

THE END OF DAYS DEFERRED: IMPERATIVE AGENCY, COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY, AND CORPORATE COMMUNICATION

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Abstract: This article analyses the discursive configuration of a widespread assumption – that the event of climate emergency should be met with some form of concerted collective action. Beginning with references to the concept of ‘greenwashing’, it goes on to note the temporal framing of climate disaster and the imperative agency advocated in the types of address used by news organisations, climate scientists and bodies (like the United Nations) devoted to global governance. Standard media practices, which serve a vital function in circulating meaning, are also discussed, on the basis that, while they seem to advocate *timely* intervention, they also disassociate environmental awareness from the radical measures needed to mitigate disaster, displaying an ambiguous or (in some cases) hostile attitude to the activist forces that could drive recuperative transformations in climate policy.

I argue that effective mitigation is deferred for three interrelated reasons: first, because of the recurrent emphasis placed on momentous (future) tipping points, which obscures a more insidious and rapid deterioration in the present;¹ second, the preeminent tendency of mediated climate discourse to call for ‘leadership’ on issues that a deeply compromised political establishment cannot fully address; and third, state/corporate collusion,² which makes a show of balancing competing demands (economic growth and zero emissions, for example), but is actually committed to a criminal model of industrial enterprise. Taken together, these factors – combined with the neglect of subaltern and alternative voices and the instinctive journalistic deference shown to elite social actors and their ‘authoritative’ utterances – help replicate the material/ideological structures of the social order and its hierarchical distinction between, on the one hand, leadership figures and, on the other, an infantilised public supposedly in need of rational direction.

The article substantiates these observations by analysing the PR strategies of the oil and gas company, bp, while distinguishing between greenwashing critiques and the approach advocated here, which recommends the delegitimisation of corporate discourse on the basis that corporations have no right to engage in what is in effect a form of political communication. The conclusion to this piece suggests that, if the span of human life on earth has indeed been circumscribed by climate breakdown, then the emergency is political, and fighting for an immediate and ‘immoderate’ form of social justice is the only way to address a crisis that elite social actors seem determined to ignore, misrepresent or monetise.

Keywords: climate, media, state, rhetoric, corporations, timeliness

INTRODUCTION: CORPORATE ADDRESS, CITIZENSHIP AND PUBLIC COMMUNICATION

The conventional, state-centred definition of citizenship refers to the civil rights and obligations exercised by those who inhabit, or belong to, any national polity regarded as legitimate. Formal access to a range of political entitlements does not, however, mean that they are truly functional or that, where they do allow citizens to make their voices heard, all members of the collective will be able to utilise these resources equally. This distinction, considered alongside the concentration of economic power in a separate domain, illustrates the gulf between the theoretical exercise of lawful rights, and the practical management of society.

Yet, despite the fact that orthodox frames of citizenship conceal inequalities, and denote the categorical exclusion of the dispossessed, they still draw political vitality from their association with the more expansive paradigm – namely, a transnational identity encapsulated both in the notion of ‘world citizens’ (whose wealth allows them to move freely between luxurious global locations), and the ideal of extra-national, borderless allegiance to a higher moral cause (the very notion that state practices work so obsessively hard to restrict). Despite these shortcomings, references to citizenship do at least recognise and recirculate a sense of social responsibility and intra-group solidarity, and it is this trope that is picked up and mimicked by the corporate-industrial sector when it crafts (in both traditional and social media formats) its own ‘green’ messages.

Such activity is interpreted here as a process of dissimulation, an attempt to align a largely unreconstructed system with narratives of conservation and social responsibility. In this respect, the analysis that follows resembles established critiques of corporate greenwashing,³ except that my enquiry, while recognising the discursive hypocrisy of capitalist environmentalism, argues that the whole genre of communication to which it belongs is illegitimate and should be eradicated. The assumption that private companies have the right to intercede in public debate can be traced to the routine use by powerful institutions (both ‘private’ and ‘public’), of promotional techniques designed to draw attention to their supposed virtues. The corporate energy sector, adept at using the interpersonal forms of address that democratic cultures are expected to produce, is perfectly capable of simulating benevolence and echoing the moral preoccupations of civil society. It does not, however, possess the structural authority ceded to bodies like government departments.

The latter, even when distrusted or overbearing, are regarded as legitimate interlocutors within public debate,⁴ while communiques from private industry can appear intrusive. Aware of this distinction, businesses have tried to gain legitimacy by becoming ‘corporate citizens’, allowing them to disseminate strategic messages in the guise of public information. In this quest, the apparently progressive stance of a newly sensitised ‘business community’ has been aided by the fact that politicians have moved closer to entrepreneurial ideology, deploying the same symbolic resources (references to futurity, global challenges, new technology, the unity of diverse peoples, etc.) in texts like party political broadcasts.

Private companies, for their part, had already adapted a ready-made commercial format – the TV advertisement. Once the workhorse for securing sales through repetitive visibility, by the 1980s the genre was repurposed to promote the appearance of capitalist virtue. The circulation of egocentric brand narratives, as opposed to specific products, was enabled by the intermediary development of lifestyle advertising, which placed emphasis on social empowerment through the display of branded goods and services, rather than demonstrating the simple use values associated with single artefacts.

