



The making of a one-of-a-kind climate change PR professional

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A pioneering climate change PR professional describes in his own words his views on how to navigate through today's hyperpolarized public square.

In the world of environmental communication, we are learning as we go. For years, we thought facts and outrage changed minds in ways we now know they don't. We need to explore reliable new ways to speak, listen, and connect in the face of environmental disinformation and polarization.

For that we need ongoing research that helps educate us as it explores and advances the principles of effective science communication and highlights the harms of anti-environmentalism.

My own journey from corporate PR consultant to co-founder of a new media website investigating climate change disinformation was eye-opening. We launched [DeSmogBlog](#) in January 2006 to “clear up the PR pollution that clouds climate science.” We wrote about Darth Vader PR campaigns in the US, Canada, Australia, and the UK, largely funded by the coal and oil industries. Finding myself in the midst of a nasty international dispute about the climate crisis, I realized the strategies used to mislead people with anti-science propaganda and anti-environmentalism are much more developed and robust than those used to educate people about science and the environment.

My interest in environmental disinformation started in 2003 when I was invited to join the board of the David Suzuki Foundation, Canada's best-known science-based environmental organization. Consultants at my public relations firm thought accepting would be a mistake. They questioned the wisdom of associating with environmental activists. We worked for the establishment. Environmentalists make the establishment nervous.

Suzuki Foundation board members had concerns of their own. Wasn't public relations spin part of the problem? Wasn't it responsible for much of the public confusion? It's hard to argue with that. Public relations does have its “dark side.” Without bad actors manipulating public opinion, our path toward solutions would be quicker: We'd see more light, less heat.

‘Why, when we know so much, are we doing so little?’

Even though I owned a highly successful PR shop in Vancouver, I didn't see myself as part of that dark side. But I can see why some Suzuki board members might disagree: We represented the establishment on difficult public issues, including the environment: governments, hospitals, universities, big business (especially real estate development), banks, biotech, forestry, mining, oil and gas, and even the cruise ship business.

When I accepted the appointment, I didn't know a lot about the environmental challenges the world was facing. But when I join a board, I read my board package. I attend board meetings. I listen to briefings and read reports.

When Al Gore came to a board dinner in the spring of 2007, I paid attention. And given chances to talk to famous scientists about climate disruption, I jumped.

Two pieces of writing around that time upended my worldview: a New Yorker series called 'The Climate of Man' by Elizabeth Kolbert, which in 2006 became a best-selling book, *Field Notes From a Catastrophe*; and *Boiling Point* in 2004 by former Boston Globe reporter Ross Gelbspan. These books opened my eyes to how serious the climate crisis is.

Over time, I realized that environmentalists are not crazy or even radicals. They're very often telling the truth: Humans are rapidly destroying the oceans, driving record levels of species to extinction, and dangerously overheating the climate. Environmental collapse isn't just a future risk. It is well underway.

If 'house is on fire' ... why are we doing so little about it?

The late Interface Carpets CEO Ray Anderson, also a Suzuki Foundation board member, would often say at meetings, "The house is on fire." But you wouldn't have known what he was saying given the state of public discourse, awareness, and concern.

I became preoccupied with a question. Why, despite all the alarming scientific evidence, are we doing so little to address the big environmental challenges? Why, when we know so much, are we doing so little? I realized that if we want to do something about the climate crisis, we need to do something about the state of public discourse. The ability to have an honest public conversation is a tremendous public resource, but what's happening now is a deliberate attempt to stop us from doing the heavy thinking.

I became interested in the role that propaganda and pseudoscience play in change resistance, and the ways in which manufactured doubt and controversy can be used to stall the growth of public understanding and concern and block public policy solutions. I co-founded [DeSmogBlog](#) to raise awareness and help people become savvy about the global problem of climate change disinformation. It gained millions of readers and was named one of the best blogs of 2011 by Time magazine. In 2009, I wrote *Climate Cover-Up* with Richard Littlemore to take a deeper look at anti-science propaganda and the widespread echo chamber of media and think tanks that magnify it. The book won awards and made its way onto the bookshelves of climate scientists and other professionals around the world, yet I was shocked people were not more outraged by all the evidence of deception.

