

# CLIFF POLICY BRIEF #2, March 2023

The Climate change and Fossil Fuels (CLIFF) project studies policy challenges surrounding the energy transition



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## FOSSIL FUEL (FF) BUSINESSES HAMPER PHASE OUT BY MANAGING THE 'NARRATIVE'

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### Key Messages

- Fossil fuel (FF) companies have spread doubt about climate change science**
- FF companies have lobbied governments to slow down decisions on a FF phase out**
- FF companies promote 'necessitarianism' to distract attention from their role in causing climate change**
- FF companies are 'green washing' their strategies**
- FF companies support techno-optimism to enable net zero goals**
- FF companies indulge in strategic blame placement to avoid accountability**

### Introduction

Fossil fuel (FF) companies extract, produce, and distribute fossil fuels. Such FF is the main cause of the climate emergency. This has been known at least since 1965 (Environmental Pollution Panel, 1965), acknowledged by some companies since 1979, predicting catastrophic effects unless over 80% of fossil fuels were left underground (Knisely and Ferrall, 1979; Supran & Oreskes, 2017; Cook et al., 2019; Franta, 2021). However, despite the growing evidence of the link between FF and the climate crisis, the trillions of dollars invested in FF, have led these companies to legitimize themselves by managing their image and narrative rather than modifying their activities. This policy brief focuses on how they manage the narrative.

#### 1. FF companies have spread doubt by undermining climate change science

These companies undermine the science by questioning the anthropogenic nature of climate change, the role of FF in climate change and the role of the industry (Supran & Oreskes, 2021; Carter & Dowler, 2021; Franta, 2021; Cook et al., 2019; Oreskes, & Conway, 2011).

They caused confusion by stating that some saw a problem while others did not. This enabled them to

support the climate denial movement (Kenner & Heede, 2021; Cook, Supran, Lewandowsky, Oreskes, & Maibach, 2019; Supran & Oreskes, 2021; Scanlan 2017; Oreskes & Conway, 2011) focusing on men (due to the inextricable ties between FF and masculinity, popularized through the American Dream (Daggett, 2018; LeMenager, 2013)) and the radical right. The FF companies have learned from the tobacco companies in merchandising doubt (Oreskes and Conway 2010).

#### 2. FF companies have lobbied governments to slow down decisions on a fossil fuel phase out

Fossil Free Politics (2021) reports that the Commission Transparency Register shows that between 2010-2018 five oil and gas companies (Shell, ExxonMobil, Total, Chevron, and BP) spent €251M lobbying the EU (Tansey, 2019; Laville, 2019). Between 2015 and 2021, there were 71 cases of revolving doors involving Shell, BP, Total, Equinor, and ENI and the EU where experts move from the industry to the EU and vice versa. These companies spent €170M lobbying the EU, and met EU officials 586 times. Since 2011, Exxon, Chevron, Shell, BP, and API used \$452.6 M to lobby the US federal government, employing about 40 lobbyists per year on average mostly to lower taxes (US House Committee 2021).

#### 3. FF companies promote "necessitarianism" to distract attention from their role in causing climate change

As denial became difficult, the companies shifted to delaying policy and creating public numbness, impotence and inability to take action (Mills, 2020; McRight & Dunlap, 2010). These companies sell a narrative of 'necessitarianism': stating that FF is necessary and irreplaceable (Megura & Gunderson, 2022). This enables them to continue to ensure growing demand (Malm, 2016), and to present themselves as those who can provide the solutions. In 2020 Shell reports that: "Increasing the role that gas plays in the energy mix is one way that countries can take action as the world moves to a low carbon future".

#### 4. Recently, FF companies are 'greenwashing' their strategies

With growing evidence, the companies have instead focused on their climate change leadership by: (a) selling themselves as *energy* rather than as oil and gas companies; (b) creating new sustainability branding; (c) using green vocabulary (carbon offset/neutral) and joining the 'net zero' bandwagon (Megura & Gunderson, 2022; Rajak, 2021; DeSmog 2021; Mann 2021); and (d) using green imagery (imagery forests, green leaves, solar panels, wind turbines). For example, Shell 2021 report mentions "oil" 84 times and "energy" 244 times. Shell's 2021 Q2 report shows \$16-17B in oil and gas in comparison to a \$2-3 B investment in renewables (DeSmog, 2021). Many companies sell gas as 'clean' conveniently ignoring its greenhouse gas emissions. Increasingly there is talk of 'net zero' to legitimize the continued use of FF (Dyke et al. 2022; Marahrens, 2021; Carbon Market Watch, 2021)). Options include Carbon capture and storage (CCS). 'Green' fossil fuel advertising is often targeted toward young men (who may be more susceptible to an industry that portrays itself as male - known as petro-masculinity (Daggett, 2018)).

#### 5. FF companies support techno-optimism to justify 'net zero' goals

These companies market: (a) technological optimism which will enable compensating for fossil emissions; (b) how new technologies can become profitable; and (c) these frames to justify continued FF use (Gunderson, et al. 2020). By emphasizing CCS, they can continue to use FF which leads them to underinvest in renewables (which could strand their fossil assets). Techno-optimism in 'net zero' technologies enables their survival (Rajak 2020).

#### 6. FF companies indulge in strategic blame placement to avoid accountability

In order to deflect blame, FF companies are strategically focusing on others (shareholders who want profits; consumers who are addicted to fossil fuel) and the companies thus appear as victims (Rajak 2020). For example, in 2005, Shell claimed "Our customers emit six to seven times more CO<sub>2</sub> using our products than we do making them...".

In 2020, it stated: "Emissions from our own operations make up less than 10% of our total emissions. Most of our emissions comes from the use of the energy we sell...". The use of these strategies in managing the narrative has delayed the fossil fuel phase out.

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