In these parables, the symbolic resonance of commodified behaviours depended on their place within a larger hierarchy of discriminatory social practices: class exclusivity and the celebration of wealth were prominent. Having moved away from a literal interpretation of

commodity benefits (which encouraged the development of more creative propositions), the next challenge was to develop a less elitist discourse, because the spectacle of conspicuous self-actualisation was entirely unsuited to a communitarian period in which excessive consumption was regarded as one of the major affronts to environmental sensibilities.

Using the template provided by the lifestyle turn, but jettisoning its obsession with status and power, private companies could now express abstract, grandiloquent claims about their green credentials. Following the merger of political discourse and Public Relations, the sector even began to *preach to the consumer*, in an attempt to generalise responsibility for climate breakdown (see below). Shell's 2007 'Don't Throw Anything Away' campaign (revisited by Seele and Gatti in their 2017 analysis) is a pertinent example of a corporate intervention that assumed the persona and discourse of the climate activist, favouring an idiomatic, intimate approach to the subject position supposedly occupied by ethical consumers.

Noting the gulf between this liberal communicative façade and actual practice, Friends of the Earth (FoE) attacked Shell's apparent impudence, drawing attention to the '*inconsistency* between [the company's] communication and its actual environmental performance' (my emphasis) (*Greenwashing Revisited*). FoE went on to complain to the UK's Advertising Standards Authority (ASA). Activist and journalistic appraisals of this type, focussed on corporate duplicity, are still very much in evidence. In September 2022 press reports accused Shell of further hypocrisy, this time because it had contradicted its public stance on the environment, when it advised employees not to 'give the impression that Shell is willing to reduce carbon dioxide emissions to levels *that do not make business sense*' (my emphasis).⁵

While conservationist groups are right to condemn greenwashing techniques and the moral inconsistency and secret manoeuvring they entail, a more fundamental criticism is that the branded advocacy created by conglomerates is a mode of *political* intervention that companies have no formal right to make. Their assumption of a conversational guise within a commercial genre, and the simulation of a friendly, but temporary 'relationship' between source and target audience, imitates a democratic exchange between equals. Yet, without the feedback loop made available in any genuine discussion, there is no opportunity for the exercise of independent judgement, and critical responses (as the FoE/Shell cases demonstrate) have to take an external detour through protest movements, political lobbying, media interventions or the legal system.

This is not to argue that the use of one-way communication is the exclusive vice of capitalist enterprise. As suggested above, the political establishment is also well positioned to reaffirm, through the very *act* of ‘messaging’, the formal division between centres of influence and their target audiences. Often framed as a conversation, rather than a command, both state and corporate address emerge from a larger representational system that speaks of democracy and human aspiration but exercises control through institutional detachment and the politicisation of distinctions in group identity.⁶ Collectives imagined as subaltern (usually those that dwell within the borders of a polity, but lack a significant financial or political stake in the system), are subjected to the uninterrupted circulation of bourgeois/managerialist values,⁷ the purpose of which is to neutralise, or overwhelm through sheer volume, alternative or oppositional perspectives.

The fantasy created by corporate PR is that the actions of ‘ordinary’ citizens (understood here as moral, rather than merely formal participants in public life), and those of CEOs and their acolytes, are aligned in a common quest to save the planet. The incorporation, however, of private entities into the general category ‘citizen’ has a deprecatory effect on the expectations assigned to citizenship itself. While the tendency of both the sincere environmentalist, and the determined ‘carbon capitalist’⁸ (who usually occupy quite distinct socioeconomic structures), is to make a public show of accepting the widespread belief that the planet’s ecosystem is in terminal decline, the difference is that the latter does not regard this proposition as a *decisive* argument in favour of ending global dependence on fossil fuel. Instead, it is seen as one among a number of competing variables.

In other words, once a general awareness of climate change and a concomitant social breakdown has become an established theme, it is the need to display some kind of behavioural/rhetorical response, evident in the ‘here and now’, that energy executives regard as the most *undeniable* circumstance, rather than scientific warnings about an event that is merely ‘pending’. Meanwhile, it is exactly the standard discourses of climate emergency and human culpability, that corporations and their critics have to had assimilate, navigate, and reconfigure in order to serve their distinct political goals.

ACTION, EMERGENCY AND CULPABILITY

Although the broad terms of the climate debate are set by various sections of the scientific community, the universalisation of environmental discourse is determined by those authoritative transnational organisations that exercise the right to issue moral judgements on public controversies. In the case of the climate emergency, these declarations are, as noted above, often framed as ‘time constrained’ events. The United Nations, for instance, identifies specific deadlines for actions needed to mitigate climate change, while devices like the Climate Clock – which counts down to the year 2030, second by second in ‘real time’ – reinforce the widespread impression of a rendezvous with disaster. Serious news articles on the environment follow this trend, presenting its degradation as an imminent threat that should be met with a timely response. This narrative is particularly notable during major climate summits, when editorials and articles draw attention to various ‘tipping points’, after which the accelerated collapse of the eco-system is supposed to be irreversible.⁹ It is also reflected in media use of exigent terms like *climate emergency* or *climate crisis*, which suggest the need for precipitous intervention and the exercise of collective resolve, although the reports they introduce will not necessarily endorse specific types of action (even after the UK Parliament declared a ‘climate emergency’ in 2019, the BBC tended to avoid terms that might hint at partisan alignment, often opting for the ‘neutral’, gradualist expression *climate change*).¹⁰

