

THE FORCES MAINTAINING FOSSIL FUEL DEPENDENCE  
IN THE AGE OF ELECTRIC

by

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A THESIS

Presented to the School of Journalism and Communication  
and the Robert D. Clark Honors College  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Bachelor of Arts

June 2020

## **An Abstract of the Thesis of**

Nick Mau for the degree of Bachelor of Arts  
in the Department of Advertising to be taken June 2020

Title: The Forces Maintaining Fossil Fuel Dependence in the Age of Electric

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With climate change at the forefront of global environmentalism, the world waits in earnest as rising temperatures cause massive losses from the Greenlandic and Antarctic ice sheets with grave consequences as a result of carbon pollution buildup in the earth's atmosphere. In response, individuals on a personal basis have made strides to promote and adhere to sustainable practices in their own lives to reduce carbon emissions, however, the operation of single driver cars and the dominance of a carbon intensive global transportation standard have caused fossil fuel powered automobiles to become the single most costly polluting behavior of the average individual with access. The rise of environmental consciousness has since revealed the lucrative industry of oil extraction, refinement, and distribution to be the profiting influence maintaining fossil fuel dependence in a time when reducing carbon emitting practices has become paramount to minimizing the disastrous repercussions of climate change. To combat the swaying tides of public opinion, leading oil companies have enlisted advertising to repair and maintain their immensely profitable stake in the crude oil reliant standard transportation system for which the world has been conditioned to rely.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank my advisors Bob Rickert, Shan Anderson, and Professor Monique Balbuena for helping me to fully examine this project's topic and consider the various perspectives and contexts related to its subject matter. I am beyond grateful for the sacrifices they have made in their busy lives to willingly and graciously serve on my thesis committee for the betterment and completion of my undergraduate thesis in fulfillment of the requirements for graduation at the University of Oregon's Clark Honors College. I would also like to thank the faculty and staff of the honors college for supporting me in whatever manner I required since my arrival in the Fall of 2016, and to Miriam Alexis Jordan in particular for her unwavering guidance throughout every step of the process leading toward the submission of my undergraduate thesis. I cannot express to the fullest extend my gratitude for the encouragement provided by my parents, Susan Paradis and Jim Mau, and their assistance throughout my pursuit of higher education both financially and emotionally. Finally, I would like to mention Aodan and Dakoata for sticking with me since our freshman year CHIP class and throughout the entirety of our Clarks Honors College commitment, and Dean, Will, and Owen for providing additional support at home.

Thank you.

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## **Introduction**

### *One Footprint on the Carbon Scale*

The modern era boasts countless technologies emerging in relatively recent times that, given no longer than a few years to a decade, become taken for granted to the extent to which they are ingrained in the basic functions of society and daily life. The internet, for example, has escalated the concept of globalization from a theoretical likelihood to an undisputed truth of existence in the 21st century. Not long ago there were considerable challenges obstructing people's ability to reach each other, share information, and travel from one place to another.

Since its conception, the United States and citizens who inhabit the proud country have held dear to their claim of independence and autonomy, coining the title "Land of the Free". There is no greater symbol of American freedom than the personal automobile, a rite of passage for any individual of legal driving age that represents the coveted notion of being able to "go anywhere and do anything". Personal ownership of an automobile meant the formation of a new standard of living for which infrastructure and imagination had not yet been anticipated or prepared for. Initially, the obstacles present were demanding and costly. To facilitate the driving of personal automobiles, towns and governments across the country needed to make considerable investments to build roads suited for the evolving transportation method, a task which in recent memory was devoted to railroads, an expenditure of no insignificant sum. As roads pathed the way for cars to take American culture by storm, the introduction of the

assembly line and mass production made single driver vehicles, once a luxury commodity, feasible for purchasing by the ordinary household.

The magnitude to which personal ownership of cars has changed the ways people behave and interact with the world cannot be understated. Given the ability to commute, travel leisurely, and live in one location while visiting others for insignificant affairs broadened the scope of possibilities in a single day for every American with access. Along with the liberties that owning a car provides comes demand, leading to a new standard of ownership for most people across all socioeconomic classes. Unprecedented levels of wealth were gained as the automotive market exploded across the country, with several sectors of the expenditures associated with automobiles fostered the growth of many of the leading companies which exist today. To be alive at a time like this was rife with opportunity. Maintaining a car can be costly, or lucrative from a business perspective, and components such as tires do not last forever, so a recurring bill can be expected and understood in part with owning an automotive asset. Considering the disbursements of wealth associated with a vehicular centered lifestyle, fuel stands out as particularly integral to a continued reliance on automotive transportation. Power translates to distance, which cannot be achieved without the means for catalyzing the process by which a car's engine outputs power. Since its invention and lasting to this day, the standard powertrain by which the vast majority of personal automobiles are made to run is and has been the internal combustion engine. The term "combustion" refers to the process by which fuel, in this case gasoline, is continuously ignited to harness the power of its miniature blast while its carbon exhaust is dispelled into the atmosphere. Simply put, cars burn fuel, which in the scope of

hundreds of millions of cars on the road per day for approximately 100 years begins to cause serious consequences when taking in to account the state of carbon in the atmosphere's toll on global climate.