As a PR specialist, I've spent 30 years dealing with tough issues, straddling the worlds of government and industry, business and the environment, and I see this dysfunctional dialogue and corruption in the public square as a pressing problem. If we don't find a way to work this

out, to disagree more constructively, we may never arrive at timely solutions to critical collective problems. When faced with an onslaught of over-the-top advocacy, people lose interest, hope or simply the thread of what's being said. That result leads to escalating polarization and eventually gridlock and weak, or no, public policy.

Lessons learned from an 'ethical oil' (think 'clean coal') PR campaign

Although DeSmog has investigated and written about anti-climate science campaigns in the US, Australia and elsewhere, the following example from Canada illustrates the misleading rhetoric we should all be concerned about.

Early in January 2012, I was watching the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's evening news program *The National*, when Kathryn Marshall, a spokesperson for a group called "Ethical Oil," was interviewed.

Her message was as simple as it was strange: Ethical oil is like fair trade coffee or conflict-free diamonds: It burns the same as conflict oil in your gas tank and it costs the same, but it's morally superior.

She said on CBC News in 2012 that the then-proposed Northern Gateway pipeline project, which would take diluted Alberta bitumen from the oilsands to the coast of British Columbia, would be good for Canada and would allow export of "our ethically produced oil to different countries." As a result, those countries could "then reduce their dependency on conflict oil from nations like Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, and Iran that have atrocious human rights records and really don't care about the environment at all."

She said Canadians should "make sure that foreign interests and their foreign-funded front groups and lobby groups" didn't interfere with the pipeline approval and didn't "hijack a Canadian process."

Her talking points were a mix of conservative agitator Ezra Levant's "ethical oil" narrative and the "research" of a former aquaculture industry PR person, Vivian Krause. In examining funding for environmental groups, Krause had concocted a conspiracy theory that US interests were funding Canadian environmental efforts in a plot to landlock Canadian oil to benefit the US industry. As full of holes as the theory is, numerous pro-oil anti-climate action people in government, media, and industry latched on to it.

Marshall's message dominated Canadian media with this story about foreign-funded radicals for weeks. The public narrative about pipelines and climate change shifted to one about Canadian sovereignty.

It was bad enough when it was just industry and its front groups making these specious arguments. But it got worse when the then-Conservative government under Prime Minister Stephen Harper piled on. Conservative senator Nicole Eaton charged these "foreign-funded radicals" with political manipulation. "There is influence peddling," she said. "There are millions of dollars crossing the borders masquerading as charitable donations."

Next, Joe Oliver, then the Natural Resources Minister, claimed environmentalists and some radical groups were trying to block trade and undermine Canada's economy, "threatening to hijack our regulatory system to achieve their radical ideological agenda." Then-Environment Minister Peter Kent hinted money-laundering was involved. Senator Don Plett in 2012 asked

where environmentalists would “draw the line” on where they receive money from: “[W]ould they take money from al-Qaeda, the Hamas or the Taliban?”

In 2019, when Jason Kenney was elected premier of Alberta, home of Canada’s oilsands and leading source of greenhouse gas emissions, he re-animated the foreign-funded radicals campaign. Kenney had been a cabinet minister in the Harper government when the campaign was launched in 2012. Soon after he became premier, Kenney announced a public inquiry into foreign funding of “anti-Alberta” energy groups. As part of his “fight back strategy,” he opened a “war room to counter misinformation.” He also unveiled a commission to investigate the ‘shadowy funding’ of environmental groups. I know, it all seems a bit Russian.

Just as Canada’s ‘ethical oil’ is a public relations fiction, so too is the US’s ‘clean coal.’ Neither actually exists. The ‘clean coal’ brand was created by an advertising agency, R&R Partners, and promoted by the Hawthorn Group, a public relations shop working for the American Coalition for Clean Coal Electricity (ACCCE), an industry front group fighting climate change regulations. The ‘ethical oil’ concept came from a 2010 book of the same name by Ezra Levant, a conservative political activist and writer. Alykhan Velshi, a senior adviser to Prime Minister Harper, then built it into a strategic campaign, funded by oil and gas interests.

