

Subvert - A podcast by Corporate Accountability

Title Big Oil's Big Tobacco moment

Description

In this episode, Lena interviews Geoffrey Supran. He's one of the researchers who brought to light that ExxonMobil and others knew about the climate impacts of fossil fuel extraction and covered it up. We discuss the implications of today's Big Oil [hearings](#).

Show Notes

[Check out our recent opinion piece](#) on the Big Oil hearings, co-authored by Geoffrey Supran and Corporate Accountability's Patti Lynn.

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Transcript

Lena: Hello and welcome to another day of the climate crisis, brought to you in no small part by the fossil fuel industry, knowing that its business practices would lead to the warming of the earth and the destabilization of ecosystems, and then covering that up.

You're listening to Subvert. I'm Lena Greenberg, your host, and I use they/them pronouns.

A few days ago, I had the pleasure of interviewing Geoffrey Supran. I'll let him introduce himself, but in short, he's one of the researchers who brought to light that ExxonMobil and others knew about the climate impacts of fossil fuel extraction and covered that knowledge up. Instead, leading a massive disinformation campaign to deceive the public.

I wanted to talk to him this week because today, October 28th, CEOs of ExxonMobil, Chevron, BP, and Shell will be in Congress to testify at a hearing on their history of deceiving the public about fossil fuels and climate change. Without further ado, here's my conversation with Geoffrey:

Geoffrey: My name is Geoffrey Supran, I'm a research fellow at Harvard University, where I study the history of climate propaganda by fossil fuel interests. That's it in a nutshell, my background's actually physics and renewable energy engineering.

So, my research in this area, really, I tried to bring quite quantitative and empirical techniques to a discipline that's traditionally been dominated by more qualitative and journalistic approaches. But it takes a village, and so that's my little bit of the village.

Lena: Wonderful. Well, the village is better for having you in it.

This week we're gonna see the CEOs of ExxonMobil, Chevron, BP America, and Shell in Congress. So, in so many words, these corporations are being called to answer for decades of misleading the public about what happens when fossil fuels are extracted and burned.

I'm wondering if you can give folks some context on why this is important given, you know, there's this kind of focus on the disinformation itself, more so even than the activities. Paint us a picture of what those CEOs did to land themselves in Congress.

Geoffrey: Sure. Research by scholars and investigative journalists, including to some extent myself, have unearthed a historical record of oil industry subterfuge that frankly has become incontrovertible. The only question really is whether they'll be held accountable for it. And the reason this is such a big historical moment is because it very much follows parallels within congressional investigations into the tobacco industry. As to you know, a history of malfeasance and potential, you know, collusion between these companies in an effort to mislead the public and ultimately delay action in a way that would interfere with their business operations.

We've uncovered a whole bunch of skeletons in the closet of Big Oil. But frankly, everything we know is actually based on a few hundred key documents uncovered by researchers in historical archives and so on. Already with those documents we have uncovered a web of what we call a climate denial machine, basically a labyrinth of these fossil fuel companies, their trade associations, think tanks, PR firms, and so on all feeding money and people into an echo chamber of climate denying media and blogs and politicians.

And, it's really those machinations over the last few decades have confused the public and policymakers in a way that has undermined action on this crisis, such that we now find ourselves in this point where literally the collapsing climate is visible around us. But, you know, that's where congressional authority to demand documents comes in and yeah, it's what makes this such a big historical moment: the possibility of exposing thousands and I presume ultimately millions of documents just like was done before with the tobacco industry.

And that's actually part of the point of congressional oversight, like Henry Waxman has written before about how it's not all about the facts and figures of the investigation itself, but it's about building a public record and also just providing public and media momentum that can then ultimately inform and support litigation and other forms of accountability.

Lena: Yeah, thanks for that context. And, as we've discussed a bit, Corporate Accountability has been around for a while in the tobacco control world. We were at the initial negotiations of the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control. So, one thing I'm thinking about is, those tobacco hearings in the 90s

that you just mentioned, kind of set the scene for the court of public opinion, really being done with Big Tobacco's lies.

And, that kind of, I think, made it more possible for on the global stage policymakers and protectors of public health to say: hey, Big Tobacco, you can't write policy for us, that doesn't work. I'm wondering what you're thinking about, given the timing of these hearings, of these executives in just a couple of days to go till the Conference of the Parties in Glasgow.

Geoffrey: Yeah I mean, it's certainly all coming to a head and at this very moment, at the federal level, a budget is, is trying to be worked through that would have a meaningful level of climate action built into it. And, we essentially have one Congressman, you know, sort of who's become the linchpin and really the impediment to making this thing move through.

Congressman Manchin to be clear, as the recent sting operation of an Exxon lobbyist, revealed just a few months ago. That lobbyist described Congressman Manchin as, I think, a kingmaker. You know, like he said that we, Exxon, meet with him every week. You know, huge fossil fuel interests, personal interests. He's massively conflicted when it comes to passing climate legislation that would threaten that industry.