The 21st century has been shadowed relentlessly by the looming presence of a global climate emergency. Once celebrated as an icon of American freedom, the personal automobile's legacy has been devalued as too-good-to-be-true as a result of the indisputable and absolute scientific evidence to suggest the dark side to which most Americans contribute by engaging in the comfortable and familiar vehicular centered lifestyle they enjoy today. Despite coordinated efforts to adopt more sustainable practices in a wide variety of areas where people's goodwill has overcome practicality, personal automotive transportation remains as significant a luxury as it was in its conception, making it a difficult asset to forgo, especially considering the decades of infrastructure and conditioning that have led to the reliance on cars as an essential resource. While this integral problem will return as a foundational point of discussion for the purposes of this examination, there must be an acknowledgment of the heightened push for increased fuel-efficiency in modern cars, a staple of many manufacturers' product lines in response to the growing demand for environmentally responsible and economically preferable automobiles.

In most cases where the environment succeeds, major oil corporations experience financial hardship. This is not to imply the failure of major oil corporations implies correlation with environmental benefits, because fallout from relatively frequent and inevitable oil spills and leaks have severe and tragic repercussions for the planet. These events are consistently and undoubtedly followed by an apologetic and green-



centric media circuit, but it is evident that oil companies have more pressing financial concerns when outside of the global spotlight. As stated by Hiroko Tabuchi of The New York Times in her fully comprehensive exposé piece titled “The Oil Industry's Covert Campaign to Rewrite American Car Emissions Rules”, “A quarter of the world’s oil is used to power cars, and less-thirsty vehicles mean lower gasoline sales” (Tabuchi, nytimes.com). Changing public opinion and governmental restrictions aimed toward slowing the climb of carbon in the earth’s atmosphere has been met by an eager response from oil companies, but perhaps it is not the desired one. Rising gasoline prices are being experienced by drivers, and the oil industry’s strategy will remain solid as long as people’s dependence on fossil fuels remains an essential factor in standard driving habits. For those profiting on the extraction, refinement, and distribution of oil and gasoline, maintaining this dependence is key to dominating the automotive fuel market, and advertising is fundamental to combatting their largest threat, which is the uncertain landscape of public opinion.

With more idyllic alternative fuel sources being integrated into the market with claims to sustainability and clean, emission-free ratings such as the growing popularity and attainability of electric cars, oil companies have turned to abandoning the unseen, unheard approach to make way for campaigns designed to confront consumers directly and build associations with their brand to renewable projects with promises of innovation. As attractive as fueling your car with pond algae sounds, the International Energy Agency, or IEA, reports, “investment by oil and gas companies outside their core business areas has been less than 1% of total capital expenditure” (IEA, iea.com). To an extent, advertising is meant to accomplish a specific job. In a sense, oil

companies are no different than other businesses competing in their respective market, only global warming has entered as a unifying dilemma with profound implications from a universal perspective that transcend a single industry's livelihood. By 2100, it is predicted that temperatures around the world are expected to rise by 2.6 degrees above the average preceding the industrial revolution (Pirani, plutobooks.com). Furthermore, this trend is echoed by the current presidential administration's decision to back out of the Paris Climate Agreement, which aspires for this statistic to remain below 1.5 degrees. The average American would most likely not be surprised to hear of the oil industry's engagement in high profile lobbying and aggressive campaigning resembling propaganda, however, advertising has been tried and proven in its effectiveness against these stacked odds, even to a degree with serious consequences as is the case with preserving the world's reliance on fossil fuels.

### *Thesis Statement*

Facing a global environmental crisis that threatens public opinion on the processes by which gasoline is refined and distributed as the standard automotive fuel for personal automobile use, the oil industry has broken tradition by turning to advertising as a means to maintain fossil fuel dependence in the age of renewable energy.

## **Background**

### *How We Got Here*

The benefit to the individual is clear and indicative of a splendid lifestyle for those fortunate enough to take part in a transportation system based on the single driver vehicle experience. This luxury has become a staple in the livelihood of those living in developed countries around the world and outranks other forms of public transportation by a mile in terms of comfort and ease of access. Since its introduction, the single vehicle driver transportation system has shaped the habits and routines of its users so profoundly that entire countries have designed their infrastructure to be dictated by its conditions and risen to prominence through reaping the rewards it offers. With the United States as its staging ground, in a few short decades personal vehicle ownership and operation became the new gold standard by which the global population aspired to achieve the notion of freedom for which cars began to represent, taking the world by storm. The allure of this new system was potent, and the spread was infectious, “from the 1950s, the US system of car-based transport was copied in Europe. Cities were re-made: roads and parking spaces covered ever greater proportions of their land” (Pirani, [plutobooks.com](http://plutobooks.com)). Approximately half a century later, climate change emerged to rival the notion of this development being the great step forward for which no competing arrangement would challenge. Despite the impending doom for which it warns, its ramifications are yet compared modestly to the inarguable convenience and pervasiveness that single driver transportation has ingrained in people’s expectations. As environmental consciousness has permeated the hopes and desires of people seeking

