

A Strategic Nature

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*Public Relations and the Politics
of American Environmentalism*

MELISSA ARONCZYK AND MARIA I. ESPINOZA

OXFORD
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Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America.

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CIP data is on file at the Library of Congress

ISBN 978-0-19-005535-6 (pbk.)
ISBN 978-0-19-005534-9 (hbk.)

DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780190055349.001.0001

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Printed by LSC Communications, United States of America

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Abbreviations

ADR	Alternative Dispute Resolution
AEF	Andersson Effers Felix Public Affairs
AFL	American Federation of Labor
AISI	American Iron and Steel Institute
CAA	Clean Air Act (U.S.)
CF&I	Colorado Fuel & Iron Company
CIIT	Chemical Industry Institute of Toxicology
CIO	Congress of Industrial Organizations (U.S.)
CMA	Chemical Manufacturers Association (see MCA)
CSI	Clean Sites, Inc.
D4CA	Data for Climate Action
EDF	Environmental Defense Fund
EIS	Environmental Information Systems
EPA	Environmental Protection Agency (U.S.)
GEMI	Global Environmental Management Initiative
ICC	International Chamber of Commerce
IEB	International Environmental Bureau
IPRA	International Public Relations Association
MCA	Manufacturing Chemists' Association (founded 1872; renamed Chemical Manufacturers Association in 1978; renamed American Chemistry Council in 2000)
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Agreement
NAM	National Association of Manufacturers (U.S.)
NASA	National Aeronautics and Space Administration (U.S.)
NCPP	National Coal Policy Project (U.S.)
NEDA	National Environmental Development Association (U.S.)
NEDA/CAAP	National Environmental Development Association—Clean Air Act Project
NEDA/CWP	National Environmental Development Association—Clean Water Project
NIRA	National Industrial Recovery Act (U.S.)
NRDC	Natural Resources Defense Council
PBS	Public Broadcasting Service (U.S.)
PCEQ	President's Commission on Environmental Quality (U.S.)
PRSA	Public Relations Society of America
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations)

viii ABBREVIATIONS

SIPI	Scientists' Institute for Public Information
SWOC	Steel Workers Organizing Committee
UNCED	United Nations Conference on Environment and Development
UNCHE	United Nations Conference on the Human Environment
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
USCIB	United States Council for International Business
US-ICC	U.S. Interstate Commerce Commission
WEF	World Economic Forum
WICEM	World Industry Conference on Environmental Management

Acknowledgments

This is a book about the conditions of knowledge in the making of the natural environment as a public problem. To ask what we know and how we know it is an inherently social project. It relies in every instance on the willingness of others to share their own knowledge and understanding. It is in this spirit of inquiry that we acknowledge with deep gratitude the “public” that came into existence around this book.

To Lee Edwards, Jeff Pooley, Devon Powers, Thomas Rudel, Chris Russill, and Tim Wood, who read the entire manuscript and provided such thoughtful and generous comments. To Monika Krause, for support and perspective. To Bob Brulle, for his mentorship and guidance along the twists and turns of the research path. To Jeff Alexander, Philip Smith, Fred Wherry, and the members of the Center for Cultural Sociology at Yale University, who listened to and helped shape the earliest stirrings of this project.

To the librarians and archivists at the Rutgers and Yale libraries, the Wisconsin Historical Society, and the Smithsonian Institution Archives for their expertise; to Jamie Corey, Mahogany Lore, and Jayde Valosin for dedicated research assistance; to James Cook, Emily Mackenzie, Jeremy Toynbee, and Patterson Lamb for their exceptional editorial guidance; and to Kimberly Glyder for her stunning cover design.

To the many PR people, lobbyists, consultants, administrative and political officials, communications managers, industry representatives, nonprofit leaders, environmental advocacy groups, government agencies, activists, organizers, and media companies who allowed us to speak with and learn from them. To our families, who supported this project in more ways than they know.

To the National Science Foundation, whose funding made this project possible; and the School of Communication & Information and the Department of Sociology at Rutgers University for giving us additional resources, including the gift of time, to support this work.

Perhaps our greatest debt is owed to the public relations counselor E. Bruce Harrison (1932–2021). It is a complex debt, and not one that can be easily untangled. Harrison was a brilliant strategist who worked with hundreds

of industrial and political leaders as well as journalists and media organizations from the 1960s through the early 2000s. Starting in February, 2017, after his immediate response to a tentative email request, we maintained a semi-regular correspondence until ill health befell him in 2020. In our visits together, our lunches, his introductions to old friends and allies, his emails and letters, he was unfailingly gracious and charming. His decision to share his company library with us—a total of over 850 documents spanning his fifty-year career—was at once an act of tremendous generosity and a personal desire to be remembered for his role in what he called “sustainable communication”—the “greening” of industry through expert PR. Without him, this book could not have been written.

But without him, we also wonder whether the contemporary crisis of global warming would have become so dire. Advancing communication, rather than environmental action, as the locus of sustainability, Harrison showed relentless determination to protect and promote his clients—major polluters and environmental rule-breakers in the most contentious industries in the world, from oil and coal to tobacco and pesticides. His work has contributed in no small way to the misplaced belief in private sector strategies to “solve” the climate crisis despite daily indications of the failure of these strategies to do much besides promote themselves.

Of course, Harrison could not act alone. As we hope this book will show, any reckoning with environmentalism in America must account for the long-term political, economic, and information conditions in which public relations was able to become such a powerful force. This book is dedicated to all those working to turn the tides against the easy acceptance of clearly unacceptable practices, so that we may imagine more considered and healthy futures.

Introduction

Public Relations and Its Problems

On a wet spring day in 2019, dogwood and magnolia trees in brilliant bloom, a group of media makers, environmental activists and communications professionals gathered at the Columbia School of Journalism in New York City for the launch of *Covering Climate Change: A New Playbook for a 1.5-degree World*. Hosted by the progressive magazines *The Nation* and *The Columbia Journalism Review*, with media sponsors *The Guardian* and New York City public radio station WNYC, the goal of the event was to “begin a conversation that America’s journalists and news organizations must have with one another, as well as with the public we are supposed to be serving, about how to cover this rapidly uncoiling emergency.”¹

The first speaker, Bill McKibben, was well known to the attendees. Former staff writer at the *New Yorker*, founder of the grassroots environmental activist organization 350.org, his 1989 book, *The End of Nature*, is broadly credited with turning global warming into a public problem. Thirty years and multiple books and honors later, McKibben is heralded as an influential organizer dedicated to provoking public action against polluting industries and their political and economic support systems.