In tandem with the media propagation of particular terms, the oft-repeated abstraction that it is ‘our’ moral duty to act, flows from elementary arguments identifying human activity as the source of climate breakdown. Hausfather’s 2017 headline assertion in *Carbon Brief* is a typical example: ‘Why Scientists Think 100 per cent of Global Warming Is Due to Humans’.¹¹ Other news sources reproduce this stance, arguing that that the planet will pass the point of no return ‘if humanity continues to emit greenhouse gases into the atmosphere’.¹² A similar emphasis appears within the European Commission’s online climate action briefing, which states that ‘humans are increasingly influencing the climate and the earth’s temperature by burning fossil fuels, cutting down forests and farming livestock’.¹³

The conviction that ‘humanity’ has caused phenomena like global warming, and that the species as a whole should now halt or slow down the process of decline, has become an established, near-hegemonic position, met by overt opposition only from right-wing elements that wish to make political capital (and actual profits) from publicly ‘denying the science’. The dominant paradigm of collective responsibility and communal effort is in part, therefore,

the consequence of opposing the right-wing contention that climate change is not, to cite the archaic expression, ‘man made’.

Yet, while some elements on the left – dissatisfied with the inadequate focus on the negative agency of capitalist enterprise and the legacy of extractive colonialism¹⁴ – offer a corrective assessment of the ‘human culpability’ thesis, some of its most ardent advocates belong to the very organisations that stand accused of degrading the planet. The discursive output of the corporate energy sector reveals how it inflects the *liberal* consensus on the environment to suit its interests (see bp, below). It warps the ideal of a common cause in order to support the suggestion that all social groups should be answerable for those egregious assaults on the natural world, that are actually traceable to the systemic depravity of corporate entities, the negligence of elite social actors and the self-indulgent habits of wealthy individuals. In practice, the apparently unremarkable depiction of ‘universal guilt’ encourages the diffusion of responsibility, implying that the whole of the world’s population is engaged in the same equally damaging misdemeanours, rather than being complicit in environmental decline only by virtue of their inadvertent position within global chains of production and consumption – and in the majority of cases, as the consequence of a simple quest to survive.

‘LEADERS AND LED’: MEDIA, CITIZENSHIP AND AUTHORITATIVE SOURCES

If the default position of the media, climate scientists and institutions of transnational governance is to call for a collective effort to meet the crisis, then the issue is what kind of interventions are being suggested, which social actors are to be held accountable for particular tasks and what is the time-frame within which certain goals are meant to be achieved? When media forms do try to disaggregate the ‘universal’ environmental obligation of humanity into more specific roles and responsibilities, they tend (understandably) to identify and then replicate hierarchical distinctions between designated groups. Despite the ‘shift in the epistemology of the news from the truth of institutional expertise to the truth of ordinary voice’,¹⁵ media representations still (as Carvalho argued in 2010), ‘construct particular “subject positions” for individuals and cultivate dispositions to action or inaction’ and, in ‘addressing climate change and other public matters, *citizens have been largely left out of media(ted) discourses*’ (my emphasis).¹⁶

Carvalho's article goes on to note that 'these *exclusionary* constructions ... do not recognise citizens as *worthy speakers* on the substance of collective problems and do not cultivate a proactive political identity' (my emphasis) (*Media(ted) Discourses*, p?). Part of the reason for this lack of interest is exactly the absence of citizenship as a prominent frame, and the fragmentation of everyday experience into the standard genres that provide journalistic narratives with local colour.

In *Becoming the News*, Palmer addresses this issue, naming the categories used by US journalists to classify their human subjects, which include 'witnesses, experts, criminals, victims, heroes, community representatives, and freaks'.¹⁷

When they are reproduced in news stories, particular variants of subaltern testimony are not accorded equal significance, because gendered, class-based and racialised assumptions work to devalue the contributions of specific groups. This is the consequence, in Ross's opinion, of a newsroom culture that 'privileges elite and other (white) male voices [that] ... exert a greater influence and conformity over who "counts" as an authoritative voice'.¹⁸ However these ideological gatekeepers are defined, the persistent division between principals (political and corporate leaders) and the bulk of those whose agency is denied or under-reported, would suggest that academic preoccupation with the media's role in reproducing (or failing to reproduce) democratic culture, should also take account of the ways in which news practices might contribute to the differential propagation of gender, ethnicity, status and class frames – enshrining, in communicative form, the stratification of groups within society as a whole, and calling the facile assertion of democratic equality into question. Even when the topic under discussion is more determinedly political, and the opinion of individuals is sought, they are often confined to an echo chamber that reverberates with an agenda constructed elsewhere.

This is, again, because citizenship is rarely presented by dominant groups as a coherent, rights-based condition, while depoliticised, relatively passive descriptions like 'the public' or 'the electorate' are preferred: of course, in those countries that retain monarchs, citizens are also 'subjects'. This is, again, because citizenship is rarely presented by dominant groups as a coherent, rights-based condition, while depoliticised, relatively passive descriptions like 'the public' or 'the electorate' are preferred: of course, in those countries that retain monarchs, citizens are also 'subjects'.