to do their part in making a difference in response to global warming, this shift has not been entirely effective in creating positive change considering “even after the facts of climate change were acknowledged by governments, car-based transport remained central to urban development” (Pirani, plutobooks.com). Even as public transportation has shifted in its characterization as a last resort to a noble pursuit, the suggestion remains that qualities associated with driving prevail in their amenity and facilitation of travel.

As long as the rest of the population is enjoying the luxury of driving personal automobiles, alternate forms of transportation will be recognized as a significant disadvantage. To the individual, sparing one’s involvement in the single driver vehicle system has great costs, often to the extent that data and evidence to instill the consequences of climate change are outweighed by its burden. It is difficult to place blame on any individual as well, reason being, everyone needs to get to work, the grocery store, and from point A to point B. Although maintaining as low of a carbon footprint as possible is a goal held in good faith by many, the reality of the world as people have come to expect and grown familiar pulls in the opposite direction. While the unfortunate truth can be deduced on its own by simply acknowledging the thick layers of smog engulfing high density traffic centers, evidence suggests that the average American’s contribution to greenhouse gas buildup in the earth’s atmosphere is comprised of 51% exhaust from standard combustion engine equipped cars, followed by 26% to power in-home appliances and 18% to account for in-home heating and cooling (U.S. Department of Energy, fueleconomy.gov). Consumerism’s stake in popular culture is an immense burden on the natural environment, and it is undoubtedly

beneficial to engage in sustainable and waste-reducing practices such as forgoing plastic straws and recycling cans. Progress toward clean energy in the production sector is beginning to take place and is proving to take a positive effect on reducing carbon in the atmosphere, but on the basis of the single largest factor in an individual's carbon footprint, that being driving related emissions, progress is yet to be seen.

“Carbon pollution from the electric power sector has decreased some in recent years as policymakers have focused more on reducing emissions from that sector. However, the data also show that little such progress is being made in the transportation sector. In fact, transportation sector emissions are increasing” (Olivieri, uspirg.org)

As involved as industrialism is noted to be in regards to climate change, and rightly so, greater introspection is required of the general population in examining where individuals can reduce their responsibility through universal change, beginning with the average person's largest polluting behavior.

### *Existing Literature*

On December 13th of 2018, Hiroko Tabuchi of the New York Times published her fully comprehensive article titled “The Oil Industry's Covert Campaign to Rewrite American Car Emissions Rules” aiming to expose the surreptitious pursuit of Marathon Petroleum and the nation's largest oil corporations to dismantle Obama-era carbon emission standards in the transportation sector through sponsored advertisements on Facebook.com. In her own words, Tabuchi writes, “In Congress, on Facebook and in statehouses nationwide, Marathon Petroleum, the country's largest refiner, worked with powerful oil-industry groups and a conservative policy network financed by the billionaire industrialist Charles G. Koch to run a stealth campaign to roll back car emissions standards” (Tabuchi, nytimes.com). From the moment President Trump

gained control of the executive office, oil billionaires and lobbyists identified the weakness as a prime opportunity to negate the bad-for-business carbon emission regulations set in place by the outgoing administration. Tabuchi identifies a disguised industry campaign formed under the moniker “Energy4Us” and backed by oil lobbyists representing corporations such as Exxon Mobil, Chevron, and Phillips 66 (Tabuchi, nytimes.com).



Figure 1: “**Energy4Us Sponsored Post.**” Sponsored Facebook advertisement directing users to submit comments supporting the roll-back of carbon emission regulations.

Similar to other political surveys promoted through social media, these Facebook advertisements target individuals who align with the political ideology of the represented political figure and use specific language to create a social message unrelated to the corporate motivation foundational to the campaign. Without investigative writers such as Tabuchi, covert groups in the same vein as Energy4Us would go largely undetected in their connection to the corporate lobbies that produce them. Note the “Paid for by” consideration required by Facebook adjacent to the text

reading “Sponsored” to inform users that the post is appearing as a paid advertisement (Figure 1 and Figure 2).



Figure 2: “Energy4Us Sponsored Post, 2.” Sponsored Facebook advertisement directing users to sign up for an anti-Obama administration emission regulations newsletter.