Speaking by Skype (“we’re learning to use these low carbon technologies”), McKibben began by putting his finger squarely on the pulse of the thirty-year problem preventing the public from knowing the truth about climate change:

We know now much more of the behind-the-scenes story than we did even a few years ago. . . . Beginning right after [NASA scientist] Jim Hansen testified to Congress [in 1988], the oil industry began the project—with the utility industry and the coal industry—of setting up a kind of architecture of denial and misinformation. And the strategy they hit on was the same strategy that the tobacco industry had hit on—indeed they hired many of the veterans of that industry—and that strategy was to try and pretend that there was doubt about the situation.

And climate change was new enough as a topic at first that it was a fairly plausible strategy. For a few years as scientists were kind of getting their

ducks in a row, it's understandable that journalism fell for the creation of what was in essence a phony debate. The strategy of the industry and its PR teams was to insist that we didn't know if global warming was real. . . . And the phoniness of this debate is that both sides knew the answer to that question right at the beginning. It's just that one of them was willing to mount a PR offensive in the opposite direction of the truth. And that PR offensive was obviously extremely successful. . . .

In other words, this was one of the cases where the PR guys . . . got the better of us for a very long time. And that was tragic, because the three decades essentially that we wasted in this phony debate were the three decades that we most needed in order to come to terms with climate change.²

The story of "PR guys" winning the war of information around the causes of global warming is well supported by scholarly research and investigative reporting.³ These accounts have brought to light many of the devious information strategies by which fossil fuel industries cast doubt on scientific knowledge.

But McKibben's story serves another function, which gets to the heart of what this book is about. It presents the lack of media coverage of climate change as a problem of bad information. It sees the failure in the media's poor publicity, giving rise to "a calamitous public ignorance."⁴ And it sees the solution at least partly in the media's responsibility to overcome the distortions of false and self-interested information to provide the public with the truth of scientific facts.

The problem with this critique is that it both overplays and underplays the explanatory power of public relations as a system of influence in our information-mediated lives. It overplays the role of PR in the lack of public responses to climate change while underplaying its role in damaging the vital relationship between people and the natural environment. It overplays the opposition between journalism and PR, presenting these professions as harbingers of truth and lies, respectively, while limiting PR to a system of messaging and framing. It overplays the authority and responsibility of journalists themselves in enacting behavioral change among its publics while downplaying the authority and responsibility of PR agents, characterizing them as mere mouthpieces for their powerful clients.

Those who embody this critique know that the story is more complex than it appears. But even when we add in some of the deeply embedded structural

and political factors that have contributed to the lack of action around climate change in the United States, these basic premises about PR hold fast. In the making of public knowledge about climate change, PR is understood as having three core characteristics. It is defined as spin, that is, information that obstructs, manufactures, or manipulates facts about environmental problems; it is seen as a handmaiden to industrial power, amplifying anti-environmental strategies designed in corporate boardrooms; and it is perceived to be a source of public cynicism and disaffection, the “bad other” to journalism’s moral rectitude.

This book offers another way to think about public relations. It examines the roots of these perceptions in order to present a more robust account of the ways that strategic communication—and its communicators—have wielded influence over the relationship among information, the environment, and its publics in a modern democracy. It demonstrates how public relations specialists actively construct and manage public understandings of the environment. It shows the mechanics of environmental publicity, bringing front and center what is so often characterized as the behind-the-scenes work of PR. To do this, we rely on both macro- and micro-level investigations, combining insights from national patterns and individual motivations to develop a conceptual framework for understanding the promotional culture around the communication of the environment.

To draw the big picture of the impact of promotional culture on environmental thinking, we adopt a historical perspective. The relationship of information, environment, and publicity is a long-standing one. Throughout the twentieth century, making the natural environment into a matter of public concern required a series of techniques of mediation. Strategic communicators from as early as the Progressive Era made use of publicity techniques to shape both environmental awareness and the political landscape on which this awareness could take root. These mediations shaped how environmental problems were thought about, given credence, or dismissed. The central argument in this book is that American environmentalism emerged alongside the tools, techniques, and expertise of American public relations, and that neither environmentalism nor PR would look the way it does today without the other. Of course, these concepts did not evolve in a vacuum. Understanding the relationship of public relations to environmentalism requires a focus on the simultaneously evolving systems of mass media and public opinion, environmental regulation and legislation, and the creation and circulation of information about environmental issues.

The basic premise of this book is that it is not possible to understand the role of the environment in our everyday lives without understanding how something called “the environment” has been invented and communicated to us throughout our lives. To tell this story properly requires a careful account of the evolution of the institutions, norms, and movements that have pushed environmental concerns to the fore of public opinion and political action. But it also demands an examination of the simultaneous evolution of professional communicators and the formation of *their* institutions, norms, and movements. Without this piece of the puzzle, we miss crucial ways that struggles are won, resources allocated, and beliefs fostered about environmental problems.