One PR pro’s advice to oil and gas interests: Exploit fear, greed, anger

Countless campaigns like these are polluting public conversations around the world. A number of them have been designed Washington political and public relations consultants such as Richard Berman.

On October 30, 2014, the New York Times published an article about a speech Berman gave at a Colorado Springs event sponsored by the Western Energy Alliance, a group whose members focus on extracting natural gas through hydraulic fracturing, AKA fracking. The Times reported that Berman advised the oil and gas industry officials to exploit emotions like fear, greed, and anger and turn them against environmental groups. “Think of it as an endless war,” Berman told executives. “You can either win ugly or lose pretty,” Times reporter Eric Lipton reported him as saying. Berman’s speech had been secretly recorded and leaked to the Times by an industry executive who said he was offended by Berman’s tough talk.

The Times reported that Berman was trying to raise \$3 million for an advertising and public relations campaign called Big Green Radicals. “There is nothing the public likes more than tearing down celebrities and playing up the hypocrisy angle,” his colleague said, showing billboard advertisements planned for Pennsylvania that featured Robert Redford and the words, “Demands green living. Flies on private jets.”

Berman is no stranger to conspiracy theories. He has claimed that environmental groups are funded by Russian oil interests. He set up his own “EPA, the Environmental Policy Alliance,” to create confusion around the Environmental Protection Agency. Its stated purpose is to uncover the funding and hidden agenda of environmental and conservation groups.

Berman appears to some to relish his nickname among adversaries as ‘Dr. Evil.’ It’s derived from his aggressive campaigns designed to demonize not just environmental and conservation groups but also groups such as the Humane Society, Mothers Against Drunk Driving, green building groups, and sports and fishing organizations concerned about pollution.

Piquing my anger: Blatant attacks actually worked, at least somewhat

The more I delved into the war on fact-based reality, the angrier I got. The disinformation was so blatant and shameless. And much of it involved ad hominem attacks. But the main source of my anger was the effectiveness of the tactics: They worked, at least somewhat. Toxic conversations like these stall our ability to think collectively, act in our own interests and solve the many dangerous environmental problems stalking everyone on Earth.

The attacks on science and the environment are global.

There's the "climategate," when in late 2009 and just before the Copenhagen climate talks, an unknown hacker stole more than 1,000 emails from climate scientists at the Climate Research Unit of the University of East Anglia in the U.K. The hacked emails were then used to dupe much of the free world's media into writing misleading stories suggesting climate scientists were falsifying data, and raising the possibility that global warming was a hoax.

What really happened was that, within 48 hours of the theft, fossil fuel-funded groups in the US, including the Cato Institute, Americans for Prosperity, the Heritage Foundation and the Competitive Enterprise Institute, launched an international PR blitz aimed at discrediting climate scientists and disrupting the Copenhagen climate talks. Although numerous independent inquiries subsequently exonerated the climate scientists, climategate was among the biggest global warming stories of 2009 even though it was a made-up scandal.

And there's Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation. He's used the influence of his massive global media empire – which includes newspapers like the Times of London and broadcasters like Fox News – to cast doubt on climate science. In a campaign to divert public attention from the link between Australia's bushfires and the 'bogeyman of climate change' his newspaper The Australian campaigned to shift blame for the fires away from conservative political inaction onto 'greenies' falsely claiming environmentalists and arsonists were the cause of the fires, and that it was an arson emergency, not a climate emergency.

There is truth in the proverb that sunlight is the best disinfectant. Transparency can bring honesty back into public conversations. That's why I continue to write about environmental propaganda. People aren't as outraged as they should be. When asked in interviews why I started DeSmogBlog, I would answer that when you turn on the lights, the critters scuttle back into the corners. But I've learned that is seldom true. Usually, the critters get bigger, meaner, and more aggressive.

In my most recent book, *I'm Right and You're an Idiot: The Toxic State of Public Discourse and How to Clean It Up*2, I took a deeper look at the propaganda problem. I interviewed philosophers, moral psychologists, media gurus, cognitive scientists, social psychologists, public intellectuals, and spiritual leaders about toxic public discourse.