However they are described, the point is that the relative neglect of ‘ordinary people’ is a function of a hierarchal system that foregrounds elite opinion. This is not irrational in itself because it reflects the realities of the international order, but whatever the prevalent attitude to individual leaders, neither the media nor their authoritative sources problematise the *principle* of leadership and, in deferring to establishment precepts about the inviolable status of hierarchy, help reinforce a sense of inertia and dependency. The words of UN Secretary-General António Guterres exemplify this problem: in his 2022 World Environment Day message, he said that, ‘we know what to do ... increasingly, we have the tools to do it ... but we still lack leadership and cooperation. So today, I appeal to leaders in all sectors: *lead us out of this mess*’ (my emphasis).¹⁹

Guterres’s apparent belief in executive capability is widespread, and media accounts of urgent global challenges, including climate change, continue to accord politicians and corporate leaders a high degree of visibility: once again, this is not surprising. As Bell noted in 1991, this distinction can be traced to the automatic deference accorded to eminent speakers. Irrespective of their moral status, when sources deemed sufficiently prestigious or powerful issue a statement, the simple and ‘indisputable fact’ of this utterance guarantees its newsworthiness, just as the same ‘fusion of word and act’²⁰ lends weight, often undeservedly, to long passages of rhetorical gibberish.

In political and corporate discourse, then, it is not the truthfulness of an avowal that matters, so much as its origin, discursive prominence and timeliness, while for their part, elite interlocutors can gain credit by showing that, at *an appropriate moment*, they took an important contingency seriously. An ostensibly principled stance on the environment is then always subject to modification as ‘new information’ comes to light and the ‘moment’ passes, just as, in June 2022, the UK government reneged on its commitment to devote considerable resources to national re-wilding projects, when Russia’s invasion of Ukraine pushed ‘food security’ to the top of the political agenda.²¹

The point is that even a threat like climate breakdown (which could bring an end to life on earth and which is supposed, at the very least, to call a halt to prevarication), can be supplanted by a problem, the relative urgency of which can be decided by the confidential decisions of the contemporary patrician class. Public figures are not only used to offering entirely provisional commitments that can be revised over time, but are also adept at

assuming different stances for distinct purposes, and for the various audiences they expect to encounter. Employing the collective ‘we’ in their speeches (the ‘name for the speaker and all others ... that context shows him [sic] to be representing *for the moment*’, my emphasis),²² the prevailing sense is one of a shrewdly conditional timeliness,²³ a sleight of hand that is usually interpreted by critics as simple betrayal or hypocrisy, or otherwise regarded as evidence of the utterance/action dichotomy expressed in Greta Thunberg’s contemptuous depiction of COP26 climate promises as no more than ‘blah blah blah’.²⁴

If political assurances on climate change cannot be taken at face value, then the problem is further exacerbated by the fact that these utterances are more often than not a type of what Bell calls ‘pseudo-direct speech’ (*Language of News Media*, p207). The often unknown authors of green narratives are actually institutional actors like press officers and speechwriters, but the finished product is attributed to the luminaries who deliver the script.

TRUTHFULNESS AND TIMELINESS

From a journalistic perspective, however, the widespread assumption that politicians and CEOs may not tell the truth, is less important than the expectation that legislators and ‘captains of industry’ will make a show of taking action – i.e., that they will deliver speeches, make deals, devise policies and reach transnational agreements – and that they will do so *on behalf of* a citizenry that is not directly instrumental in taking any decisions. As suggested above, the prominence given to announcements made by elite social actors, fulfils a largely inconspicuous and ‘unremarkable’ normative function – the discursive reproduction of the hierarchies that are a central feature of systemic democracy.²⁵ It is this sense of structural intransigence that can reinforce the suspicion that those who profess leadership are actually engaged in a ritualistic form of communication, one designed to maintain distinctions between elites and other social categories, and to undermine internal solidarity even within groups regarded as cohesive.²⁶

Explicit recognition of an inescapable environmental calamity is not necessarily, therefore, a sign of progress, because it can mean that dominant groups and their acolytes have merely ‘factored in’ a set of references to measures that they may never have to implement. If and when leading members of a liberal democracy become convinced that time really is running

out, then the effect – rather than prompting a genuine commitment to environmental restoration – may be to initiate a concerted rush to accrue capital before the final breakdown.

As far as ‘ordinary’ citizens are concerned, they are expected to act as mute witnesses, animated only to undertake desultory engagements with formal politics, or to alter their consumption patterns (though the latter is largely a gestural recommendation). Any concrete response to the emergency is subsumed in the realm of symbolic, useless or even harmful activity, like planting trees in the wrong places, or bagging up recyclable waste that ends up in landfills or is simply burned.²⁷ It is determined, autonomous activism that the state seems to find intolerable,²⁸ and works to undermine, criminalise, or even to represent as terrorism.²⁹

NEWS CYCLES AND CORPORATE IMPATIENCE

If hierarchical divisions in society are confirmed through the references found in media content, the news cycle itself can be a factor in decoupling a sense of necessity from any public commitment to coherent action. As the product of state/corporate rationality, the ebb and flow of news promotes a consistent sense of communal time, but also the expectation that all significant events have no more than an apposite duration. Although the news cycle is not controlled by dominant social groups, since it is capable of reproducing an agenda that discomforts these elites, it also assigns significant importance to novelty, so that one headline issue is replaced with another, irrespective of the enduring relevance of an ‘older’ item: in this way, even the cessation of existence can move from a definite and urgent proposition, to something more provisional. As a consequence, official bodies and established media forms convey the odd impression that the climate emergency is actually embedded in, and subservient to, a cyclical process.