The Historical Roots of Publicity

McKibben’s story reproduces an enduring American anxiety over the role of publicity in the making of informed publics in a democracy. The history of the concept of publicity reveals some of this ambivalence. In 1926, the philosopher John Dewey advanced an idea that would become paramount to American democratic thought: that “there can be no public without full publicity in respect to all consequences which concern it.” For people to recognize themselves as members of a public, with the power to pronounce on matters of social importance, these matters must be “observed, reported and organized” through “free and systematic communication.” One of the problems confronting the democratic organization of publics, in Dewey’s eyes, lay in the “physical agencies of publicity,” from advertising and propaganda firms to sensationalist news outfits. In the newly industrialized and technological post–World War I age, these “exploiters of sentiment and opinion” threatened to eclipse the possibility of public congress. If societies “demand communication as a prerequisite” for participation in shared interests and institutions, the use of communication to manipulate public feeling or provoke cheap responses to unworthy issues precluded the possibility of forming this shared outlook.⁵

Dewey’s contemporary, the political theorist Walter Lippmann, was equally concerned about the role of publicity in the making of democratic publics. His solutions to the crisis of public discourse were rooted in the discipline of scientific reason. In *Public Opinion* (1922), Lippmann laments the sheer complexity of political and social affairs, the failings of

modern communications media, and the fragmentation of attention, all of which limited citizens' ability to know what they needed to know to make good decisions about how society should operate. Living in a "world beyond our reach," Americans are subjected to the "manufacture of consent"—the manipulation of public sentiment through the "self-conscious art" of professional persuasion, and its troubling legacy is that "the knowledge of how to create consent will alter every political calculation and modify every political premise." The ideal of the "omnicompetent" citizen who could be informed on all issues of public importance was not possible under these conditions, where "the practice of appealing to the public on all sorts of intricate matters means almost always a desire to escape criticism from those who know by enlisting a large majority which has had no chance to know."⁶

It is hard to write a book about democratic communication in the American public sphere without drawing on the ideas of Dewey and Lippmann. The ideals they advanced continue to test our evolving values and beliefs about the role of publicity in fostering the unity of public purpose; and the concerns they raised about the fetters on this purpose continue to challenge us in our assessment of our social and political institutions.⁷

There is a third figure from that era, less often cited in this context, but one whose ideas have arguably become just as central to our understanding of the role of publicity in the making of informed publics: the public relations counselor Edward Bernays.

Bernays is generally known as the "father" of public relations, a title that he may well have invented for himself. For the better part of the twentieth century, Bernays was devoted to inventing, legitimating, and advancing the profession of PR. He taught its first academic course; published dozens of treatises; and developed hundreds of promotional campaigns for clients of all stripes, from the American Tobacco Company to civic organizations.

But the most important contribution Bernays made to the concept of the public in the burgeoning democratic life of the early twentieth century is also its most contested: the transformation of the concept into a strategic resource.

In 1923, a year after Lippmann's *Public Opinion* was published, Bernays hastily put out his own missive, *Crystallizing Public Opinion*. Bernays wanted to transpose Lippmann's concerns about the machinery of publicity and "the manufacture of consent" into his terms, advancing PR as a necessary feature of democracy rather than a fetter on it. Indeed, the primary objective of

Crystallizing Public Opinion was to promote public relations as an invaluable profession for the exercise of democracy in the modern era.

To turn his business into a credible input to democracy, Bernays sought to move public opinion from the realm of normative democratic theory to the practice of expert technical management. Bernays celebrated what Lippmann (and later, political theorists Habermas and Bourdieu) decried: the use of media, polling, surveys, and other techniques to make and manage publics.⁸ He drew liberally and selectively on expert sources from across the social sciences to lend his ideas an air of respectability.⁹ He often invoked his family connection to the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud (he was Freud's nephew). At New York University he taught the first course on public relations ever offered, using his entrée into the academic community to codify his ideas. He advocated the use of legal metaphors to describe PR practice, referring to himself as a PR counselor, whose business was conducted in the court of public opinion.

Writing in the *American Journal of Sociology* in 1928, Bernays advanced the idea of the public opinion specialist, demonstrating how sociological theories and methods could be made useful to the technical process of public manipulation. Armed with an understanding of group dynamics, statistics, and the impact of affect on behavior, the analyst

has methods adapted to educating the public to new ideas, to articulating minority ideas and strengthening them, to making latent majority ideas active, to making an old principle apply to a new idea, to substituting ideas by changing clichés, to overcoming prejudices, to making a part stand for the whole, and to creating events and circumstances that stand for his ideas. He must know the physical organs of approach to his public: the radio, the lecture platform, the motion picture, the letter, the advertisement, the pamphlet, the newspaper. He must know how an idea can be translated into terms that fit any given form of communication, and that his public can understand.¹⁰

What Bernays understood deeply was the power of “the public” as a cultural form. In his eyes, the public could be invoked as a strategic resource—not as an end in itself, but as a means for other ends. If you retain the ideals of publicity as a principle of democracy, consensus as the desired outcome of reasonable (in Habermas's terms, “rational-critical”) debate, and communication as the feeder for social integration, you can conduct your affairs in

the name of the public good. Whether advancing the public good was your actual motivation became less important than maintaining the ideals that surrounded it.

The scholar Sue Curry Jansen has shown how Bernays consistently applied what he favorably called “semantic tyranny” to existing phrases and concepts, retooling them into ideas he could use for his emerging PR practice. The phrase, “manufacturing consent,” for instance, initially uttered by Walter Lippmann as a damning critique of propaganda, became in Bernays’s hands a desirable objective. More damaging still, Jansen argues, was the way that Bernays made Lippmann himself into an apologist for elite expertise as the source of effective government, a misinterpretation that persists in various forms today.¹¹

Bernays’s signal accomplishment was to advance and institutionalize the notion that ideas and information need to be shaped, framed, and labeled in order to appear acceptable to people in political and cultural contexts. For Bernays, PR was less about communication than it was about creating contexts for communication: contexts where certain ideas and information could be made to seem relevant and legitimate while others receded or became marginal. By seating ideas and information within democratic structures of participation, communication, and social importance, publics could be formed and opinions garnered around the issues of the day. This is the foundational definition of public relations—creating relational meanings to structure groups of people who are enjoined to think of themselves as legitimate publics in a democracy.

This capsule history of Lippmann, Dewey, and Bernays is meant to serve a double function. In describing how the cultural form of the public can be adapted to serve strategic and self-interested ends, the story also shows how social and political thought and action can themselves adapt to these transformed ends. Whether we accept or lament them, the industries of public relations and public opinion are part of our modern democratic system today. These industries belong at the forefront of our thinking about democratic publics—not to celebrate them, but to recognize how central their work has been to modern understanding about public communication. This recognition paves the way for social and political researchers to develop sharper tools of critique.

