which would threaten the survival of small island states and an increase in extreme weather patterns – will be catastrophic (IPCC, 2007: 5; see also Gelbspan, 2004). Most alarmingly, the report indicated that many of these changes are already observable and are likely to worsen unless policy action is taken in the short and longer terms.

The release of the IPCC report represented a political threat not only to the Bush administration in the US, but also to the newly elected Conservative government in Canada, Australia’s Howard government and governments elsewhere that oppose the premise of anthropogenic climate change and state intervention to both prevent it and mitigate its effects. The fossil fuels industry was especially concerned to forestall state intervention given the benefits of increased mining and exploration activities at a time of increased global demand for oil, gas, coal and other energy products.

In the fluid, contingent and competitive field of public policy, third-party advocacy groups are commonly used by established power centres to sway public opinion (Miller, 2007: 54). Third-party advocacy involves the establishment of grassroots movements to help push private interests, and it provides a means through which businesses can influence policy-makers and for wealthy donors to sway political campaigns while leaving very little trace evidence of involvement (Drinkard, 1997). One of the most controversial PR techniques to emerge from this period is the use of artificial grassroots organizations, or astroturf. Astroturfing, which has been used by corporations and governments around the world for well over a century,² refers to the development of fake grassroots organizations that may look and feel like they are community based, but which are created to manufacture the illusion of public or scientific scepticism or support for government or corporate policies and practices (Beder, 1998; Fitzpatrick and Palenchar, 2006; Miller, 2007). Critics argue that such obvious deception cloaks an organization or industry’s self-interest as a matter of public concern and corrupts the policy-making process, which is supposed to operate on the basis of rational debate over the best evidence-based practices available.

Astroturfing has become increasingly synonymous with the activities of corporations in the fossil fuels industry. A classic example is the now-defunct Global Climate Coalition (GCC), a partnership of oil, coal and automobile corporations that challenged climate change mitigation policies and sought to influence media coverage about global warming. The GCC was created shortly after the first meeting of the IPCC in 1989 by Ruder Finn PR, a consultancy hired by William O’Keefe, a former executive with the American Petroleum Institute (Rampton and Stauber, 2002: 27).³ The GCC carried out several direct advertising campaigns, wrote consistently about the ‘junk science’ behind global warming in the op-ed pages of daily newspapers, supplied a steady stream of media releases and reports to news media and engaged in widespread grassroots
campaigning (Rowell, 1996). One of the Coalition’s most aggressive media campaigns came in 1997 when it co-sponsored (with the American Association of Automobile Manufacturers) a US$13 million advertising campaign condemning the international climate change treaty negotiations in Kyoto. The anti-Kyoto ads were run through the Global Climate Information Project, a third-party advocacy group created by Shandwick Public Relations, and used the slogan ‘It’s Not Global, and It Won’t Work’, stating (incorrectly) that under the Kyoto treaty, Americans would ‘pay an extra 50 cents for every gallon of gasoline’ (Whiteman, 1999: 13).

By 1997, the growing scientific consensus about global climate change as well as the GCC’s increasingly negative reputation as an anti-environmental front group was creating a PR headache for many member organizations. The Ford Motor Company’s CEO, William Clay Ford Jr, stated in a speech in 2000 that amid growing scientific and public consensus about anthropogenic climate change, membership of the GCC had increasingly become a problem: ‘We left the Global Climate Coalition [because] we felt that membership in that organization was an impediment to our ability to move forward credibly with our agenda on environmental responsibility.’ The majority of GCC’s member organizations followed Ford’s lead, and by 2002 the Coalition had dissolved. However, the Coalition’s legacy, along with numerous other astroturf organizations created during the 1990s, continues.

In June 2009, the US House of Representatives passed the American Clean Energy and Security Act (Waxman–Markey Bill), the first bill passed by a US House to propose ‘measurable cuts’ in the heat-trapping emissions linked to global warming. The bill was hailed as a modest step forward in US climate change policy by many, including various climate scientists and international heads of state such as German Chancellor Angela Merkel. Yet immediately following the bill’s passage, a group calling itself the ‘Energy Citizens’ began holding rallies in oil-producing and manufacturing cities across the US. The rallies were aimed at expressing opposition to the bill on the basis that it was ‘a badly flawed 1,427-page piece of legislation that will drive up the price of energy, deter American job creation and send jobs overseas and bring greater stress to a still struggling economy’.