In turn, the willingness of elites to tolerate this situation testifies to the superficiality of a political and commercial culture that shows a marked reluctance to *dwell for too long* on even the direst traumas. Confronted, for instance, with an event like the COVID-19 disaster, even very early analyses of the crisis began to speak of a ‘post-pandemic’ world in which resilient corporate bodies would emerge stronger.³⁰ For ardent managerialists and the political right, lockdowns and constraints could not end soon enough, especially since, during the height of the first wave, the exemplary role of key workers called into question existing precepts about the value of established social hierarchies.

Upset by this turn of events, many administrative managers and corporate bosses came to believe that public fear of infection needed to be supplanted *as soon as practicable* by the ‘higher needs’ of the economy. In the opinion of these individuals, once the initial shock had passed, and the more onerous restrictions on commercial life had been removed, the pandemic had in effect timed out, despite high infection rates and a steady toll of fatalities. The short-termism and impatience that characterised elite behaviour during the pandemic, is reproduced within state and corporate assessment of the climate emergency. Despite echoing the basic tenets of environmentalism, the material actions of the fossil fuel sector contradict, as already noted, its public statements, which consist of filibustering, misdirection and retrospective justification (see bp, below).

The reason for the gulf between extractive activity and the dissemination of reassuring communiques, can be traced to the fact that corporate interests have been forced to make public declarations that climate change is a reality unfolding in the present. In practice, however, many CEOs see the ‘end of days’ narrative as less relevant to economic survival than scanning the daily volatility of the market in which, as Sheffi argues, green sustainability is ‘a *potential business goal*, competing with many other business goals that managers face’ (my emphasis).³¹ Therefore, the crucial factor in enacting any form of institutional change is not the individual entrepreneur’s belief in, or alternatively denial of, a catastrophic ‘end point’ beyond which life cannot be sustained: it is rather the industry’s collective perception that the discourse of environmental collapse needs to be recuperated because it has gained significant traction among important stakeholders.

As a result of this situation, some citizens might encounter ‘radical’ propositions (produced by private companies), that seem to exceed their own level of environmental commitment, even though leading businesses ignore public and/or activist agendas³² and speak instead of the diversification of resource, carbon offsetting and the adoption of technological solutions. This smokescreen fills the public domain, while corporations pursue the fiction of net zero³³ and dump oil and coal stocks on minor operators. Talk of civic responsibility and ‘good corporate citizenship’ represents, however, just one strand of an extensive range of material/symbolic activities that sustain existing power relations: secretive corporate lobbying, for example, is a ritualistic form of state/corporate collusion that takes place beyond democratic oversight.³⁴

MEASURED INTERVENTIONS: REPURPOSING GREEN DISCOURSES

News organisations may not regard transnational corporations as official bodies, nor even as reliable interlocutors, but journalists seek their insights because important institutions act, in Manning's words, as 'primary definers'.³⁵ The corporate world is seen as an essential source, not just of information, but of the frames that help news outlets interpret events. In this respect, the negative reputation of the fossil fuel sector does not prevent the general dissemination of mercantile ideas (though, as suggested above, these follow the precepts of 'public relations democracy').³⁶

In private, therefore, business leaders may behave as autocrats, but in public (again as noted earlier), they gain advantage from the liberal democratic principle that all participants' opinions are equally valuable. Their special entitlement is presented as the sincere exercise of good citizenship and their propaganda as a contribution to an open discussion held between respectful equals. Of course, any social force that enters public debate and expects to be taken seriously, has to engage with the language, the precepts and the range of conventional positions that make up the overall discursive milieu within which specific topics are discussed. In order to establish credibility, corporate discourse must repeat key terms and avoid unnecessary and obvious controversy (i.e. those points of view that seem socially illiberal and which lie outside the standard frame of green ideas).

Following this principle, companies will – at least during the heightened phases of awareness associated with major events like international summits – maintain a strict distance from climate denialists, beginning instead from an apparent agreement with many of the basic propositions that underpin environmentalism. Since specific instances of language use are, to use pandemic phraseology, 'highly transmissible', it makes sense, from a commercial standpoint, to adopt and then repurpose standard phrases and concepts. Meanwhile, because the political influence of the corporate sector is undeniable, it has to represent this decisive material power as universally beneficial, promoting its activities as a moral quest directed by a benevolent leadership.

Fossil fuel conglomerates, in particular, must demonstrate their rhetorical commitment to green tenets through the careful prioritisation of particular actions, like the acquisition of

renewables, while presenting existing investments as necessary *during the transition to* ‘sustainable’ operations: hence the growing tendency to present themselves not as oil or gas, but as *energy* companies (see below). On this basis, public engagement is pursued through a variety of generic interventions (all of which conform to prevailing codes of discursive behaviour) mobilised in response to world events, but shaped in part by the appropriate communicative form (press release, Tweet, internet homepage, TV advertisement, etc).

BP (BRITISH PETROLEUM): BRAND RHETORIC

The oil and gas behemoth bp (formerly British Petroleum) underwent a substantial makeover in 1989, when BP Amoco spent some £100m on forecourt redesign and the renovation of its shield logo (rendering it in a brighter shade of the original yellow and green). In 1999, BP aligned its visual and discursive branding with soft environmentalism, adopting the reassuring symbol of a ‘helios’ (composed of interlocking yellow/green petals with a pure white centre), and the unassuming guise of lower case letters. The newly minted ‘bp’ – abandoning any explicit reference to British national identity, and downplaying its primary function as a Petroleum giant – began to recuperate the wider discourse of socially progressive globalism and, in an attempt to reduce negative perceptions of its activity, went on to issue a series of television commercials promoting its ‘Beyond Petroleum’ narrative.