Most critics dismiss PR as manipulative distortions of reality. In the face of mounting evidence of organized misinformation campaigns financed by fossil fuel industries to deny and obfuscate global warming, this is

unquestionably the case. But the question at the core of this book is how such manipulations have been so devastatingly effective. It is hard to ignore the will to mislead, especially when those doing the misleading are armed with considerable authority or resources. There are sometimes reasons beyond resource differentials, however, that these misinterpretations are deemed acceptable as declarative statements of how things are.

Arguments about manipulated publicity are not as helpful as they need to be to understand how PR operates. When PR is taken as manipulation, this activates the premise that we render the world transparent by bringing this manipulation to light, revealing the “truth” underneath.¹² Yet as recent political events have clearly demonstrated, the opposition of manipulation (fakery, distortion, lies) to truth (honesty, transparency, facts) reproduces an unreflexive antinomy that is neither analytically nor rhetorically sustainable.

Hannah Arendt argued that the problem of politics and truth was the central dilemma of the twentieth century. “Seen from the viewpoint of politics,” she wrote, “truth has a despotic character”:

Facts are beyond agreement and consent, and all talk about them—all exchanges of opinion based on correct information—will contribute nothing to their establishment. Unwelcome opinion can be argued with, rejected, or compromised upon, but unwelcome facts possess an infuriating stubbornness that nothing can move except plain lies. The trouble is that factual truth, like all other truth, peremptorily claims to be acknowledged and precludes debate, and debate constitutes the very essence of political life.¹³

Let us return to McKibben to bear this out. McKibben argues that the appearance of debate in our media is what has prevented the public from coming to terms with climate change. But the appearance of debate is not the problem. The problem is that we think debate is necessary in order for our democratic system to function. In this context, the task of PR is to mirror democratic structures of advocacy. Public relations creates, shapes, and promotes a politics that is embedded in our major institutions, our common practices of mediated debate, and even the way we collectively think about what “the public” is and what it ought to do. It represents various viewpoints, provides information, and solicits opinion. That this information and these viewpoints are plainly unscientific, that these truths are

clearly “inconvenient,” becomes less important than adhering to the values of democracy.

Public relations is not invested in truth. It is invested in legitimacy. And legitimacy is a relative proposition, or as Mark Suchman suggests, a pragmatic concept.¹⁴ It isn't a quest for truth or facts. It's a way to *use* concepts of truth or facts to persuade others that your view is the best one, in order to gain support in a particular context. This is one reason that the ongoing belief that more and better information about global warming will spur publics to action has not been realized. This belief misrecognizes the role of PR in establishing legitimacy for its representatives through appeals to the public, to information, and to democracy.

PR as a Technology of Legitimacy

In this book, we treat public relations as a technology of legitimacy. The etymology of the word “technology” is relevant: the science, or logic (*-logia*), of skill or craft (*techne*). We examine the logics by which public relations agents developed their craft over the course of the twentieth century. The aim is to show how this craft—the knowledge, tools, and techniques invented and applied to creating relations with determinate publics—became central to the operation of democratic publicity, even as its mechanics were obscured from public view. At issue is the question of how democracy came to include these features rather than work against them. If part of our mission in this book is to move beyond arguments about PR as manipulated publicity, another part aims to avoid replicating the strain of thinking around PR, mainly by PR people themselves, that PR is necessary or important for advancing democratic virtues and values. Rather, our goal is to reveal how PR worked through these values to present its objectives as aligned with the social and political concerns of the time, including the role of publics in a democracy.¹⁵

Our conception of public relations is therefore ontologically different from what most PR research considers. Our aim is to theorize PR at a systemic level. We show how it established structures of advocacy that legitimized particular rationales for action and strategies for management of information within existing understandings of democratic communication. These structures include the development of political and social institutions.

For instance, PR actors played instrumental roles in the social communication practices of trade associations, helping them to recognize themselves as public advocates for not only their company members but also for an economic and political system that supported their industries. These advocacy structures owed their success to more than their economic and political relevance. Key to their legitimacy was PR innovators' ability to navigate the cultural and moral environment in which they operated. A coalition of companies organized around preventing legislation to limit fuel emissions has to be recognized as fitting into the existing architecture, norms, and standards of political discourse in order to be taken as legitimate. By the same token, calling that coalition the Coalition for Vehicle Choice has a cultural valence that speaks to (and helps produce) values and beliefs of the era. Our approach is therefore both material and cultural: to inquire into both the formation of advocacy structures and how they are wielded, and also into what makes them meaningful in a given time and place.¹⁶

Considering PR as a technology of legitimacy refers not only to securing legitimacy for one viewpoint over another. It is also about how this business has created a set of social and political conditions in which certain ways of thinking become available to us while others are foreclosed. PR is a process that provides conceptual repertoires, repertoires that have influenced how we define public information and communication around environmental change. Limiting the analysis to manipulation misses out on the specific ways PR embeds itself into our sense-making.

In her stunning book, *Strangers in Their Own Land*, sociologist Arlie Hochschild refers to environmental problems like industrial pollution and ecosystem destruction as a "keyhole issue." Looking through the keyhole of fracking and petrochemical use in Louisiana allows her to develop a cultural understanding of American politics, by showing how charismatic leaders, community associations, and ordinary citizens ascribe meanings to politics that fit their own senses of self and society. At one level, the natural environment is the keyhole issue in this book too. By tracing the transformation of the discourse of environmentalism over the decades of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, we see to what extent making the environment meaningful to different publics was historically conditioned by the work of professional public relations. But just as the key has no function independently of its keyhole, so do we need to contemplate the lines of thought that make up environmentalism to make sense of the role of public relations in American politics and culture.

PR Counselors as an Epistemic Community

Who are these PR guys engaged in the war of information around climate change? What drives them to do what they do? How have they maintained their operations behind the scenes, and with what impact on public communication? And to what extent have their actions informed, and been informed by, the historical legacy of environmentalism throughout the twentieth century?

