

## Repackaged Disinformation: Fossil Fuel’s “Next Generation” PR Strategy Is Same Old Climate Deception

*By Karen Sokol*

In 2018, Rhode Island became the first state to sue Big Oil for climate damages. Rhode Island contended that since Exxon, BP, Chevron, and the 18 other fossil fuel firms named in the suit knew their products were heating the atmosphere, but attempted to keep that information from the public with a massive disinformation campaign, they must now help Rhode Island pay to cope with rising seas, stronger coastal storms, and other impacts.

As they had done in past waves of climate cases, the companies tried to get the suit moved to federal court, where they believed they had a greater chance of success in fending it off. But federal district court Judge William Smith rejected their request, and in a [powerful ruling summarized](#) the state's evidence that the companies are liable under state tort law for their contributions to the climate crisis because they deceptively marketed dangerous products:

Climate change is expensive, and the State wants help paying for it. Specifically from Defendants in this case, who together have extracted, advertised, and sold a substantial percentage of the fossil fuels burned globally since the 1960s. This activity has released an immense amount of greenhouse gas into the Earth’s atmosphere, changing its climate and leading to all kinds of displacement, death (extinctions, even), and destruction. What is more, Defendants understood the consequences of their activity decades ago, when transitioning from fossil fuels to renewable sources of energy would have saved a world of trouble. But instead of sounding the alarm, Defendants went out of their way to becloud the emerging scientific consensus and further delay changes—however existentially necessary—that would in any way interfere with their multibillion-dollar profits. All while quietly readying their capital for the coming fallout.

In this passage, Smith succinctly explains a manifestation of the industry’s business strategy that [I characterize](#) as one of “disinformation plus path-dependence.” This dual-pronged strategy involves aggressively marketing

products to create a fossil-fuel dependent society, coupled with massive and systematic disinformation campaigns to counter and obfuscate the clear scientific evidence of the catastrophic dangers of using those products.

As Rhode Island's case and similar ones brought by local governments [all over the country](#) make clear, this strategy has been so effective that we are now at the point where the climate crisis can no longer be addressed only by reducing carbon emissions, although such reductions remain imperative. We are already [experiencing](#) climate harms that we must adapt to. But the fossil fuel industry has sabotaged democratic discourse about the climate crisis with its [decades-long, painfully successful effort to hide and deny the science demonstrating the dangerous disruption of our climate system](#).

With its dishonesty dragged into the sunlight by journalists and researchers, the industry has been scrambling hard to greenwash its sins away. A 2020 BP marketing presentation recently [leaked to Drilled News](#) provides a window into that effort, which appears to be an updated spin on its tried-and-true "disinformation plus path-dependence" strategy, this time aimed at a new generation.

Apparently, BP has taken note that young people's demands for climate action, as well as dramatic changes to existing power structures required to achieve climate justice, [are resonating nationally and globally](#).

But rather than change its ways, BP is changing its messaging to a "next generation" version of business as usual on the fossil fuel production side, supported by a new disinformation campaign.

BP had already been shifting its marketing campaigns to include less overt climate denial and more [greenwashing](#). For BP, this has included tactics like dropping the word "petroleum" from its name, as well as making vague [promises](#) to reduce the carbon intensity of its oil and gas operations. In the words of the leaked BP marketing strategy, that public message has been that the company is "leading the *transition* to a *low* carbon future." (Emphasis added here and in subsequent quotes from the presentation.)

At the same time BP and other firms have been putting out this and similar messages, however, the pace of the industry's fossil fuel extraction and production has only [accelerated](#). According to a recent [report](#) by [Carbon Tracker](#), an independent financial think tank that analyzes the impact of the energy transition on capital markets, major oil companies continue to invest in oil and gas production that will produce a significant amount of emissions — so much, in fact, that they will put the Paris Agreement's goal of limiting average global

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temperature rise to [“well below 2 degrees C”](#) out of reach. Indeed, the report finds that the major oil and gas companies must cut production by 35% over the next 15 years if there is to be any chance of meeting the Paris target.

But vague promises to transition to low carbon are no longer effective, because the next generation has grasped both the urgency of the climate crisis and the fossil fuel industry’s role in creating it. “The world changed forever in 2019,” BP’s strategy deck notes alongside a photograph of one of last year’s massive youth climate protest, followed by a mention of the Oxford English Dictionary’s pick for the 2019 word of the year: “climate emergency.”

Thus, BP’s “task,” according to the presentation, is to “signal “to the future generation of policymakers and energy consumers that it “get(s) it.” BP’s apparent solution is a new disinformation campaign, labeled “NOW,” that is designed to send a message that it’s not merely “transitioning” away from fossil fuels, but rather “changing *rapidly*.” And it’s moving beyond promising merely “low carbon” to promising to “help the world achieve carbon *neutrality*.”

Of course, the presentation doesn’t characterize this as a disinformation campaign. But some elements of the leaked presentation that focus on BP’s current and planned business operations strongly suggest that’s the case.

Slides related to BP’s “business models” are dominated by photos of offshore oil rigs and power plants, and indicate that the company plans on “*growing* advantaged oil and gas.” But “advantaged,” does not mean low-carbon, much less carbon-free. Rather, as [explained on the BP website](#), it simply means oil and gas that is the most easily accessed, and thus garners the highest rate of return.

The apparent plan to maintain and even increase fossil fuel production is confirmed by the behavior of BP and other oil and gas firms in response to the coronavirus pandemic, which was in its early stages in the U.S. by the time of this February marketing presentation. The industry has taken advantage of the distraction and devastation caused by the pandemic to increase its polluting activities and further entrench the fossil fuel foundations of the economy.

Once the coronavirus hit, the industry [asked](#) the Trump administration for an indefinite suspension of its obligations to comply with basic environmental and public health protections, even though communities near polluting facilities have apparently suffered [higher death rates](#) from COVID-19. The administration [responded quickly by announcing that the EPA did not intend to seek penalties for most violations of environmental and public health rules](#), depriving communities of these vital safeguards, and with no clear date for reinstating them.

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The industry has also moved forward on increasing its fossil fuel extraction capabilities by taking advantage of the Trump administration's [post-pandemic expediting of oil and gas lease sales and permitting of pipelines on federal lands](#). And taxpayers are underwriting an even greater percentage of that fossil fuel development, since the Trump administration [has given drillers a break on royalties](#) and lease payments for gas and oil extraction on federal lands, which were already well below market value..

The industry also asked for and got access to the business aid and loans that make up a significant portion of the federal government's economic rescue and stimulus packages, including the Trump administration's commitment to spending an astounding [\\$3 billion to fill the Strategic Petroleum Reserve](#), the [only place for that oil to go](#) given that no one else is buying it and other storage sites are filling up. Drilled News created its ongoing [Climate and COVID-19 Policy Tracker to try and keep up with these and dozens of other instances of climate and energy related disaster capitalism](#).

All indications are thus that this latest instance of the industry's "disinformation plus path-dependence" strategy goes beyond mere greenwashing; it's "greenblanketing." It is not the climate crisis, but rather the climate action protests across the globe that concern BP. And if BP has thought since February that the pandemic might quell or distract youth activism for justice, the Black Lives Matter protests show the exact reverse is true. If anything, the two movements have parallel demands for justice and equity.

As these protests and the activism behind them continue, they present a formidable problem for BP and the rest of the industry. Given the clear [commitment](#), [passion](#), and [intelligence](#) behind the next generation's calls for a transition to a world organized to promote human and planetary health and well-being, I'm betting they're not going to buy that BP and the rest of the industry suddenly "get it."