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Answers to Representative Porter, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
Examining the Role of PR Firms in Preventing Action on Climate Change
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1. **The groups publicly registered as opposing Proposition 112 reported spending $31 million against the Colorado ballot measure. $26 million of that money came from just one front group—Protect Colorado—which was created and funded by Anadarko Petroleum and Noble Energy. As a PR professional, what could a client get with such a quantity of money? What activities could it procure?**

   A budget of $31 million for a single market campaign is quite extensive and buys a client the ability to elevate its interests far above community voices. Typically, such a budget would result in highly produced television advertisements amplified by large national and local media buys, and supplemented by social content, sponsored content, newspaper op-eds, events, direct mail, outreach to journalists in order to influence future stories, and more. While lobbying is not a standard public relations activity, a political PR firm could leverage those resources to influence state legislators and tilt the public narrative toward the interests of its client through third-party mobilization efforts.

   In the case of Protect Colorado, television advertisements had a lower production quality, meaning they were likely less expensive to produce than the higher calibre creative work we typically see produced for corporate or brand clients spending at this level. However, agency fees for strategic messaging and campaign execution – including the recruitment and management of third-party individuals and groups, as well as payments to those third parties – would be major line items in the budget.

2. **How would you specifically define the terms "greenwashing," "misinformation," "disinformation," and any other key terms relating to the subject of this hearing?**

Greenwashing, misinformation, and disinformation are closely related terms, yet there are key distinguishing factors that set them apart, particularly in the context of fossil fuel industry communications.

Greenwashing refers to messaging that produces false positive perceptions of a company's or industry's environmental performance. The hallmarks of greenwashing include a significant gap between words and actions – or green claims versus green investments and business practices – as well as the omission of facts related to the risks of fossil fuel products.

For example, 65 percent of Exxon's public messaging contains a green claim, while just 8 percent of its capital expenditures are devoted to low-carbon activities. Similarly, 49 percent of Chevron's public messaging contains a green claim, while only 5 percent of its capital expenditures are devoted to low-carbon activities.[1] Neither Exxon's nor Chevron's advertisements disclose the fact that the burning of fossil fuels is the primary cause of climate change, and both companies have been criticized by shareholders for failing to fully disclose methane emissions.[2]

The functional role of greenwashing is to divert attention from the questionable environmental records of fossil fuel companies. The practice is widespread as 60 percent of oil supermajor public communications are found to contain a green claim.[3]

Misinformation refers to false information that contradicts climate science, but that is not necessarily intentionally spread in order to mislead the public. Often, misinformation originates from individuals or groups that may be predisposed to certain cognitive biases, but that are not paid or incentivized to spread such false information by an industry entity.

On the other hand, disinformation is false information that both contradicts climate science, and is intentionally spread in order to mislead people for profit or political gain. Disinformation often originates directly from fossil fuel industry groups, or from individuals or organizations that are

[1] InfluenceMap, "Big Oil's Real Agenda on Climate Change," September 2022: 7–9, https://influencemap.org/report/Big-Oil-s-Agenda-on-Climate-Change-2022-19585.
[2] Ceres, "Chevron's investors call for improved methane disclosures in a near-unanimous vote," May 25, 2022, https://www.ceres.org/news-center/press-releases/chevrons-investors-call-improved-methane-disclosures-near-unanimous-vote
[3] InfluenceMap.

funded by fossil fuel interests. It includes distinct messaging and tactical themes, several of which were discussed during the September 14th hearing.

From a messaging perspective, disinformation includes both climate denial rhetoric – such as the false notion that the science of climate change is "still uncertain" – as well as climate delay rhetoric – such as the false notions that individual consumers rather than polluting corporations are responsible for climate action, or that fossil fuels are a "climate solution."

From a tactical perspective, disinformation also includes some of the activities described in my written testimony as well as in the House Natural Resources Committee Staff Hearing Report's references to third-party mobilization and delegitimization of the opposition strategies. The hiring of fake protesters, the use of proxy individuals or astroturf groups that fabricate community support for a corporate position, and the intimidation, harassment or surveillance of local community members are clear examples of disinformation tactics. Not only are false narratives effectively spread via these tactics, but the funding sources behind them are deliberately concealed.

The purpose of fossil fuel industry-funded disinformation is to suppress the truth, manipulate public opinion, foster division, and obstruct climate action. As Dr. Melissa Aronczyk mentioned in her oral statement, these disinformation tactics are carried out by certain PR firms, and "they are not publicized, they are not transparent, and they are not regulated."

3. Is there anything else you would like to add for the hearing record?

While greenwashing is a widespread problem, with many PR firms and advertising agencies producing greenwash on behalf of their clients, disinformation is less widespread. The disinformation tactics described above are utilized by a small minority of bad actors who represent a risk to consumers and the advertising industry.

Advertising industry non-profits and trade bodies including the Institute for Advertising Ethics and the Public Relations Society of America clearly state: "Advertising, public relations, marketing communications, news, and editorial all share a common objective of truth and high

ethical standards in serving the public,"[4] and: "advancing the free flow of accurate and truthful information is essential to serving the public interest and contributing to informed decision making in a democratic society."[5]

Some advertising industry groups are engaged in a conversation about the risks and dangers of greenwash and disinformation, seeking to elevate the issue and help curb the problem. However, the most offending PR firms, practitioners, and fossil fuel clients are unlikely to alter course of their own volition. That is why enforceable mechanisms for accountability and disclosure around the risks of fossil fuel products and the funding sources behind third-party mobilization efforts are needed.

[4] Institute for Advertising Code of Ethics: https://www.iaethics.org/principles-and-practices
[5] Public Relations Society of America Code of Ethics: https://www.prsa.org/about/ethics/prsa-code-of-ethics