To fully account for the evolving strategic nature over the course of the twentieth century requires careful attention to those doing the strategizing. Most writing on public relations considers PR agents as value-neutral information intermediaries who work on behalf of clients to convey their ideas to their chosen publics. In contrast, we consider PR agents to be value-generating actors who create and shape cultural narratives, information standards, and rules of engagement with strategically framed interlocutors.¹⁷

In this book, we consider PR consultants to be an epistemic community. Defined as self-structured groups sharing professional expertise, beliefs, and common objectives for influencing public policy, epistemic communities claim authority over expert knowledge and seek to embed this legitimacy into their objectives.¹⁸ As knowledge-based networks, epistemic communities also influence meaning-making processes by circulating particular understandings of issues among different publics.¹⁹ Seen in this light, PR is not only about the communication of ideas and information but also about creating the ideas and information standards that shape political contexts.

The ability of public relations actors to present themselves and their work in terms of facilitation and amplification rather than innovation and authoritative direction is a defining characteristic of promotional industries more generally. The “transnational promotional class” is made up of self-styled intermediaries such as lobbyists, consultants, public relations practitioners, and marketers who present their work in terms of brokerage between political figures and their publics. These promotional elites professionalize, mediatize, and manage the process of political communication and policymaking. They do not form a self-consciously composed collective entity but rather operate as a loosely affiliated coalition of actors and institutions dedicated to constructing and managing international and domestic public opinion as well as the conditions in which public attitudes and values are collected.²⁰

To understand the effect of this collective is to focus on the ways that this self-conscious intermediary role allows PR actors to carry out their work. In *The Politics of Misinformation*, Murray Edelman argues that publicity operates according to a paradox: political information and actions that are publicized are rarely those that lead to actual social change:

Political actions, talk, and media reporting focus largely on elections, legislation, and the publicized promises of officials, candidates, and interest groups. All of these institutions emphasize their support for needed change and the reality of change, but none of them makes much difference. By contrast, the activities that do make a substantial difference are largely unpublicized, or redefined as something different from what they are.²¹

A central aim of this book is to bring out these unpublicized activities, by attending to the actors who create and justify them. In order to account for publicity as a technology of power and influence, attention must be paid to the strategies and motivations of those who deliberately avoid the lime-light. Examining PR actors' strategies of silence helps us to show how this boundary work allowed them to build up their professional repertoire and gather insights from across sectors.

As market intermediaries, PR counselors occupy a very important liminal position among industries and between industry and government. Like lawyers or accountants, they work across industrial sectors with a wide range of organizational clients. They can build thematic expertise and knowledge that gets solidified into rules and standards, and these get carried across their client base. Unlike lawyers or accountants, however, they are not bound in the same way by the law or the tax code, so they have considerably more flexibility in generating ideas and information for different audiences.

This flexibility is further reflected in the networks of legitimacy in which PR counselors operate. The effectiveness of public relations in the realm of environmental politics is necessarily embedded in a much wider ecosystem of influence: trade associations, industry or science advisory councils, think tanks, research institutes, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), foundations, chambers of commerce, and organizational boards.²² While many of these institutions are themselves limited in scope because of their focus on a single trade, industry, style of research, or membership group, public relations practitioners can move freely among them, maintaining multiple affiliations and a broad client base. In the context of environmental

issues in the time period covered here, the cohesion of these networks has been to a great extent coordinated by PR actors, who have used their liminality and invisibility to move among network nodes. The trans-industrial and transnational coordination of this network helps to explain the remarkable ideological convergence of corporate public relations across industrial sectors, firms, and national boundaries.

Another explanation lies in the charismatic personalities of some of the more prominent public relations actors. Bernays's larger-than-life personality was paradigmatic of many twentieth-century public relations counselors who innovated in the realm of environmental communication. How such charismatic figures managed to promote themselves and their industry while maintaining the profession's secrecy is part of the story we wish to tell. Indeed, a tension we explore in this book is how the self-aggrandizement of PR actors and PR literature fits within the industry's ongoing attempt to maintain its distance and status as neutral facilitator as opposed to powerful intervener in political affairs.

One outcome of such lofty self-representation is continued slippage among the industry's terms of engagement. Public relations, public affairs, advocacy, lobbying, and the notion of strategic communication more broadly have ambiguous boundaries that often remain unobserved in practice. In this book, these terms are all in play. We use them according to the ways they are deployed in empirical situations. To give a prominent example: the Watergate scandal was a point of inflection for the public relations industry. Increasing public scrutiny in the mid-1970s, as well as congressional reforms distributing power across subcommittees, made old-style centralized lobbying ineffective. For many professional communicators, the solution was to divest one's consultancy of its lobbying function—in some cases, by founding a separate agency to keep the lobbying payments at arm's length from the firm. For others, the solution was to integrate PR and lobbying in new structures of advocacy, such as by forming and sponsoring grassroots constituencies of local citizens who could call on their congressional representatives directly.

Public relations counselors' skill set is therefore deeply contingent and constantly evolving. Professional titles change regularly, as do the toolkits used to represent client needs. In twentieth-century settings of environmental concerns, public relations counselors continually looked for ways to make the environment manageable to their various publics. While in some instances this meant decoupling client activities from environmental issues altogether, in others the chosen method might involve concerted efforts

toward transparent communication with communities affected by environmental damage.

“Informing” Environmentalism

Ultimately, making the environment manageable required a concerted focus by PR agents on what the anthropologist Kim Fortun calls the “informing” of environmentalism: producing knowledge about the environment that appeared palatable, tangible, and rational.²³ The specific objective by PR actors was to turn environmental problems into problems of information. In this way the actors could intervene, using their expertise to provide the “right” kinds of information in order to control the outcome. But as Fortun observes, informing environmentalism influences what counts as necessary knowledge. It changes how the environment is conceptualized as a problem and who invests in that problem. It shifts notions of risk, sustainability, and responsibility away from its object and onto different terrains of understanding that are directed away from environmental or climate action.²⁴

This shift, we argue, is not a recent development. It has taken place in various forms and by various means over the course of the twentieth century. Taking this historical approach allows us to show the incremental ways by which the environment became, for many American publics, the wrong kind of problem: a problem of information, politics, and publicity instead of a problem of our continued existence. The role of PR is, if not singularly responsible, at least centrally involved in this process. Bringing their work to the forefront of our investigation allows us to build on but move beyond recent work on conservative think tanks, skeptical science, and corporate advocacy in US environmental politics.