These early texts, dating from around 2000, focussed on bp’s environmental credentials, but also included a campaign that encouraged consumers to monitor their own ‘carbon footprint’. In 2014, four years after the Deepwater Horizon disaster – in which eleven workers were killed by an explosion and over 130 million gallons of crude oil were released into the Gulf of Mexico – the company issued a video called, ‘The Business of bp’.³⁷ It took the form of an animated diagram featuring the company’s ‘upstream’ and ‘downstream’ activities, with images of platforms, ships, seismic exploration on land and sea and a rotating globe with arrows showing the influx of crude oil and the emergence of refined fuel. The voiceover included the following assertions:

bp is one of the world’s leading oil and gas companies. Every day, we aim to build an even safer, stronger, and better performing company, to provide the energy that heats our homes, fuels our vehicles, and powers our businesses ... We specialise in deep water operations and giant fields, from Prudhoe Bay in Alaska, to Rumaila in Iraq, to

PSVM in Angola. When it makes business sense for bp, we bring the oil and gas to the surface ... bp's upstream segment produces around 2.3 million barrels of oil and gas per day, and has proved [sic] reserves equivalent to over £11 billion, in key locations around the world, including Angola, Azerbaijan, the UK North Sea and the Gulf of Mexico, in the United States ... bp is a focussed oil and gas business, actively managing our portfolio ... to maximise value, safely and responsibly.

This video offers a quasi-pedagogical excursion into company activities, supported by factual references, while displaying some of the routine features of rhetorical utterance (see Atkinson's 1981 analysis *Our Master's Voices*).³⁸ These include positive self-evaluation, references to altruistic actions that benefit a wider community, the use of generalisations, the appearance of the inclusive 'we' and the exploitation of simple techniques like the 'rule of three' (where attention is drawn to the significance of an event or idea through formulaic repetition). A classic example of the latter occurs in the passage that refers to 'the energy that *heats* our homes, *fuels* our vehicles and *powers* our businesses' (my emphasis), where the possessive determiner 'our' obscures the differences between company and consumer by associating the standard frames of domestic consumption with capitalist enterprise.

A less inflected instance of the rule of three appears in the assertion that bp is dedicated to building 'an *even* safer, stronger and better performing company' (my emphasis), although no baseline criteria are supplied against which enhanced success could be measured. The intention here is to suggest that recent improvements are built on an already strong foundation, obviously contentious in the light of the Gulf of Mexico disaster (to which event this is an oblique reference).

There is no mention of other social forces like governmental intermediaries, protest movements, or class-based organisations (such as trade unions), suggesting that the nominated categories (households and corporate power) are equally important participants in securing the benefits offered by the company. Any sense of a looming climate emergency is lost in the notion of steady corporate improvement over time. In this scenario of diurnal, linear progress, the passage of time itself means that bp's successes and value as a beneficial social actor will increase.

By 2017, bp had developed its discursive stance further still, evident in its ‘Advancing the Energy Transition’ video.³⁹ Part of this transition relates to the purpose that each genre is meant to serve, but the new narrative had a more obviously ideological goal than the instructional stance that featured in ‘The Business of bp’. The company used high production values and impressive cinematography, drawing on a generic style associated with the cloying optimism of lifestyle advertisements and party political broadcasts:

We are a global energy business, with enormous reach across the world’s energy system. From deep sea to desert, from rigs to retail, we find and produce resources, refine and market products. We track, trade and deliver the world’s energy in real time ... Yet our industry is changing faster than at any other moment in our lifetime. The energy mix is shifting towards lower carbon sources, driven by advanced technologies, growing concern about the environment and changing patterns of demand ... The energy we provide has always lifted people out of poverty, and powered economic growth. Today, we face the dual challenge of meeting society’s need for more energy, while at the same time reducing carbon emissions. As scientists and engineers, we recognise the urgency of the climate challenge, and we *will* be part of the solution.

The company is now presented as ‘a global *energy* business’, operating ‘across the world’s *energy* system’ (my emphasis), and moreover one that has freed itself of any need to mention the inconvenient specificity of products like oil or gas. The video, which shows earnest workers engaged in exploration, offers a highly developed rhetorical address, and mobilises a series of bombastic assertions, cast in a grandiloquent, ‘poetic’ form, using alliteration (‘from deep sea to desert, from rigs to retail’) and tripartite lists (‘driven by advanced technologies, growing concern about the environment and changing patterns of demand’). The temporal frame is one of rapid but nebulous industrial change (‘our industry is changing faster than at any other moment in our lifetime’) in which an accelerating condition in the present is compared with an essentially indeterminate point of reference (a ‘moment’) within a collective *human* past (‘our lifetime’). In this video, bp also adopts the self-congratulation and patronising assertion familiar from managerialism, centrist political discourse and PR: ‘the energy we provide has *always lifted people out of poverty*, and powered economic growth’ (my emphasis).