I spoke to best-selling authors like Wade Davis, David Suzuki, Ronald Wright, Thich Nhat Hahn, Joan Halifax, Karen Armstrong, Marshall Ganz, Peter Senge and Otto Scharmer. I even interviewed the Dalai Lama.

Polluting the public discourse, akin to polluting the environment

Why, I wanted to know, are we shouting at each other rather than listening to what the science is trying to tell us? And why all the name-calling and ad-hominem attacks? How have we come to a time when facts don't seem to matter?

One of the first people I interviewed was Yale social scientist and law professor Dan Kahan, an expert in risk communication.

He said something that stuck with me: "Just like we can pollute the natural environment, we can pollute public conversations." Not with greenhouse gas emissions, but with disinformation, unyielding one-sidedness and a warlike approach to public debate.

Canadian social scientist Alex Himelfarb, who has served in various public service roles under three Canadian prime ministers, told me these campaigns are not about persuasion. "The strategy is to minimize public spaces where dialogue might occur, and where it does occur, confuse it, obscure it," he said. "The idea is to kill the debate, not foster it."

It's almost too easy. "They don't have to convince the public of anything to limit public will," Himelfarb said. "They just have to make it seem as if all the proponents for change are pursuing their own special interests and sow doubt that anybody is telling the whole truth."

Another Yale professor, Jason Stanley, who teaches a course in the philosophy of language and propaganda, told me that when bitumen from Fort McMurray is called 'ethical oil' and coal deep mined in the U.S. is called 'clean coal,' real discussion about the pros and cons gets lost. This language, according to Stanley, is not so much about making substantive claims as it is about silencing.

He called the foreign-funded radicals campaign a linguistic strategy for stealing others' voices. "The idea is to silence people by painting them as grossly insincere, undermining public trust in them, so nothing they say can be taken at face value."

With no respect for facts or objectivity, what chance for meaningful discourse?

Polluting the public square with this style of rhetoric suggests that there are no facts or objectivity: Everyone is trying to manipulate you for their own interests. Disinformation is bad enough. But, if you can convince the public that everyone is biased, public conversations become impossible. Unfortunately, there's an even darker force at work in this propaganda.

We humans are 'tribal' ... What matters is who's in, who's out of your tribe

After spending time with Jonathan Haidt and Dan Kahan, I realized the true engine of propaganda is division, polarization. Who's in and who's out – and who's not in your tribe – becomes more important than what they have to say.

Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, who teaches at New York University's Stern School of Business and studies the social psychology of teams, argues that human beings are tribal. We naturally gather into teams. If you can get people to engage in the psychology of us vs them (their own teams), open-minded thinking shuts down.

"Our righteous minds have been designed by evolution to unite us into teams, divide us against other teams, and blind us to the truth," he said. "We are divided in these highly polarizing ways not because some of us are good and others are evil but because our minds were designed for groupish righteousness."

Kahan takes it further, arguing that people in some cases actually want to be misled. He studies cultural cognition, the tendency of individuals to conform their beliefs about disputed matters to the values of their cultural identities.

According to Kahan, we resist information that threatens our identity. When we are under the spell of cultural cognition, we develop elaborate rationalizations to justify our beliefs even if they are false and evidence points in another direction. We engage in selective thinking. We look for what confirms our beliefs and ignore information that contradicts those beliefs. When scientific evidence is cloaked with team meaning, our minds close.

When we massage “my-side bias” into issues, we convince people that, as Kahan says, “This isn’t something people like us believe. If you believe this, you can’t be one of us; you must be one of them.” The outcome: Loss of faith in facts, reason, and public discourse. You are wrong before you start because you are on the wrong side. Disinformation is not the toxic heart of propaganda; tribalism is.

Once we decide, we find reasons to justify our views

It’s not just bad actors who pollute and polarize public conversations. Carol Tavris, author of the best-selling *Mistakes Were Made But Not By Me*, told me the moment we make a decision we begin to see all the reasons we are right about it.