Constructing PR as a Reflexive Field

One more word on our approach to public relations in this book. Typical evaluations of PR, especially in the realm of environmental politics, limit the scope to corporations and business. When environmental organizations, public interest groups, or civic entities engage in public relations, as all of them do, the practice is distinguished from that of its corporate counterparts

through labeling (e.g., advocacy versus propaganda). This distinction is not simply a matter of perspective. Historically, a great number of PR innovations and techniques in the United States were developed with business and profits in mind.²⁵ The monopoly companies of the early twentieth century in environmentally compromising industries like rail, steel, and coal faced considerable anxiety among Americans over their size and power. Corporate public relations emerged out of this anxiety, charged with a mission to invest the corporation with a “soul.”²⁶ While the concept of “the environment” as a social and moral problem would not be named until the 1960s, many prewar public relations campaigns focused on mitigating the noxious effects of the corporation in their communities, whether direct ecological effects like pollution and waste management or indirect effects such as employee health and welfare. These problems animated the efforts of Progressive era “muck-raking” journalists such as Ida Tarbell and novelists like Upton Sinclair, who directed their ire at the corrupting influence of fossil fuel companies.²⁷ In the second half of the twentieth century, mounting public awareness of ecological harm caused by extractive and air/water-polluting industries (fossil fuels, chemicals, tobacco, nuclear energy) made corporations into symbols of destruction and targets for reform. Again, public relations counsel played instrumental roles in the reorientation of corporate activities in public and political spheres.²⁸ As the industry developed its professional associations, journals, and academic programs, these were overwhelmingly focused on the functional and administrative goals of private organizations. Such a lopsided perspective is consistent today.

While it is incontrovertibly true that anti-environmental communication, including the manufacture of doubt and outright climate denialism by contentious actors, has taken up an outsized portion of the communications landscape, to focus exclusively on this communication as the legacy of PR reduces the potential for analytical traction. Despite the clear difference in resources, motives, and information content that attends the practical application of public relations by different groups, it is nevertheless vital to pay attention to non-denialist and non-corporate uses of PR for two important reasons. First, to assume that public relations is the sole province of business is to ignore the vastly important role of information management within government, media, and civic organizations in the conception and communication of public problems. In this book, we draw on a growing literature about the use of public relations and strategic communication by civil society actors in the name of social reform as well as multiple interviews with strategic

communicators at national and international environmental nonprofits, activist groups, state and local government departments, intergovernmental organizations, and academic and media institutions to show how various organizational actors consider what it means to communicate about the environment, and how they compete or collaborate in different settings.²⁹

A second reason is to overcome the limits of a dichotomous analysis of attitudes toward climate change, which makes corporate and non-corporate participants into antagonistic opponents and maintains the political polarization that has come to characterize this sphere of understanding. For example, scholarly arguments about reflexivity as a necessary precondition for apprehending the human, economic, and technological causes of climate change tend to identify as anti-reflexive those defenders of the current system: primarily conservative and corporate entities.³⁰ This line of thought retains a barrier between each camp: anti-reflexive orientations lack the progressive, moral, and intelligent vision embodied by the reflexive approach.

In practice, however, there is dimensionality *within* groups in addition to differences between them. For instance, ExxonMobil and Shell Oil Company do not always embrace the same tactics. Lumping them together as “industry” or “corporate” actors misses important insights about how different actors overlap in their interests and collaborate or co-opt each other’s maneuvers.³¹ Further, distinguishing corporate from non-corporate action is not always obvious. When wealthy families allocate portions of their private fortunes to groups fighting industrial regulation, or political action committees amass individual donations to fund advertising for oil-friendly political candidates, determining whether this constitutes specifically corporate action becomes complex.

In the realm of grassroots mobilization to promote citizen involvement in public policymaking, the picture is even more blurred. While some research has uncovered the “astroturf” nature of citizen groups, pointing to their corporate underwriting or to the professionalization of mobilization strategies via so-called grassroots lobbyists (paid public affairs consultants who incentivize and organize citizen participation using a grassroots repertoire), citizen participation is not uniformly instrumental or manufactured. Researchers such as Tim Wood have shown that the motivations and actions of individual participants in industry front groups are often genuine, civic-minded, and morally inspired.³² Third-party groups may be top-down, but they are not necessarily corporate.

Another limitation of the reflexivity/anti-reflexivity position is that it does not recognize that various fractions of capital have different vested interests. Consider, for instance, the ways that the Keystone XL Pipeline debate mobilized participants who hold rail interests against participants who hold oil interests. The same is true of members of the anti-capitalist movement: the demands and interests of environmental organizations and social movements vary according to their objectives. A historical and contextual approach allows us to move beyond the dichotomy of good and bad actors that has contributed to the antagonism preventing action on climate change in the current American setting.

The point here is not simply that everyone does PR or that context matters. The point is that PR *itself* has played a non-negligible role in maintaining this dichotomy of good and bad actors around environmentalism. It has long served the interests of public relations actors to develop clear enemies in order to sharpen information and communication practices against them. This enemy construction is both particular (“Bill McKibben”) and general (“the Left,” “activist,” “the public”); it affects both the individual and the category.³³ Such constructions serve to build the category of the other actors in this network—the oil industry, or the average citizen, for instance. Paying attention to PR therefore requires attention not only to differentiated uses of strategic communication by a wide range of actors but also to the ways that the PR industry has developed and maintained actor categories as well as dimensionalities within them.³⁴

Methodological Considerations

We are two authors with diverse backgrounds and nationalities. Our intellectual training spans the disciplinary subfields of environmental and cultural sociology and the interdisciplinary fields of media studies, cultural studies, and environmental communication. In this book, we make use of approaches and materials derived from all of these contexts of inquiry, and we also draw on practitioner perspectives in journalism, management studies, and public relations. Our research strategies combine ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, and archival methods to develop a broad cultural and historical context.³⁵ Chapters 1, 2, and 3 make extensive use of company and trade association archives and government records to develop their arguments. Chapters 4 and 5 draw on professional journals, industry reports, and news

coverage of environmental issues. Chapters 6 and 7 present interview material and on-site observation at events with communication strategists, public relations professionals, advisors, project managers, and environmental advocates working within a broad range of organizations. Some readers may find this blended scholarly lineage a little too promiscuous for their taste. We preferred to sacrifice the discipline that disciplinary boundaries provide for the more pressing goal of bringing together multiple perspectives on the singularly complex and intractable problem of environmental degradation and a changing climate. One thing this book tries to make clear is that reckoning with the problem of the environment requires dialogue among and participation by all people and all perspectives, even—or perhaps especially—those that have historically appeared antithetical or antagonistic to the cause.