This moment we're in where we've got this congressional hearing really shining a spotlight on the very processes of disinformation and lobbying by Big Oil, and Big Fossil in general, that, you know, are manifest in this real time political battle. Yeah, so it's gonna be a big week.

Lena: So wild too, to see Big Oil doing the same thing as Big Tobacco has done with this kind of blame on people. You know, telling us to recycle, like those corporations are not knowing and hiding the evidence of what happens when you extract and burn fossil fuels. Big Tobacco is going really hard on how vaping is going to save people from smoking. Even though there's plenty of research to show that it has the same deadly impacts of traditional cigarettes. So, these corporations are really showing their shared playbook. We have talked a bit about the oil and tobacco overlap, but I'm curious if there's anything else on your mind about that.

Geoffrey: Yeah, our research and others has revealed deep parallels in everything from the rhetoric to the overall strategies to frankly, the infrastructure and personnel, deployed by variously the tobacco and fossil fuel industries. Our research has also begun to identify patterns in the rhetorical defense strategies that they seem to be deploying in response to both public scrutiny and legal investigations. So, I think we can anticipate seeing some of those tactics on show on Thursday.

You know, on the flip side, the slightly more positive side, I think, you know, it's worth making very explicit that the history of tobacco investigations really does establish precedent for Congress to investigate these kinds of industry networks and hold them accountable. And yeah, I think the question is, you know, are policymakers going to be able to kind of really see through the smoke screens put up by

all the talking points and bring it back to basics of what did this industry know, versus what did they say and what did they do. Our research and others has shown clear discrepancies between those things. And I think, you know, this hearing will be most successful if they can highlight those dichotomies.

But yeah, it remains to be seen. There was, there have been a couple of very initial congressional hearings regarding climate denial in the fossil fuel industry, a year or two ago that I, you know, I was at and, I think that they were very powerful illustrations of how just in the space of a few hours, you can introduce not only thousands of pages of evidence into the congressional record. But, through the power of masterful questioning, you can translate this dry historical data into, you know, kind of viral TV moments.

Lena: Yeah, absolutely. The way you're talking about this architecture of deception, you know, not just the corporations in their PR operations, but the sort of network of entities that deliver those messages is making me want to bring us back to Representative Khanna's kind of initial questions.

So, he's been leading the charge on these hearings. And he said, you know, what we want to see coming out of these hearings is that these corporations stop lying. And so, my next question for you is: what is left for Big Oil, Big Fossils, these corporations that have really maintained a public image for the last many decades based on this huge PR machine and this architecture of deception. Is there anything left for them if they stop lying?

Geoffrey: Yeah, I mean, you and I have discussed this a little bit, there is this question as to whether they choose to admit to their past lies and therefore potentially expose themselves more to legal investigations. Or, if they double down and lie about those past lies, which was frankly the beginning of the undoing of the tobacco industry.

For example, ExxonMobil's attacks on my and Naomi Oreskes' research about their history of climate denial and delay. I've talked about before, how they are now, frankly misleading the public about their history of misleading the public.

Lena: Right.

Geoffrey: And I, you know, I do gauge that they surely have learned some of the lessons from past scrutiny on the tobacco industry.

And, they are now operating with a sophistication of propaganda that wasn't the case even a couple of decades ago. So, I think that they will be well-trained and well-versed in how to answer all the predictable questions. But, yeah, I do think that, whether it's in this hearing or another hearing, or in a court of law down the road, it seems almost inevitable that eventually they're going to get caught up in their own web of denial.

You know, ultimately, I like to think the truth comes out. And, the only question really is whether it comes out quickly enough to have a meaningful impact on, as ultimately: these companies' social license to operate, their ability to influence politics and policy, and the way they're perceived in the public eye. And therefore the role that they are, or are not permitted to play in shaping the 21st century narratives of this crisis and their role or not in it.

Lena: By the time this is airing, we've got some research coming out that really exposes how despite some nice news coverage about how the fossil fuel industry will be sidelined at COP26, that in fact, polluters like BP and Shell and Microsoft will all have access to COP26 where they will be pushing a net-zero narrative, which our research shows is a really great way to say: oh, you know, who cares that we have, have done all of this horrible stuff in the past, we have a solution. Which, again, mirrors Big Tobacco: presenting itself as a solution to a problem that it knowingly caused.

So, I think, I also, for my own sanity, have to believe that eventually the truth will come out about this, and we are seeing so much research and so much discussion about how the fossil fuel industry can't play a role in climate policy and actually yields climate policy that protects people and the planet. But yes, we, I think we have no choice, but to hope that it comes out soon enough.

Geoffrey: Yeah. Yeah, I mean, to throw a somewhat more, to throw some realism on the whole thing. You know, there is the reality that this is an important moment in the sense that it's somewhat of a test for the capacity of political bodies such as Congress to effectively hold fossil fuel interests accountable.