There is no mention of the likes of oil billionaire Charles G. Koch, Exxon Mobil, or any other recognizable group with a clearly defined intention to influence public opinion on matters of oil extraction, refinement, gasoline sales, or climate change. Tabuchi’s knowledge, effort, and resources allow for these culprits to be pinpointed for the betterment and education of her article’s readers, however, the goal Energy4Us sets out to accomplish is nevertheless realized through the accounts that interact and send survey results to be cited in the political discourse of Washington D.C.. Policy, whether popular or not, is a stimulant for sweeping change. On the anticipated repercussions, Tabuchi writes, “The Trump plan, if finalized, would increase greenhouse gas emissions in the United States by more than the amount many midsize countries put out in a year

and reverse a major effort by the Obama administration to fight climate change” (Tabuchi, nytimes.com). The major takeaway from this piece in regard to the ramifications of advertising by the oil industry is not only its strength in governing public opinion, but its capability to leverage the policies that dictate public behavior. While advertising is advantageous for its social influence and carries a credible reputation for arousing thoughts and emotions in audiences, mitigating a large-scale tendency breaker such as global warming requires these forces to take on an additional role in shaping the ruling system on an administrative level.

### *The Solution*

Forgetting for a moment the abiding influence of personal wealth and its endless pursuit by the industrial elite in the history of the world, the solution to the issue of climate change is relatively simplistic. As reported by the U.S. Department of Energy, “Each gallon of gasoline you burn creates 20 pounds of GHG. That's roughly 6 to 9 tons of GHG each year for a typical vehicle” (U.S. Department of Energy, fueleconomy.gov). The earth’s atmosphere is an enormous expanse, and 6 to 9 tons of GHG, an abbreviation of the term greenhouse gas, is miniscule in one individual’s personal circumstance within the larger context of the world. The catch is that climate change is not dependent on one person’s commitment to managing their carbon footprint, but the sum of the lot, a colossal number of which engage in the single most individually polluting behavior, the operation of combustion powered cars. While the result is an incredible amount of carbon pollution emitting from roadways, there is hope



for an immense reduction when fuel alternatives reach the mainstream, and therein lies the solution.

### *The Problem*

Climate change in its current state is a problem that cannot be solved overnight, and even if it were the case that carbon emissions could be ceased in an instant, we are still yet to see the totality of the effect it has already instilled on the environment. Arctic researcher and glaciologist Richard Alley writes, “More ocean warming and more glacier melting will occur even if the air temperature stabilizes—just as a winter snowfall takes a while to melt after the weather warms, the glaciers and oceans have not yet come into balance with the modern air temperature” (Alley, p. 32). For the meantime, global warming is here to stay, but for how long and to what degree are factors determined by economic and scientific commitment and social responsibility to our planet, all of which are forces in reach of persuasion by advertising at the hand of corporate oil giants. Although the solution reads as attainable on paper, deeply embedded dependence on fossil fuels is due to more than convenience and accessibility alone.

## **Methodology**

### *Primary Sources*

Structurally central to providing a thorough analysis of the thesis statement will be the specific dissection of corporate oil advertisements respective to each singular example and its associated theme of discussion. Among these inquiries, recognizing unifying concepts and culminating evidence to support the thesis statement is paramount, for example, primary sources will be used as tools to interpret how “Advertising in the last half of the 1990s continued to embrace the industry's two dominant themes: establishing an image and creating distinctions unrelated to the product” (Ad Age, adage.com). A complete collection of the advertisements examined as sources can be found under “List of Figures” with the associated page on which they appear.

### *Secondary Sources*

Framing the introduction and background to the thesis statement’s issue of discussion is complemented by the insights and collaborated thinking afforded by secondary sources. Hiroko Tabuchi’s New York Times piece is a case where this precedent is set, with links to suggest advertising’s inherent role in promoting environmental policy stemming from its review of the social impact it provokes. Analysis of secondary sources is also integral to understanding in full the events of recent history which guide discourse, such as in relation to BP and Exxon Mobil’s catastrophic oil spills with researchers from the National Bureau of Economic Research

writing, “advertising could play a persuasive role that convinces consumers that negative events are accidental and due to “bad luck”. In this sense, advertising changes customer beliefs about firm behavior and acts as insurance” (Barrage, p. 8). Referencing these sources is rooted in the principle that adherence to existing literature is foundational to building upon shared knowledge.