For this reason, rather than demonizing actors (e.g., corporations) or categories (e.g., spin), *A Strategic Nature* sets a baseline for concerns that have consumed actors and framed categories for over a century regarding the role of human beings within their environment. What Americans have come to think of as “the natural environment” or “the climate” has been forged at the intersection of a particular conception of information, communication, and politics in a particular kind of democracy. Different actors, working with very different motivations and repertoires of action, have tried to influence the shape of the natural environment, usually to their own advantage. We try to render here the various efforts to influence, inform, and manage the concept of the environment within this setting and to examine its impacts on the social imaginary.

That said, we do not adopt an objective or uncritical stance toward the problem. It is important to make clear some of the limitations of the project and its data at the outset. For one thing, the industry of PR is not only not neutral in its strategies of legitimation, as we detail throughout the book; it is also not at all diverse in its constitution; and it is often willfully blind to its exercise of power. Critical public relations scholars have spilled considerable ink to demonstrate the homogeneity of race and class and the gendered hierarchy of industry practitioners; the lack of recognition of power dynamics in its theories, models, and practices; and the sanitized characterization of PR audiences, or “stakeholders,” which perpetually leaves out populations, territories, and practices that do not seem to fit within the frameworks created.³⁶

In offering a historically informed perspective on the double evolution of publicity and environmentalism, we do not take this monolithic aspect of the

field for granted; indeed, the narrowing of the concept of environmentalism we detail here is a direct reflection of this homogeneity and anti-reflexivity. *A Strategic Nature* aims its critique squarely at the particular nexus of environment, information, and publicness that has given rise to a fairly toothless, isomorphic, and jejune discourse in the democratic public sphere. But we also recognize that the lack of diverse voices in this narrative deserves considerably more attention than we are able to devote space to here.

Structure of the Book

Each chapter in the book attends to a particular historical moment in American life where ideas about publics, information, and the environment came together. These historical moments are organized around periods of political contention, where various groups—corporate, civic, professional—saw the need to transform the rules governing American society. In the early part of the twentieth century, for example, the organization of private interests—industry, railroads, and utilities—spawned fear and alarm among citizens, not least for their polluting ways. In response to the intensive political power and influence of industrial monopolies, individuals organized their own “people’s lobby” wielding a “new currency of political influence [that] included procedural mastery, technical expertise, and the ability to mobilize public opinion.”³⁷ Now-famous muckrakers like Ida Tarbell used investigative journalistic means to expose the machinations of major polluters like Standard Oil, further paving the way for a culture of reform. As these actions came into the public eye and contentious collectives emerged to demand change, the need for information to regain control of public narratives became more evident.

Chapter 1, *Seeing Like a Publicist*, locates the origins of public relations alongside emerging environmental narratives at the beginning of the twentieth century. The United States Forest Service, a federal bureau established during Theodore Roosevelt’s presidency, represented a vision of nature as resource for development, at odds with the romantic spirit of wilderness preservationists such as John Muir. Chief Forester Gifford Pinchot developed sophisticated mechanisms and messages to promote his commitment to a distinctly American culture of nature, qualifying and transforming the character of environmental information to the news-reading public in the process. Pinchot developed foundational concepts and practices of public

relations that would leave deep grooves in the American experience of environmentalism.

In chapter 2, *Bringing the Outside In*, we examine the industrial infrastructures within which the burgeoning profession of public relations coalesced: rail, steel, and coal, and the simultaneous development of information infrastructures to situate these industries as paragons of democracy in the American imagination. It was in the struggles over labor rights, workers' rights, employee welfare, and industrial reform that the practice of public relations forged its methods, as scions of power and privilege attempted to manage the external environment of public and political opinion to reduce the friction for the machinations of heavy industry. While the external environment does not directly map onto the natural environment, we see in these struggles the porousness of the boundaries between the inside and the outside of industrial production, allowing industrial leaders to control the outside world in addition to the one within their walls. As later chapters will show, this maneuver laid the groundwork for the idea that specialized knowledge of communities' air, land, and water could come from industrial research. The chapter reviews the efforts of now-infamous PR men Ivy Ledbetter Lee and John W. Hill of the firm Hill & Knowlton to develop principles of "industrial democracy," introducing statistical reasoning, third-party promotion, and internal (employee-oriented) publicity programs as part of an ongoing project of fact-making around the benefits of business for American democracy.

Chapter 3, *Environment, Energy, Economy*, pursues these ideas into the post-Second World War setting, as industrial PR practitioners in the 1950s and 1960s apprehended the formidable rival of environmental pollution and its discontents. Prior to the war, industry was the leading source of information on air pollution among other problems of "industrial hygiene."³⁸ By bringing environmental problems inside the firm, companies defined both the problems and the solutions to environmental degradation. In the postwar era, however, with new federal science funding, changing norms of media representation and news coverage, and rising legal battles for companies over wartime reparations, alternative voices began to emerge around environmental issues. Amid the transformation of the nature of evidence in postwar scientific research, coupled with a growing public anxiety over depletion of the commons, public relations counsel set out to balance the scales in their corporate clients' favor. They would find this balance in the notion of energy as its own scarce resource in need of protection. The chapter reviews

the expansion of public relations networks and the adoption of environmentalism as a force to be strategically managed.