And, the extent to which the lawmakers are able to see through or work around all the talking points that the CEOs almost inevitably will throw up. If it doesn't go well, not to throw cold water on the whole thing, but, you know, I think it would establish a sort of, you know, it would, it would be a negative precedent towards the capacity of these forums to make political progress. And so, that does really sort of pile the pressure on, in a way. Like there is a significance to: does this specific event incentivize or discourage, you know, further scrutiny down the road?

Lena: Yeah. Thursday's going to be an exciting day. I'm wondering if there's anything else on your mind about the hearings, given that they're so directly in conversation with the work that you've been doing for quite a while. If there are any other thoughts that you have?

Geoffrey: I think only that the American public deserve to know the truth and, and see the receipts of how they have been denied their right to accurate information for decades. That has locked us in, to some extent, to this heated future. And that has already frankly, led to, you know, to deaths, to lost livelihoods and injustices of a crumbling climate. So, I think this is a big moment for, you know, for accountability on climate, for beginning to address some of those political imbalances. But I really just, I do think this is just the beginning rather than the end.

It will be interesting also, because the document asks from Congress, right, are for documents from 2015 to present. And so, that makes it interesting as to whether the focus will primarily be on that time period or the earlier time, you know, the earlier time period, or both, who knows. But yeah, so, more questions and answers, I'm afraid.

Lena: Absolutely. Awesome. I actually—I have a personal question, if you don't mind. I got interested in the kind of detective work of how the fossil fuel industry knew about this harm that its business practices would cause, and then covering that up, in no small part because of you. And, I'm wondering how you got into this research, especially given your background in physics.

Geoffrey: Yeah. So it was about halfway through grad school, so about late 2012, early 2013, that the fossil fuel divestment movement was just, sort of, beginning. And a lab mate of mine at MIT asked me if I wanted to co-start an MIT divestment campaign. And my response was: what's divestment? And so, you know, because the weird reality is that you can be doing a PhD in climate science or renewable energy, you know, at a top university. And frankly, they just don't teach you a lot of the basics like—

Lena: Woah.

Geoffrey: Yeah, no, for real, I had, no, I had no idea, and this applied to my climate science friends too. No idea as to how urgent the crisis was, how massive and deadly its impacts would be, genuinely, we don't get taught it. I think—

Lena: That's wild!

Geoffrey: Yeah. I mean, perhaps now that's changing because, part of the kind of impact of grassroots movements and better news coverage and all that has been that there's this added sense of urgency that I think eventually has filtered down into some syllabi and things like that, hopefully.

But no, I began by going home and, and doing what any scientist would do, which is like starting to read the literature. And, I learned about this idea of a carbon budget, the idea of unburnable fossil fuels. Bill McKibben's Rolling Stone article was very eye opening to me. And I basically came to this gradual realization that: I'm working on these, like potential technologies that might be useful 20, 30, 40 years down the road. But firstly, we don't have that much time. And secondly, we already have these technologies invented in like, the 60s, that have the capacity to address most of this issue already. If it weren't for, you know, the, directly the political machinations of, especially fossil fuel interests, and sort of indirectly the economic realities of, you know, for example, like imbalanced subsidies to fossil fuels versus renewables and things like that.

Lena: For sure.

Geoffrey: And, it struck me as I began to learn about the history of climate denial, which I had no idea about, that this history of anti-science, anti-policy behavior might actually really resonate with an MIT community that really values scientific integrity above all else. And so I read Naomi's book, Merchants of Doubt, and then at that moment, she happened to be just moving to Harvard, as a professor, from UCSD.

And so I just went down the road, told her about this divestment movement, which I think she also wasn't aware of at the time, and sort of kind of tagged her into the whole thing. And I think, together we started getting more involved in that. And also talking more about the historical side of this.

And I think we just kind of clicked and realized that we enjoy working together. Her background is in geology, so she herself has a scientific background. And yeah, and then in 2015, InsideClimateNews and LA times published all their Exxon documents and that really presented itself as a special opportunity to kind of bring some of my analytical skills, because it, first and foremost, it required reading all of these publications, scientific documents.

So yeah, we went on from there, spent the next year and a half doing that work and kind of gradually retrained myself in these tools, but, and still am, like, I'm trying to really, as I said, bring these more computational techniques to bear on this subject. Which is not something that's really been done very much because most people come from the historical or journalistic side of things.

Yeah, so that's that. So it really I'm like, living breathing proof of one of the reasons why divestment and grassroots movements are so important. Because I wouldn't be here doing any of this work if it weren't for that sort of wake-up call, at both an intellectual, but also a moral level.

Lena: That's really special. Thank you for sharing that.

Geoffrey: Yeah, thanks. Thanks for having me.

Lena: Thanks for listening to Subvert. If you're ready to see members of Congress finally hold the fossil fuel industry to account for its past and present harms, you can find a link to take action with us in our show notes at corporateaccountability.org/subvert.

Thanks so much to Geoffrey Supran for chatting with me about these historic hearings.

This episode was written by me, Lena Greenberg, Eric Johnson, and I co-produced the show. And Eric wrote our music.