Hundreds of people attended the initial rallies where they were treated to hot dogs, marching bands and leaflets espousing the bill’s putative central flaws (The New York Times, 2009). Yet what seemed like a series of grassroots, citizen-led rallies, had its roots firmly planted in astroturf.

In August 2009, Greenpeace USA uncovered an internal memo from Jack Gerard, the new CEO of the American Petroleum Institute (API), showcasing API’s ties to the ‘Energy Citizens’ rallies. In the memo, Gerard requests that API member companies recruit employees, retirees, vendors and contractors to attend the rallies ‘in order to put a human face on the impacts of unsound energy policy . . . on jobs and on consumers’ energy costs’ (Ross, 2009: C1). He also implored oil company executives to demonstrate ‘strong support for employee participation’, while warning them to treat the campaign with sensitivity (Ross, 2009: C1). Gerard also indicated that the API would undertake the logistical funding, market research and targeted messaging for the rallies:

To be clear, API will provide the up-front resources to ensure logistical issues do not become a problem. This includes contracting with a highly experienced events management
company that has produced successful rallies for presidential campaigns, corporations and interest groups and... conducting a comprehensive communications and advocacy activation plan for each state, and serving as central manager for all events. (Grandia, 2009)

Several API members, including Chevron and other original members of the GCC, paid their employees to attend various ‘Energy Citizens’ rallies while also providing transportation (Grandia, 2009; Ross, 2009). Thus as the parallels between Energy Citizens and the GCC illustrate, third-party advocacy groups are like changelings. They often carry many of the same founders (in this case, the API), members, advisory boards and funding bodies but disappear and emerge within new policy contexts and cycles.

**Astroturfing arrives in Canada: Friends of Science**

In the Canadian context, one of the most visible and controversial third-party advocacy groups to emerge in the past decade is the Calgary-based non-profit organization Friends of Science (FoS). FoS argues that solar activity, (not human) activity is the main driver of climate change. Its stated mission is to educate the public about the causes of climate change through the dissemination of ‘relevant, balanced and objective technical scientific information’ (www.friendsofscience.org). Consequently, the group has produced numerous materials and information packages aimed at the media and public, including a website, a 23-minute video called *Climate Catastrophe Cancelled*, a series of radio ads that mocked the federal Liberal Party’s policy on Kyoto and climate change and the now defunct federal Liberal government’s climate change mitigation initiatives, particularly the ‘One Tonne Challenge’, and an annual public outreach luncheon in Calgary (Gorrie, 2007). FoS also conducts cross-country speaking tours and its executive members regularly contribute to the op-ed pages of major daily newspapers in Canada, where they write critically about climate change mitigation policies and proposals (Anderson, 2007). Finally, in 2009, FoS sponsored a series of national speaking engagements, titled ‘Apocalypse Cancelled’, featuring long-time British climate change sceptic Lord Charles Monckton (Deep Climate, 2009).

FoS has been strongly criticized for its close financial ties to the Alberta oil patch. A 2006 report by freelance journalist Charles Montgomery, which was published in *The Globe and Mail* (Canada’s national newspaper of record), stated that FoS not only benefits from substantial corporate funding, but that it also accounts for its finances in secretive and ethically dubious ways (Montgomery, 2006). In describing the organization’s funding scheme, Montgomery reported that contributors would first donate to the Calgary Foundation, a non-profit organization which administers charitable giving in the Calgary area from ‘anonymous donors’. The Calgary Foundation would then funnel the money into a trust account called the ‘Science Education Fund’, which was established at the University of Calgary by political science professor Barry Cooper (Montgomery, 2006). According to Montgomery, Cooper devised the funding strategy to obscure the political and financial interests behind the donations, not only providing anonymity to donors but also a tax break for their contributions to science education. Cooper is a well-known critic of the ‘liberal media elite’ in Canada (Cooper, 1994), and
has been linked as a friend and advisor to numerous federal Conservative Party insiders, including Prime Minister Stephen Harper (Ibbotson, 2004).