## **Part 1: Repairing the Company Image**

### *Deepwater Horizon Disaster*

On April 20th, 2010, British Petroleum's Deepwater Horizon oil rig exploded in the Gulf of Mexico and triggered the most environmentally disastrous marine oil spill in the history of the industrialized world. In terms of volume, "scientific experts estimated that 205.8 million gallons of oil had leaked before containment," and in searching for an explanation to reveal fault in the calamity, "subsequent investigations found that the cause of the spill was attributable to active management decisions on behalf of BP" (Barrage, p. 8). Unfolding on a global scale, BP experienced critical backlash in the media and became a mainstream talking point of environmental discourse, which continued long after the events at Deepwater Horizon began to unfold. Unlike other corporate scandals that arise and elicit strong reactions before disappearing as fast as they crop up, the staying power of this controversy mirrored the staying power of its ecological consequences, which sullied the waters, shores, and marine life of the Gulf of Mexico for long after the story first broke. Seemingly irreversible damage to BP's corporate image resulted from the disaster, as well as the government enforced burden of resolving the fallout financially and through a massive rehabilitation effort. Unfortunately for BP, cleaning up their own mess does not relieve them of their marred public relations or earn them forgiveness in the media. Instead, repairing their badly tarnished reputation has been left to the persuasive virtue of advertising, which initially came in the form of their first post-Deepwater Horizon campaign titled "we see possibilities everywhere". Despite being mocked by environmentalists and ridiculed on

social platforms by a sector of the public that remains in opposition to the company since the spill, BP's campaign nevertheless reported signs of effectiveness and promised progress toward restoring the brand's image.

“During the decade preceding the spill, BP embarked on a large green marketing campaign, and we find that greater exposure to this advertising significantly dampened the negative impacts on retail station prices. We also find suggestive evidence that past advertising cushioned BP from longer-run negative impacts on gasoline market share”  
(Barrage, p. 28)

Past advertising refers to BP's previous campaign and rebranding, which took place nearly a decade preceding the incident at Deepwater Horizon, and which cast a deeply ironic light on the tragedy in the gulf.

### *Rebranding*

In July of 2001, British Petroleum initiated their global rebranding and advertising initiative inspirationally labelled “beyond petroleum” to the tune of a \$200 million investment in the effort (Landman, prwatch.org). As one of the first campaigns to inspire coining of the term “greenwashing”, the convention of highlighting sustainable and environmentally conscience business practices to evade or distract from less favorable dealings, BP began with redesigning their logo to its current state shown in (Figure 3).



Figure 3: **“British Petroleum to BP Rebrand.”** BP’s redesigned logo to coincide with a larger rebranding from “British Petroleum” to a shortened “BP”.

Largely resembling a mix between a blooming flower and shining sun, British Petroleum’s abbreviated rebranding to the acronym “BP” was indicative of the “beyond petroleum” campaign’s endeavor to create an impression of the brand with clean, renewable energy and environmental responsibility. The bold, shield-like design was deemed less suitable for the mission this rebranding effort sought to accomplish and was retired in favor of the vibrant color palette and earthly composition of the new logo, along with a distinctly lowercase and minimalist “bp” instead of the stylized and imposing “BP” of the former. By shortening “British Petroleum” to the current “BP”, the campaign accomplished its goal of expanding the brand’s associations to infrastructure in the energy sector outside the extraction, refinement, and distribution of solely gasoline, which is apt for the slogan “beyond petroleum”.

### *Leaving the Past Behind*

Following Deepwater Horizon, BP’s subsequent global advertising campaign “we see possibilities everywhere” was met with the tremendous obstacle of lobbying for public forgiveness, which began with putting a human face on the corporate entity **(Figure 4)**.



Figure 4: **“Tony Hayward’s Apology.”** CEO Tony Hayward appears on a BP’s first television commercial since Deepwater Horizon to promote the cleanup initiative.

Among the relentless media coverage of the gulf spill’s aftermath came CEO of BP Tony Hayward’s personal account of the willful service BP intended to provide in a commitment to defend the natural environment from further damage, compensate those affected, and protect against future debacles. Although paying for additional television space that reminds viewers of the tragedy may appear counter-intuitive, given the already exhaustive reporting on the incident, BP’s commercial served to broadcast a narrative under their control. Beside matters of sincerity, Tony Hayward’s apology assigns a glimpse of humanity to the corporate identity of BP and positions the rehabilitation efforts as a measure of good faith. Footage from this television commercial paints the cleanup initiative as widely successful in contradiction to the state of the effort as covered in the media, and Hayward phrases the assumption of responsibility on behalf of BP as unprovoked by the imposed governmental mandates that required it.