We overlook information that suggests we could be wrong. This self-justification protects us from the uncomfortable feelings of cognitive dissonance that come from recognizing we’ve made a mistake. The more time, effort, money, and public face we attach to our decisions, the harder it is to admit we are wrong. We find ways to defend our mistakes rather than facing the alternative, which is to admit doing something stupid, unethical, or incompetent even though we are good, smart, and decent.

Self-justification is a powerful process. Tavris believes the feeling of having two conflicting views of ourselves can be as uncomfortable as hunger or thirst. The mind is highly motivated to reduce this discomfort. Because of this, we have trouble accepting evidence that we made a mistake, or did something harmful, or are holding an outdated belief.

“The greatest danger we face on the planet is not only from bad people doing corrupt, evil, and bad things, but also from good people who justify the bad, evil, and corrupt things they do in order to preserve their belief that they are good, kind, and ethical people,” Tavris said.

When those who may be wrong become wrongdoers, aggressors

The miserable state of public discourse can lead us to believe the problem is evil on the side of our opponents.

Rodger Conner, who teaches non-litigation strategies for social and political change at Vanderbilt University Law School in Nashville, points out that most of us aren’t evil, that good people can do bad things for good reasons. If we don’t understand this, we can fall into something he calls the advocacy trap.

It starts when people disagree with us. We don’t like being contradicted or criticized in public. When people disagree with us, we question their views and try to correct them with facts and evidence. But if they persist, we question their motives and intentions. Eventually they aren’t just

wrong, they're wrongdoers. We perceive them as aggressors. They turn from opponents into enemies. Eventually, defeating our opponent becomes more important than our original purpose.

It's difficult to engage or collaborate with someone you consider untrustworthy or despicable. In the advocacy trap, public disagreements become perpetual shoving matches, endless battles between good and evil. It is not enough to be right and share facts. We must also extract ourselves from advocacy trap polarization.

How do we re-open the commons? According to Conner, it starts with us. Being right is not enough. We escape the polarizing spell of the advocacy trap – and propaganda – when we choose a stance of respect, empathy and compassion. People can be completely wrong but still be decent people.

Campaigns like 'foreign-funded radicals' are deliberate attempts to fracture society and pollute public discourse. They create division. That's their purpose. This reality can't be ignored. We need to defuse this polarization. The ability to have honest conversations is a tremendous public resource. We need to restore public confidence in the commons. We can't do that if we are held captive in the polarizing spell of the advocacy trap.

Best-selling author and TED Prize winner Karen Armstrong sowed the seeds of a theme that emerged in many of the interviews. She suggested we follow the golden rule: 'Look into your own heart, discover what gives you pain, and refuse under any circumstances whatsoever to inflict that pain on anyone else. Never treat others as you would not like to be treated yourself.'

Speaking truth ... 'but not to punish'

Sometimes, according to San Francisco attorney and psychotherapist Bryant Welch, the best strategy is to simply not engage because doing so undercuts the "projective devices that adversaries use to justify their aggression." If the victim remains silent rather than responding aggressively, it is harder to sustain the aggression, and the perpetrator is left to stew in their own ugliness. We all like to view ourselves as justified in what we say and do. Perpetrators who are denied the self-justification that comes with an angry response are slowed in their aggression.

David Suzuki and I in August 2011 had tea with the renowned Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh at The University of British Columbia. We were speaking about species extinction when Thich Nhat Hanh said we should bring a spiritual dimension to the work of protecting the environment. "You're not saying we shouldn't be activists, are you?" I asked. He looked at me in a quiet, piercing way and said slowly, "Speak the truth, but not to punish."

I've been thinking about this advice ever since. It was one of the most profound moments of this entire journey of research and writing, the seminal moment, because it gathered together the deepest voices and most profound threads of this long book into one elegant sentence.

'The goal of argument and public debate should not be to crush someone who disagrees with you, but to bring forward the truth.'

As I was finishing the book, someone sent me a Public Broadcasting Service special in which Bill Moyers and Harvard's Marshall Ganz discussed how to achieve political change. Ganz said we should never be afraid of the controversy that arises from speaking the truth. There is nothing wrong with a good fight over injustice. He said he has no time for people who criticize

polarization and say, “Let’s just get along better.” He argued that polarization can have positive outcomes.