The most controversial issue relating to FoS occurred in 2005 when it used money from the Science Education Fund to finance a series of radio ads in the vote-rich province of Ontario in the period just preceding the 2005 Canadian federal election. According to FoS president Douglas Leahy, the 20-second ads were the brainchild of Morten Paulsen, general manager of the public relations firm Fleishman-Hillard, a registered lobbyist and Conservative Party campaign organizer (De Souza, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c). The ads criticized Liberal government climate change initiatives and encouraged listeners to ask their MPs why ‘billions of taxpayer dollars are being spent on global warming theories’ (Roe, 2007). The radio ads were controversial not only because they challenged the scientific consensus about climate change, but because they ran during an election campaign in ridings where Liberal incumbents were considered vulnerable, and because FoS never registered as a third-party organization with Elections Canada.

After FoS came under fire for its ties to the Science Education Fund, the University of Calgary commenced an official audit of the Fund’s financial activities. Among other things, it investigated the donor controversy and the use of university money to finance purportedly partisan activities (Roe, 2007). In the audit, the university confirmed that the ads had been financed by the Science Education Fund and ‘may be considered third party advertising under the Elections Act’ (University of Calgary Audit Services, 2008: 5).6 The audit also found that Cooper had overstepped his signing authority by granting both Paulsen and Fleishman-Hillard $CAN25,000 each from the Fund’s general revenues (University of Calgary Audit Services, 2008: 20), and it accused Cooper of not following university rules governing private contract bidding when it paid another PR firm, APCO Worldwide, $CAN100,000 for ‘strategic communications services relating to the project “Research on Climate Change Debate”’ (University of Calgary Audit Services, 2008: 19). Although FoS is not specifically mentioned in the contract Cooper signed and provided to the audit committee, all APCO invoices faxed back to the university were made out to Friends of Science (University of Calgary Audit Services, 2008: 19).

Fighting fire with fire: NGO PR strategies

It would be misleading to suggest that conservative-minded governments and oil companies are the only ones that use PR to influence the media, public and policy agendas. In an effort to appear more politically relevant, environmental NGOs and activist coalitions increasingly utilize public relations techniques and rely heavily on corporate communication consultancies to assist them in reaching the hearts and minds of key publics and policy-makers (Dimitrov, 2008). From protest songs to media mind bombs, environmental movements have always been adept at using media technology for campaign purposes (Krajnc, 2000). Indeed, Rachel Carson, whose book *Silent Spring* is credited with having inspired the modern environmental movement, was herself a publicist and researcher for the US Fish and Wildlife Service early in her career, and published several environmentally themed articles in such publications as *The New Yorker* (FWS, 2007; Moyers, 2007). One of the most memorable environmental image events occurred at the first ever Earth Day in 1970, when protesters wearing gas masks marched through central
Pittsburgh carrying a coffin to show the effects of the city’s poor air quality. And Greenpeace, arguably the most visible and well-known environmental NGO in the world, first demonstrated its grasp of publicity by releasing footage in 1974 of its initial whaling protest, which it released to the Canadian media (Doyle, 2007). While these attempts have traditionally been in-house initiatives, contemporary environmental NGOs are increasingly leveraging PR firms and consultancies to streamline their message, to solicit media attention and influence policy and public discourse.

In the US, where the debate about climate change has been most polemically intense, environmental advocates have found themselves on the sharp end of the same accusations of manipulation and spin that are typically reserved for their more powerful adversaries. One organization that has been singled out for attention is the Washington-based Science Communication Network (formerly Environmental Media Services). Founded in 1994 by Arlie Schardt (a former head of the Environmental Defense Fund and later the director of communications for Al Gore’s 2000 bid for the US presidency), the Science Communication Network (SCN) is a non-profit organization which hosts public events that bring scientists together with journalists and other public figures who advocate for progressive policy solutions on climate change. It also provides web hosting for RealClimate, a blog run by a network of climate scientists that monitors political and public environmental discourse and provides ‘rapid responses’ to developing stories (Tierney, 2008).