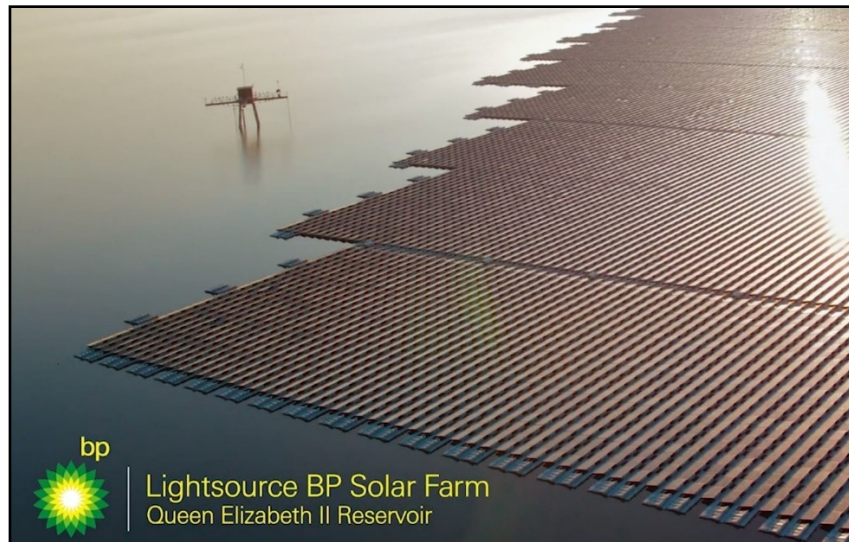


Figure 5: **“BP Solar Farm TV Ad.”** Television commercial showcasing the formerly Lightsource owned solar farm on Queen Elizabeth II reservoir.

Years after the scrapped foray into solar energy that took place in part with the “beyond petroleum” campaign at the turn of the millennium with BP’s acquisition of Solarex, BP once again flaunts their pledge to lead the industry in alternative energy by acquiring Lightsource for \$200 million (Bouso, reuters.com). Before long, the newly attained solar farm on Queen Elizabeth II reservoir became the star of a BP television commercial citing the operation’s capacity to power the neighboring water-treatment plant entirely with renewable energy. Lightsource’s work is an incredible display of sustainable power’s engineering potential, which BP captures and associates with their brand through its acquisition. The solar energy narrative is primed for the image this campaign aims to produce, while the \$200 million dollar investment amounts to pennies compared to those made in the fossil fuel sector such as BP’s \$26.5 billion acquisition of ARCO made without an accompanying TV commercial (Landman, prwatch.org).





Figure 6: “BP Family TV Ad.” Television Commercial depicting a family consuming energy in various mediums while parents practice conservation.

According to a BP television commercial, if there is one thing about family life that parents in every household can relate to, it is that kids are always messing with the thermostat and leaving on their electronics. This execution of the “we see possibilities everywhere” campaign targets families by incorporating elements dear to parenthood that brand BP as the energy solution for the environmentally conscience household. The overall theme at play deals with prospects of an innovative future in energy and positions BP as leading in these advancements. The closing shot features a joyful child adjacent to the BP logo, which arouses a likeness to the motif of looking forward to the future generation wherein BP is reliable for circulating the energy of tomorrow. The prevailing message of this advertisement is encompassed by the slogan “keep advancing”, which appears in the closing shot as seen in (Figure 6) alongside the aforementioned kid.

The concept behind “keep advancing” is central to the mission which BP’s post-Deepwater Horizon crisis campaign was devised to carry out, the ushering in of a new

era of the company's image that the brand desperately sought following the devastating blow brought about by the loss of trust inherent in being accountable for an environmental catastrophe. Although BP's recovery has not been made in its entirety relative to the state of public opinion before compared to after the losses of 2010, in time and through advertising, the brand has regained an image of trustworthiness and responsibility that may not warrant the blessing of forgiveness, but suffices to offer the customer experience of not receiving guilt-ridden judgement in line at the local BP gas station. One significant takeaway from the trials and tribulations characterizing BP's record in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the gravity of maintaining a reputable image in the market of gasoline sales and the scope of advertising in repairing costly damages associated with extracting fossil fuels considering the ever-growing social adherence to environmental conservation.

## Part 2: Advertising Continued

### *Exxon Mobil in the Spotlight*

Before climate change threatened to disrupt the fossil fuel industry's grip on the popular automotive fuel market, Exxon Mobil suffered a similar public relations fiasco to the likes of BP stemming from a March 1989 collision between the Exxon Valdez oil tanker and a rogue iceberg in Alaska's Prince William Sound. The accident, which findings have attributed to irregular patterns of ice movement induced by rapid melting caused by global warming, created a paradoxical predicament for Exxon Mobil in that the disturbance to their shipping lanes was created by the same environmental consequence that the company both had a hand in aggravating while also fighting for policy to dismiss its legitimacy.

“For the two decades following the Exxon Valdez disaster, the company worked quietly to safeguard its operations and infrastructure against steadily rising sea levels and thawing permafrost. Yet in public, it vociferously fought regulations and policies that would have limited fossil fuel emissions while publicly questioning the science behind climate change” (Grandoni, latimes.com)

Within either route Exxon Mobil sought to pursue, the company was bound to contradict itself in one way or another, with striking parallels to the gulf spill yet to occur two decades in the future, growing awareness of carbon pollution rising from people's individual driving habits caused Exxon Mobil to resort to a global advertising offensive given “the oil company's market share had yet to return to preaccident levels by the turn of the century” (Ad Age, adage.com)



Figure 7: **“Exxon Mobil Fights Malaria.”** An Exxon Mobil advertisement raises awareness for World Malaria Day to passersby in New York’s JFK airport.