I was puzzled by this, so I called him. He told me that taking a conciliatory stance in the face of wrongdoing is a strategic and moral mistake that severely compromises what he calls the “adversarial mechanisms” that citizens rely on to bring out the truth. We live in a democracy in which leaders are expected to raise the level of debate in pursuit of the truth. In his view, contention lies at the heart of democracy. Ganz recommended I read Rabbi Hillel, who lived at the time of Jesus and taught that conflict falls into two categories: arguments for the sake of heaven and arguments for the sake of victory. The goal of argument and public debate should not be to crush someone who disagrees with you, but to bring forward the truth. Argument is necessary and people should be encouraged to hold different opinions, to challenge issues, to question motivations and points of view, and to take part in passionate discussion. Paralysis is what’s bad.

Ganz added that many of his students slip into conflict avoidance too often and easily. They have a mistaken idea that if everyone talks things out, everyone will eventually agree and we can all move forward with consensus. But, Ganz argues, the illusion of agreement is for authoritarian regimes. Democracies are made healthier when citizens are free to loudly and actively challenge injustices. He was quick to note that while he believes contention lies at the heart of democracy, it must ultimately be constructive. In an argument for the sake of heaven, Hillel explains that each side listens willingly and seriously to the other’s views and analyzes those points using reason, logic, and respect. Debate used for power rather than truth leads to gridlock.

Diffusing, not exacerbating, polarization

Of the many interviews I conducted for *I’m Right and You’re an Idiot*, my conversation with the Dalai Lama at the Mind & Life Conference on Ecology, Ethics and Interdependence in Dharamshala stands out. The Dalai Lama believes our destructive emotions are the real troublemakers and that we must learn to deal with them. As the interview ended, the Dalai Lama pointed at my forehead and told me many people think the western mind is more sophisticated. “But in Tibet we operate from the heart and this is very strong. So combine these two, Tibetan heart and Western mind, and then we will have real success. Real success.” We need more warm-heartedness, more compassion. Valuable advice for a public square polluted with unyielding one-sidedness.

Feelings play a powerful role in public discourse. Ganz called it a dialogue of the heart. We participate in emotional dialogue through stories, so we need to be careful about the narratives we create. We want to defuse, not exacerbate polarization. It’s through pluralistic, empathetic narrative that more people will come to care about the right things. Environmental advocates, educators, and scientists need to excel at emotional dialogue. We need to replace narratives that divide us with those that bring us together. That’s how we avoid being drawn into the polarization strategy of propaganda.

Empathy and evidence need to replace disinformation and division. This is a challenge. The science of how to mislead people about science is advanced and muscular. The well-funded propaganda machines fighting environmental regulation know far more about stoking division than environmental scientists know about persuading us to support science-based public policies to protect the environment.

The 70-plus interviews I did for *I'm Right and You're an Idiot* convinced me we need to be careful not to be duped into fuelling the polarization that gives propaganda its sting. We need to speak up for what's right while we self-police and ask ourselves if we are intensifying or defusing polarization.

As George Orwell wrote, "It appears to me, that one defeats the fanatic precisely by not being a fanatic oneself, but on the contrary by using one's intelligence."

The polarizing strategies preferred by anti-science, anti-environment groups require that we explore the art of what Dan Kahan calls pluralistic advocacy so culturally diverse people – motivated by different narratives, characters, and dramas – can see themselves in the stories we share and can share their own stories. The goal is to find a narrative that people relate to and embed a message that will lead to open-minded consideration. This pluralistic approach to public narrative is an attempt to defuse polarization.

Environmental risk communication will fail unless it is inclusive, a dialogue of the heart where all sides have something worthwhile to contribute and each respects the other's views.

I am not an academic, but I have learned a lot from the academics in my book – Bruno Latour, Peter Senge, Karen Armstrong, Steve Rosell, Carol Tavris, Paul Slovic, Alex Himelfarb and many more. Some have become mentors and friends. And I hope that their work has improved my own work as a public affairs consultant, and that their words, through my books and lectures and articles like this one, have helped the communication work of others.

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