Controversial about SCN and the RealClimate network are its connections to key players in the PR sector, especially its links with Fenton Communications, the largest and oldest ‘public interest’ PR firm in the US. Fenton specializes in providing support to non-profit organizations and is recognized for its long-standing connection to environmental campaigning. It was commissioned by the IPCC to help publicize its first report in the late 1980s, and worked closely with environmental NGOs to sharpen their communication skills during the 1997 UN climate change meetings in Kyoto. Fenton is perhaps best known as the PR firm behind the MoveOn.org phenomenon, a political action committee that has raised billions of dollars for the Democratic Party in the US. It has also provided strategic counsel for Friends of the Earth, Global Green and Bono’s One Campaign (Advertising Age, 2008).

The David Suzuki Foundation (DSF) is a good example of a Canadian environmental NGO leveraging its influence and PR industry connections to influence the global warming debate. With a staff of 50 and support from over 40,000 individual donors, the DSF is recognized as one of Canada’s most trusted science-based environmental NGOs. It has grown enormously since its incorporation in 1990, and is one of the most financially viable and influential environmental organizations in Canada. Suzuki himself is a household name, due in large part to his reputation as a trusted broadcaster, the face of the CBC television programme The Nature of Things, and his ongoing visibility in paid television and radio advertisements promoting both individual and government action to combat climate change. In his research on the democratization of public relations, Davis (2000b: 50) argues that sources outside political and corporate influence ‘can use professional public relations to accumulate capital and, in effect, simulate the authority and legitimacy of official sources’. The Suzuki Foundation exemplifies this argument well.

In contrast to other environmental groups the Suzuki Foundation does not conduct the lion’s share of its PR work in-house but outsources much of it to corporate
communication firms. DSF has worked closely with the Vancouver-based James Hoggan & Associates, one the largest independent PR firms in Canada with clients spanning the tourism, transportation, pharmaceutical and real estate industries. The relationship between Hoggan’s firm and the Suzuki Foundation is unique: Hoggan acts as both PR counsel to the Foundation and is the president of its board of directors. Hoggan became committed to helping the Suzuki Foundation because of his growing disenchantment with the role that PR practitioners were playing in the climate change debate and because he believes his profession has a more constructive role to play in shaping progressive environmental policy. In a blistering manifesto published on his firm’s website, and repeated in numerous media interviews and public speeches, Hoggan stated his disgust with the role that PR professionals have played in sowing the seeds of doubt about climate change:

There is a line between public relations and propaganda – or there should be. And there is a difference between using your skills, in good faith, to help rescue a battered reputation and using them to twist the truth – to sow confusion and doubt on an issue that is critical to human survival.

And it is infuriating – as a public relations professional – to watch my colleagues use their skills, their training and their considerable intellect to poison the international debate on climate change. (Hoggan, 2009; see also Hoggan, 2007)

Hoggan’s firm works with the Suzuki Foundation in various ways, all of it on a pro-bono basis. It provides media training to Suzuki and other spokespeople, it assists the DSF in developing its media information packages and other campaign products, and, in 2006, it undertook the largest and most comprehensive analysis of how the Canadian public and policy-making community understand the term ‘sustainability’ in order to help the Foundation and other environmental NGOs develop more targeted and effective messaging. Not unlike the Science Communication Network’s support for RealClimate, Hoggan & Associates provides office space and institutional support for Desmogblog, a weblog dedicated to exposing the nefarious PR tactics of government and corporate players seeking to forestall or prevent policy action on climate change. Since its inception in 2005, Desmogblog has attracted close to 1,000,000 individual readers, it has been used regularly as a news source in the Canadian and international press and as a reference in such high profile peer-reviewed journals as *Nature*; it has won various new media awards and been nominated for others (including a United Nations World Summit Award). Desmogblog was also the first to report the oil industry funding behind FoS and other Canadian corporate front groups and was the official complainant to Elections Canada about the aforementioned federal election radio ads campaign by FoS. Desmogblog’s operations manager, Kevin Grandia, is a contributing writer to *Huffington Post*, *Energy Boom* and other specialist online publications. He is widely regarded as one of the world’s most influential climate change bloggers.10