As the world tuned in to follow the aftermath of BP’s record-setting oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, Exxon Mobil was not afforded the leisure of being able to slink back from public scrutiny now that their 1989 Valdez mishap had been outdone by another catastrophe of even greater proportions. Instead, the opposite became true, with Deepwater Horizon serving as a reminder to the tragic events of Exxon Mobil’s regrettable past. Fortunately for Exxon Mobil, the company had recently dabbled in important charity work to help save lives of people affected by the deadly mosquito-borne disease malaria in Africa, and now recognized the critical media attention as an opportunity to promote the effort as well as themselves.

“Exxon Mobil went forward with its efforts to advertise its commitment to fight malaria around the world on April 21, despite the explosion and fire on the drilling rig Deepwater Horizon the day before. This effort by the company, with its stock trading near its 52-week low, includes prominent ads in New York City’s John F. Kennedy International Airport” (Taylor, forbes.com)



Figure 8: **“Exxon Mobil Growing Fuel TV Ad.”** Television commercial promoting Exxon Mobil’s biofuel program and pond algae farm.

Much like harnessing solar power and fighting malaria, developing biofuel from the fat molecules of genetically altered pond algae is a noble and esteemed accomplishment made possible by brilliant engineers and professionals who commit their life’s work to exploring discoveries that will make the world a better place. To Exxon Mobil, this is a fitting association to incorporate in their “unexpected energy” campaign, however, the sincerity of its message is clouded by the correlation between the company’s supposed interest in renewable energy and its dwindling reputation in the wake of lawsuits claiming the company’s knowledge of environmental risks following the Valdez spill. A recurring theme in this vein of promotional tactics is the continuously referred to “future”, where change is quantified as potential, such as the algae project’s goal of reaching 10,000 barrels a day of production in 7 years, a highly publicized figure considering the many assumptions in place which precede the actual realization of this plan in practice. Furthermore, and once again under the assumption that the program will continue to receive the support it requires to achieve the 10,000 barrel milestone,

this total is overshadowed exponentially by the 11,000,000 barrels of crude oil generated daily by the industry in the United States alone (Peters, fastcompany.com). Echoing BP's strategy in acquiring Lightsource to create green-centric promotional material prominently featuring the company's logo, Exxon Mobil's prevailing benefit will be the increased traffic in their gas stations as opposed to the uncertain prospect of producing an inconsequential amount of biofuel in a hopeful seven years.

### *"Greenwashing" Banned*

Advertising is a form of communication harboring the potential to profoundly impact and manipulate people's opinions and associations with brands and, when done effectively, can have a lasting influence on people's behaviors and willingness to consume one commodity or another. Given this power, matters of ethics can become a primary concern in preserving advertising's responsibility and honesty to consumers. As mentioned before, "greenwashing" has become a predominant malfeasance within advertising materials common among the world's largest oil companies. The United Kingdom based watchdog organization known as the Advertising Standards Authority, or ASA, is a self-regulatory group of industry professionals identifying this issue as unacceptable in numerous advertisements, two of which belong to Shell Global, and one of which appears in (Figure 9) (Chazan, wsj.com).



Figure 9: “Shell Global Rejected Print Ad.” Print ad by Shell Global labeled as “greenwashing” and pulled from publications following intervention by ASA.

Shell Global promises to “invest today’s profits in tomorrow’s solutions” in a printed advertisement laden with shell illustrations and printed on pseudo-recycled paper which encompass the piece’s distinctly green look and message. Claiming to prioritize an environmentally-safe business agenda by reequipping their Port Arthur refinery to cut carbon emissions by 10% of the pre-renovation volume, Shell Global fails to acknowledge the project’s less favorable developments wherein an overall increase of capacity led the facility to become an outright larger source of pollution than it had been before. As stated by an ASA representative, “although emissions might be reduced on a per barrel basis, the increased production of the refinery by 325,000 barrels per day would increase the total overall emissions from the Port Arthur refinery” (Marrs, [campaignlive.co.uk](http://campaignlive.co.uk)).



Figure 10: “Saudi Aramco Rejected Print Ad.” Print ad by Saudi Aramco pulled from The Economist after complaints reach ASA.

Saudi Aramco is the single largest oil company in the world, holding a greater market share than BP, Exxon Mobil, and Shell Global. Even with such an illustrious title, their promotional materials are not exempt from the ASA’s standards for responsible advertising. With an overarching sense of “greenwashing” reminiscent of campaigns by the company’s competitors, Saudi Aramco takes the approach another step further by seemingly challenging these opponents through its headline “Real sustainability answers before it’s asked” and its tagline “This is real energy. This is Aramco.”, a tactic unbecoming of advertising strategy in an industry sharing the common goal of subverting climate change discourse. After receiving over 60 complaints regarding the advertisement’s deceitfulness and poor definition of the term sustainability and seeing as though Saudi Aramco’s business model revolves around the principal function of extracting, refining, and distributing fossil fuels, The Economist, the publication which originally printed the advertisement, released the statement, “Advertising is not editorial content and does not imply any endorsement on our part. In the case of this particular



ad, it was put on hold at the request of the client”, and pulled the piece from its magazines (Taylor, theguardian.com).