The discursive shift from ‘oil’ to ‘energy’ was formalised in bp’s 2018 document ‘Advancing the Energy Transition’,⁴⁰ and then further underlined in the speech made in February 2020 by the new Chief Executive Bernard Looney, ‘Reimagining Energy, Reinventing bp’.⁴¹ This change was again reinforced in the August 2020 press release entitled ‘From International Oil Company to Integrated Energy Company’.⁴² In his February address, Looney had begun on a personal note (which, according to critics of ‘CEO speak’,⁴³ is the standard practice of new leaders), before describing the challenges that faced the company. In the second section of his speech, he announced that he had assumed the role of Chief Executive Officer ‘at the beginning of a new decade’, a ‘turn of the calendar’ that had ‘added significance for BP’ (these upper case letters, supposedly consigned to the past, appear in the original document). The company had just ‘*closed out* a decade of epic challenge’ (my emphasis), including ‘the Deepwater Horizon tragedy in 2010 [which] tested us to the core’. Once the periodisation of bp’s exertions had been established, the presentation continued as follows:

We recovered, we returned to growth – and through it all we remained true to our values. Ten years on, we are a safer, stronger and more disciplined company. We learned some hard lessons we will never forget. We learned we don’t always have all the answers. We learned we don’t always get it right.

From passages like this, which deploy the plural first-person pronoun ‘we’ within informal rule-of-three sentences, it is obvious that rhetorical communiques do not try to present a logical argument supported by substantive evidence: the goal is rather to portray the company as a moral enterprise and to create a sense of collective identity through the production of assertions about (in this example) learning ‘hard lessons’ within the specific context of ‘closing out’ a period of negative events. In this parallel discursive universe, bp has unspecified ‘values’, while reference to the Deepwater Horizon disaster is used as a testament to bp’s resilience, rather than a respectful acknowledgement of those who died. The event is relegated to a supposedly unrepeatable past, the chastened corporate reaction to which has secured a more communal and sensitive present.

As befits a carefully devised homily, the language used contains no terms that might prompt negative connotations or distract attention from the progressive tone of the message. In the published version of Looney’s speech there is not a single reference to profit: twenty-one months later, however, in unscripted and more spontaneous remarks, the older ‘values’ that

bp claimed to have reassessed, came to the fore. In the third quarter of 2021, as crude oil prices averaged \$74 a barrel, the group made £2.4 billion in profits, prompting CEO Looney to declare that ‘when the market is strong, when oil prices are strong and when gas prices are strong, this is *literally a cash machine*’ (my emphasis).⁴⁴ The journalist who broke this story noted that, ‘Looney’s boast about the success of its core fossil fuel business comes as global leaders meet in Glasgow at the COP26 climate change summit to discuss reducing carbon emissions’. This was followed, in a press release of 3 May 2022, by a company announcement that came less than three months after the Russian invasion of Ukraine:

bp intends to invest up to £18 billion in the UK’s energy system by the end of 2030, demonstrating bp’s firm commitment to the UK, and helping the country to deliver on its bold ambitions to boost energy security and reach net zero. As one of the largest oil and gas producers in the UK, bp intends to continue investing in North Sea oil and gas, while driving down operational emissions. bp is also in action on a range of lower carbon energy investments in the UK, which are expected to bring jobs and develop new skills and capabilities.

In this passage, it is *operational emissions* associated with extracting fossil fuels that will be reduced, rather than the overall production of carbon from burning oil and gas. Boosting ‘energy security’ and reaching net zero might be perceived as incompatible goals, but the practice of rhetoric encourages the ‘[compression of] disparate concepts into the same discursive space’ (*Brute Reality*, p1). The expansive global frame and its progressive connotation is ditched in favour of ‘demonstrating bp’s firm commitment to the UK’, which involves ‘helping the country to deliver on its bold ambitions’. The switch to a nationalistic and pragmatic narrative threatens a loss of traction with enlightened audiences, which then has to be supplied through other forms of empathetic engagement.⁴⁵ The question is to what degree oil and gas companies can maintain this impression of social concern, when their primary business is so obviously harmful.

CONCLUSION: MEDIA, NEWS, AND INTRUSIVE COMMUNICATION

Whenever international climate summits (like COP26) are held, responsibility for averting disaster is most clearly attributed to ‘world leaders’ and corporate entities. Other groups, by contrast, are positioned as spectators, misdirected into gestural activity, or burdened with

obligations that should be assigned to those responsible for creating the crisis.⁴⁶ This problem is compounded, as argued above, by the high media visibility ascribed to some protagonists, while other significant players evade scrutiny. As Sheffi noted, the Deepwater Horizon catastrophe affected bp's reputation *and* its bank balance (it paid out billions in penalties), but its suppliers, including Haliburton, remained in the shadows and actually increased their profits (*Balancing Green*). This points to the intractable complexity of the capitalist formations that monetise the climate crisis, just as it highlights some of the many lacunae in the journalistic narrative. The routinely destructive practices of state/corporate entities are thus obscured, allowing the guilty parties to refresh their brands and re-enter public debate in the guise of ethical stakeholders, entitled to advise other concerned citizens about the ways in which we can all 'contribute to the solution'. Even the most prolific polluters begin by agreeing with the general account of environmental breakdown and the notion of human accountability, before disguising their own misdemeanours and suggesting false comparisons with other ('all too human') transgressions.

If, however, everyone has to 'own' the emergency, the imposition of this consensus downplays the relative gravity of specific infractions and leads to a serious misalignment of agency and effort. Essential measures to protect the environment are neglected, or assigned to social forces that are either debarred from exercising influence, or reluctant to mobilise their discretionary powers for the common good. Time is wasted by the use of distraction techniques, as companies showcase green initiatives to make themselves appear more innovative than state formations,⁴⁷ and journalists direct their enquiries to the increasingly insensible bureaucracies that thrive within a highly stratified communicative order.⁴⁸

The variable interpretation of what counts as an imminent threat to life, and the fact that the lives of the poorest do not seem to count, means that restorative action is always deferred. The temporal markers used as alarms, including the regularly renewed call to 'act now', are the inevitable products of inhabiting an economy driven by commercial and political deadlines: in effect, citizens are imprisoned in elite interpretations of time and timeliness, while the dispossessed are simply treated as invisible.