The Suzuki Foundation’s connections with the PR sector do not end with Hoggan & Associates. In June 2008, the DSF contracted Edelman Canada, a subsidiary of Edelman Worldwide, the world’s largest public relations firm, to provide advice about the Quebec media market and strategic counsel on influencing the perceptions of Quebeckers about
key environmental issues (Burton, 2008). The deal made good business sense to
Edelman and assisted with its own efforts of enhancing its corporate image. In fact,
Edelman Worldwide declared that in securing the Suzuki deal, it was ‘committing itself
to making improvements in our own environmental efforts’ (Burton, 2008). Shortly after
signing the contract, Edelman stated in the ‘Corporate Citizenship’ section of its website
that in light of its new partnership with Suzuki it was going to appoint a new Global
Environmental Manager ‘to champion our commitment’ to the environment, adding that
the new manager would be involved in ‘reducing Edelman’s global energy consumption
and decrease our overall CO2 footprint’ (Burton, 2008). Yet, two months later,
Edelman’s UK office was hired by the Kingsnorth Power Station to lobby the British
government to retain its permit to proceed with building the first coal-fired power plant
in the UK in 20 years (Burton, 2008).

Conclusion: PR and the prospects for democracy

This article has documented some of the questionable tactics of PR professionals work-
ing at the behest of corporate power, particularly those in North America’s oil industry.
Yet, it has also addressed some of the ways in which the strategic use of communication
figures into NGO campaigns to raise the profile of environmental issues (global climate
change in particular) on the media, public and policy agendas. Despite the asymmetry in
relations of power among these groups, we argue that in understanding the role of PR we
need to recognize that there are increasing opportunities for groups traditionally on the
margins of influence to shift the terrain of the debate. NGOs place advocacy and public
education as central to their missions, so it’s no surprise that strategic communication
would become a key part of what they do.

The common image of public relations evokes a wizard-like character who hides
behind the curtain, pulling the strings that advance elite interests, manipulating demo-
cratic processes and using ethically questionable tactics to influence the outcomes of
public policy debate. We have discussed some examples of such practices here, but
we do so with a note of caution, recognizing the limitations with this dismissive charac-
terization. Organizations that operate beyond the core of policy decision-making, such as
environmental advocacy groups, are increasingly utilizing PR practices developed in and
for the corporate sector to influence public opinion and the media discourse about cli-
mate change. Indeed, we believe that one of the reasons the environment has become
so prominent on the media, policy and public agendas in recent years is that advocacy
groups have become more adept in using PR strategies and relying on the counsel of
PR practitioners and consultants (see Curtin and Rhodenbaugh, 2001). It is also worth
mentioning that the success of environmental PR strategies and campaigns will also
always be contingent on the sociocultural, political and economic contexts in which they
operate. The 2008 global financial meltdown, the Climategate crisis of 2009 and the BP
oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in April 2010 all serve as chief examples of how an event
can shape not only the nature of corporate or NGO communications, it can also condition
the range of responses these campaigns will elicit on the part of the public and policy-
makers. Indeed, concern for climate change mitigation appeared to have dipped signif-
ically in the period following the failure to achieve a meaningful outcome at the
Copenhagen climate conference in December 2009. The massive environmental damage being done by the BP oil spill only months later has now renewed public concern for fossil fuels dependency and interest on the part of policy-makers to impose more stringent regulation on the oil industry.

What does all of this mean for democracy and the role of communication? The cases of the David Suzuki Foundation and Science Communication Network show that NGOs and other civil society groups struggling against the exercise of corporate and political power have been able to utilize PR strategies and tactics to influence the direction and tone of the media and policy discussion. Opinion polling in Canada shows that the electorate’s concerns about the environment have increased significantly since 2006, and in the 2008 election was considered one of the top two or three issues on the minds of voters (Strategic Counsel, 2008). By 2009, however, in the face of a sharply declining global economy and amid what were ultimately unfounded accusations of malfeasance in the context of Climategate, concern about the environment dropped remarkably on the public and policy agendas.