Without checking advertising for the spread of misleading information, instances can occur such as the oil industry’s campaign to preserve the popular dependence on fossil fuels and dictate public opinion on fossil fuel energy’s relationship to climate change. Fortunately, some of the more egregious attempts to convey “greenwashing” have been shut down by the likes of the ASA and vocal environmentalists, but meanwhile the executions have evolved to feature investments in legitimate renewable energy, which may not accurately depict the day-to-day operations at BP or Exxon Mobil in a holistic sense, but establish irrefutable ties to environmentally responsible advancements with a lasting impression on consumers.

## **Part 3: In Conclusion**

### *Counterarguments*

As much as advertising strategy in the oil industry has worked to align the fuel sector with overtones of sustainability and environmental consciousness, consumers have been widely informed of the relationship between exercising the use of fossil fuels and the climate altering carbon pollution in our atmosphere, leading to a burgeoning intention by automakers to supply highly desired fuel efficiency in mass market vehicles of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The steadily increasing number of sensible cars in traffic has successfully exacted a toll on the volume of gasoline being sold, however, the oil industry's whopping \$395 billion market value still grows despite a 33% decline in sales from 2006-2011 thanks to the rising gas prices that caused revenue to spike by 21.4% in the year following the Deepwater Horizon spill (Bird, [mintel.com](#)). With the emergence of electric vehicles seemingly being the most significant threat on crude oil dependence, the industry has manufactured a somewhat hypocritical yet honest response to the clean energy intention, with "ExxonMobil CEO Darren Woods recently [questioning] the point of EVs that are powered by coal" (Blanco, [caranddriver.com](#)). Further counterarguments to the prospect of eliminating fossil fuel reliance on the consumer's side rise from areas outside of an individual's control of their personal transportation methods and habits, such as the carbon expenditure of driving related infrastructure and processes by which oil is extracted.

"Even leading renewables nations have not worked out how to make the leap from producing a fifth or a quarter of electricity from wind and solar to figures higher than 50%. And even if oil consumption really falls, the

manufacture of cars and car-based urban infrastructure exacts a huge toll in fuel terms” (Pirani, plutobooks.com)

Although consumers now have a litany of choices in automobiles offered with varying degrees of fuel efficiency with profound impacts on the environmental friendliness of individual driving habits, “you cannot individually opt for building standards that reduce the use of fuel-intensive materials and require near-zero-energy buildings that have long been technologically feasible” (Pirani, plutobooks.com). While the belief that pollution in the production sector virtually cancels out reducing behaviors on behalf of the consumer may be grounded in some truth, these concerns are dangerously overstated when taking in to account the aforementioned data that shows the average personal polluting volume is comprised by over half in driving related emissions.

Another argument founded outside of the consumer’s sphere of influence is the yet to be capitalized on venture of reducing environmental damages brought about by the fundamental oil extraction process, with researchers from the International Energy Agency reporting that “15% of global energy-related GHG emissions come from the process of getting oil and gas out of the ground and to consumers. Reducing methane leaks to the atmosphere is the single most important and cost-effective way for the industry to bring down these emissions” (IEA, iea.com). In terms of cost-effectiveness, the prospect of replacing the standard combustion engine comes in part with large associated expenditures to the consumer, such as the fact that purchasing an electric vehicle is seen as unfeasible to many in less than ideal financial situations. The attainability of reducing carbon emissions from improving the drilling process by which oil is acquired is an initiative the world should come to expect given the supposed commitment to environmental protection boasted by the oil industry’s advertising

effort. Rather than positioning this argument as oppositional to the mission of minimizing net pollution on the opposite side of the market, the two would be better suited to go hand in hand in recognizing the oil industry's clear adherence to profitability over sustainability within its promotional effort to maintain fossil fuel dependence in a time when emission reform is vital.

### *Conclusion*

At its current rate, carbon pollution in the earth's atmosphere is set to exact a devastating rise in global temperatures which threatens to significantly reduce ice sheets in Greenland and Antarctica with destructive repercussions for the world's natural environment. Efforts to reduce carbon emissions and promote sustainability have become central to the social initiative headed by individuals seeking to do their part in averting these consequences, however, reliance on the world's single driver based transportation system of old has inadvertently led to the operation of gasoline fueled automobiles becoming the single largest polluting factor of carbon emitting behaviors. In an era when oil companies have been exposed as the profiteers of this global dilemma, the industry has responded by employing advertising as a tool to reimagine their involvement as primarily concerned with advancing renewable energy, despite their covert dedication to maintaining fossil fuel dependence in a sector direly in need of public opposition to the lucrative and harmful business practices which enable climate change at its root cause.

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