Following this observation, the fundamental question is whether it is possible to mobilise effective opposition to corporate power, without simultaneously revolutionising the system

that produces emergencies like the climate crisis – and ultimately whether any action, however rapid and comprehensive, could really prevent catastrophe.

In the meantime, the appropriation by private companies of communicative privilege should be challenged, and corporate forms of address should be characterised, not as inadequate or devious, but as vexatious, unsolicited interruptions in what should be a rational debate. Those with little or no material stake in capitalism, whether or not they are excluded from the anaemic version of democracy and citizenship promoted by governments and big business, should question the very existence of this propaganda, rather than its relative sincerity or sophistication. In other spheres, the messages disseminated by criminal organisations are suppressed and, because the fossil fuel sector and its financial backers are engaged in a form of *joint criminal enterprise* (stealing and exploiting dangerous commodities),⁴⁹ this should be enough to rescind their right to communicate. From a moral standpoint, the production of ‘counter narratives’ is still vital but, in crafting their own messages, radical communities and working-class organisations should abandon the endlessly revised time-frame set by the industrial and political elite and demand an immediate and immoderate form of social justice. Open expressions of dissent need, therefore, to be accompanied by the kind of precipitous intervention against capital interests that some militant activists already pursue.

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1. Peter Kalmus, ‘Forget Plans to Lower Emissions by 2050 – This is Deadly Procrastination’, *The Guardian*, 10 September 2021.

2. I regard this collusion as a form of structural complicity. For definitions, see Stuart Price, *Brute Reality: power, discourse and the mediation of war*, Pluto Press, 2010. (Hereafter *Brute Reality*); and Stuart Price *Worst-case Scenario?*, Zed Books, 2011.
3. See the thorough account of the concept in Sebastião Vieira de Freitas Netto, Marcos Felipe Falcão Sobral, Ana Regina Bezerra Ribeiro and Gleibson Robert da Luz Soares, 'Concepts and Forms of Greenwashing: A Systematic Review', *Environmental Sciences Europe*, 32:19, 2020.
4. On notions of legitimacy and corporate communication, see Peter Seele and Lucia Gatti, 'Greenwashing Revisited: In Search of a Typology and Accusation-Based Definition Incorporating Legitimacy Strategies', *Business Strategy and the Environment*, 26, 2017, pp239-252. (Hereafter *Greenwashing Revisited*.)
5. Alex Lawson, 'Governments Urged to Act After Oil Giants Accused of Misleading Public', *The Guardian*, 16 September 2022.
6. These distinctions include the overlapping categories of class, gender, race and identity. Powerful institutions are able to categorise individuals and groups in order to serve purposes that are not necessarily of benefit to the collectives thus identified. This process can include both the exclusion of certain groups and their divisive promotion, depending on the outcome required.
7. By bourgeois/managerialist values I mean those perspectives that emphasise the supposed virtues of capitalist social relations, and the role of managers as a special class in maintaining the hierarchies essential to its functioning.
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9. See for example Michael Marshall, 'The Tipping Points at the Heart of the Climate Crisis', *The Guardian*, 19 September 2020.
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15. Lilie Chouliaraki, 'Re-Mediation, Inter-Mediation, Trans-Mediation: The Cosmopolitan Trajectories of Convergent Journalism', *Journalism Studies*, 2, 2013, pp267-283.
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18. Karen Ross, 'The journalist, the housewife, the citizen and the press: Women and men as sources in local news narratives', *Journalism*, 8:4, 2007, pp449-473.
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21. Ben Spencer and Harry Yorke, 'Ministers quietly abandon "green crap" as focus shifts to food security', *Sunday Times*, 11 June 2022.
22. Oxford Concise Dictionary, 1964.
23. Stuart Price, *Discourse Power Address*, Ashgate/Routledge, 2007/2017.
24. Graeme Demianyk, 'Greta Thunberg Blasts World Leaders at COP26 for "Whatever the F*** They're Doing in There"', *HuffPost*, 2 November 2021, https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/greta-thunberg-cop26-blah-blah-blah_uk_618054e1e4b0ec286d309132.
25. See Stuart Price, 'Introduction: Journalism, democracy, and the critique of political culture', in Stuart Price (ed.), *Journalism, Power and Investigation: global and activist perspectives*, Routledge, 2019.
26. I refer here to 'cohesive' groups to indicate those collectives perceived as somehow 'unitary' in membership, whether through (for example) their gendered or racialised characteristics, and the ways in which this could be exploited by managerialism, which bases even the most 'inclusive' workplace initiatives on the principle of cut-throat competition.
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28. See Jessica Murray and Severin Carrell, 'Police criticised over raid on Glasgow squat housing COP26 activists', *The Guardian*, 8 November 2021.

29. See Matt Foot and Morag Livingstone, *Charged: How the Police Try to Suppress Protest*, Verso, 2022; Lamiat Sabin, 'Left Wing? You may be on police extremism list', *Morning Star*, 17 January 2020.
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43. See Russell Craig and Joel Amernic, *De-Coding CEO Speak*, University of Toronto Press, 2021.

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