The creation of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in December 1970 signaled a new era for environmentalism. The role of the EPA was quickly labeled “command and control” by the industries who stood to be most affected by the agency’s powers. Over the next decade, the rise of punitive (and sometimes retroactive) legislation to hold liable polluting entities led contentious industries to fight back. One response was the use of public relations techniques to foster increased dialogue leading to compromise or collaboration among oppositional parties. In chapter 4, PR for the Public Interest, we review the endeavors that allowed industrial interests to promote their anti-environmental agenda as rational and reasonable. It also allowed them to advocate against the passage of further legislation. By advancing a rhetoric of “compromising for the common good,” PR actors participated in both defusing the appearance of adversity in a 1970s and 1980s context of public concern over environmental damage and in cementing public relations as a legitimate profession with specialized skills of negotiation and dispute resolution.³⁹ Throughout the 1950s, ’60s, and ’70s, as battles over environmental futures intensified between environmental groups and business associations, PR actors sought to create and manage influence in political contexts. PR consultants developed single-issue coalitions, public-private partnerships, green business networks, and other multiple-member groups, along with multi-pronged media strategies, to advance the idea of plurality.

So, on the one hand, corporate PR counselors succeeded in taking control of environmental issues by framing corporate responses to environmentalism in terms of existing cultural structures in the post-Watergate era: transparency, public participation, and the public interest. On the other, they self-consciously applied those same values to their craft, conceptualizing PR as a concerted system of information management rather than an ad hoc process of persuasion. The same sentiment accompanied their work on environmental issues. To make the environment more tangible, manageable, and measurable, PR counselors developed benchmarking metrics, reporting techniques, certification schemes, and self-auditing logistics. These maneuvers allowed PR to further portray environmental politics as information politics.

In chapter 5, Sustainable Communication, the role of PR firms as international knowledge brokers is given its due. The chapter demonstrates the impact of a network of American public relations firms in spreading “green”

PR across European and Mexican borders during a critical historical period. With the consolidation of the European Union and NAFTA on the horizon, corporate clients in a range of industries (from tobacco to chemicals to oil, coal, and gas) adopted promotional methods that advertised their commitment to environmentalism in an effort to sidestep sweeping regulations. By diffusing its core principles of sustainable *communication* over sustainable environmental behavior, PR networks helped to define environmental communication as a field in its own right, acting as a major cultural producer in the realm of international environmental governance.

In chapter 6, *The Climate of Publicity*, we examine the media plans, mobilization efforts, and marketing devices that climate advocates use to promote “the planet” to various publics as an object of concern. We begin by asking what it is that PR “knows” about environmental advocacy. While PR appears in the world as a neutral technology of legitimation, this chapter demonstrates the extent to which the practice is culturally determined and how its conception of publics as situational, contingent, and self-interested plays out in its operation. Drawing on interviews with environmental advocates, movement leaders, NGOs, and climate communications teams, we then show how PR, conceptualized by environmentalists as a strategic resource against established systems of power, ultimately reproduces those systems of power, leaving unchanged the substance of response to the “super wicked” problem of climate change.

Chapter 7, “Shared Value”: *Promoting Climate Change for Data Worlds*, begins with a provocation. In the growing movement to deploy big data for big solutions to mitigate global warming, is the data serving the climate cause? Or is the climate a convenient form of promotional capital for the benefit of big data adherents? This chapter reviews the shape of the Data for Climate Action (D4CA) campaign, showing how the campaign’s greatest impact is in the realm of publicity. Under the banner of shared value and social good, business, NGO, and political leaders promote data solutions to climate problems, privileging technical and private sector expertise and digital “evidence” of global climate transformations. Despite its datafied package, the chapter reveals the continuity of mechanisms of public relations to generate facts that further reinforce the informational and technical character of environmentalism.

It is not particularly novel to say that the communications or mediation work of organizational actors matters for how we think about the environment. Studies across the academy have looked extensively at how

environmental concerns have been fostered, shaped, and influenced by mediated representation in various forms. Dedicated work has been conducted on environmental framing and its consequences; the disciplining discourses of environmental governance; the professionalization of strategic communication and its uses for public opinion and policymaking around environmental issues; the rhetorical and image strategies deployed to promote environmental values and beliefs; and the technologies of environmental knowledge-making, such as modeling, mapping, and monitoring, among many other approaches.⁴⁰

What has not been given its due is the specific role of the public relations industry in making the environment into a matter of concern. The task of this book is to show the historical co-evolution of environmental publics and publicity with the public relations industry and how this co-evolution impacts our contemporary thinking about environmental change.

The environment is a special case of political contestation, because it is not at root a political problem. Showing what role the PR industry has played in turning environmental problems into other kinds of problems—political problems, problems of information, problems of individual attention, in short, into anything but an environmental problem—is the aim of this book. This has meant that generalized expressions of environmental concern, such as mobilization for collective action, ethical commitments to lower consumption and take personal responsibility, and values of pluralist participation and organizational transparency, have been narrowed to fit into advocacy structures that rely on publicity and its subjectivist reorganizations.

If it is true that “publics do not exist apart from the discourse that addresses them,” the kinds of environmental publics that PR brings forward are beholden to a limited discourse that is not open-ended, reflexive, or accessible.⁴¹ In Habermas’s conception, this is the essence of “manipulative publicity”—a stylized censorship of the free provision of information necessary to a participatory democracy. His ideal of the public sphere, in which individuals come together in public settings to debate, transform, and criticize ideas, is quashed by the presence of large-scale organizations, including the state and corporate power. The reason and criticism necessary to ensure a robust public conscience as a countervailing force to power was suppressed by powerful self-interested groups.

But what if our current model of participatory democracy is constituted by this “manipulative publicity”? As the historian Timothy Mitchell argues in his book, *Carbon Democracy*, “The term ‘democracy’ can have two kinds

of meaning. It can refer to ways of making effective claims for a more just and egalitarian common world. Or it can refer to a mode of governing populations that employs popular consent as a means of *limiting* claims for greater equality and justice by dividing up the common world.”⁴²

A Strategic Nature builds on that idea by inserting the determinate role of public relations in making this relationship between carbon and democracy legible and palatable to modern publics. More to the point, it is about the role of public relations in creating the publics necessary to accept this relationship. If democracy is characterized by Mitchell’s second definition, then, he argues, “the problem of democracy becomes a question of how to manufacture a new model of the citizen.”⁴³ We see public relations as instrumental to this process.