At the same time, however, the widening appeal of corporate PR tactics and their establishment in the activist and NGO sectors may also be accelerating the process which Habermas described as a ‘re-feudalization’ of the public sphere, a process which sees public communication transformed into an instrument for the strategic pursuit of organized interests thereby damaging possibilities for meaningful discussion across political or sectoral lines. Public relations firms with all types of political and environmental commitments are exercising increasing influence in the discourse about climate change. Some may see this as a welcome development, particularly progressives who have long lamented the lack of strategic efficacy on the part of environmental activists. For them, the constructive role being played by firms like Fenton in the US and Hoggan & Associates in Canada represents an opportunity to influence the direction of climate change policy. At the same time, however, other PR firms and consultancies are playing a more ambivalent role. Edelman Canada is a case in point. Within months of securing a contract with the David Suzuki Foundation, and widely publicizing its newfound commitment to ecological sustainability, it was already advising key players in the Alberta oil sands on how social media could be used to change the public conversation about energy production. And in the US there is Frank Luntz, the Republican pollster who famously (and successfully) advised the Republican Party and their supporters in the conservative movement on how to challenge the scientific consensus about anthropogenic climate change. After years spent as one of the environmental movement’s top public enemies, Luntz has resurfaced as an unlikely ‘eco-hero’ who now offers communications advice to American environmentalists and political leaders on how to effectively reframe the climate change debate. In a vast departure from his own partisan and anti-environmental affiliations, Luntz argues that the US climate bill was the ‘smart thing’ to do and stated that Americans ‘are much more interested in seeing solutions than watching yet another partisan political argument’ (Sheppard, 2010). His advice to environmentalists: stop talking about climate change, sustainability and using terms like ‘carbon neutral’, and start talking about how it’s in ‘America’s best interest to develop new sources of energy that are clean, reliable, efficient and safe’ (Sheppard, 2010).

For those who believe in the normative importance of the public sphere and in the value of open dialogue and deliberative democracy, the notion that strategic imperatives
are taking precedence in the debate over climate change is not seen as a boon to dialogue and deliberation, but, ultimately, as a challenge to democracy. With PR playing an increasingly central role in the discussion about global climate change, it’s questionable whether such ideals can ever truly be realized.

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Notes

1. In April 2010, Dr Andrew Weaver, a Canadian climate researcher and member of the IPCC, filed a lawsuit against the National Post. In his statement of claim, Weaver accused the Post of repeatedly defaming his character by suggesting he is a corrupt scientist who promotes global warming theories to secure large government grants. See ‘B.C. climatologist sues National Post: Skeptics and believers in climate change could battle in civil court’, CBC News Online, 22 April 2010; at: www.cbc.ca/technology/story/2010/04/21/bc-andrew-weaver-national-post-lawsuit.html#socialcomments.

2. The manufacture of grassroots campaigns to support narrow and sectional interests has deep roots. As Hochschild (1998) shows, third-party advocacy was central to colonialist agenda-building of Belgium’s King Leopold in the late 1800s. Edward Bernays is credited with being the first to make effective use of front groups to advance political and social agendas, advancing the interests of moral reformers, tobacco companies and the US government over numerous campaigns (e.g. Tye, 1998).

3. The GCC’s efforts were coordinated with separate campaigns by many of its member organizations, including the National Coal Association, which spent in excess of US$700,000 on global warming campaigns in 1992–3 alone, and O’Keefe’s American Petroleum Institute, which commissioned the PR firm Burson-Marsteller for US$1.8 million in 1993 to coordinate a ‘grassroots’ letter and phone-in campaign to stop a proposed tax on fossil fuels. See www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Global_Climate_Coalition.


6. In December 2008, FoS was exonerated by Elections Canada, which ruled that the group had not violated the Elections Act.

7. It is well known that in the 1990s APCO was hired by Phillip-Morris to create several front groups, including the Advancement of Sound Science Coalition (which shares two scientific advisors with FoS) to advance contrarian arguments about the relationship between cigarettes and lung cancer.

8. Environmental Media Services (EMS) was officially instituted in 1994 as a project of the Tides Center, a well-known progressive foundation with close links to the Democratic Party in the US. EMS founder Schardt worked in the 1990s as a project director for the Tides Center and
oversaw the direction of more than US$1 million from Tides to EMS in 1999. ActivistCash.com ‘Environmental Media Services’; at: www.activistcash.com/organization_overview.cfm/oid/110.

9. In the 2006 fiscal year, the DSF diverted almost CDN$640,000 of its operating budget to its communications work, representing more than 80 percent of its environmental initiatives combined (David Suzuki Foundation, 2006).

10. In September 2010, Grandia left his position as Director of New Media at Hoggan to become Director of Online Strategy at Greenpeace USA.

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