

Corporate moral agency, diachronic responsibility and narrative identity

- contesting the narrative of the carbon majors

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Important distinctions – my disclaimer..

1. The philosophically intriguing question about whether and how any organized group, collective, corporation etc. can be a morally responsible agent
2. The less intriguing question about the real (financial) motives driving corporate social responsibility programs in business:
 - a) The shareholder view, Milton Friedman's principal-agent theory of the firm
 - b) The critical view on CSR: the oxymoron (the concept is self-defeating etc)
3. The even lesser intriguing legal notion of the corporate person (can be sued in court)

The Carbon Majors case – contesting the narrative

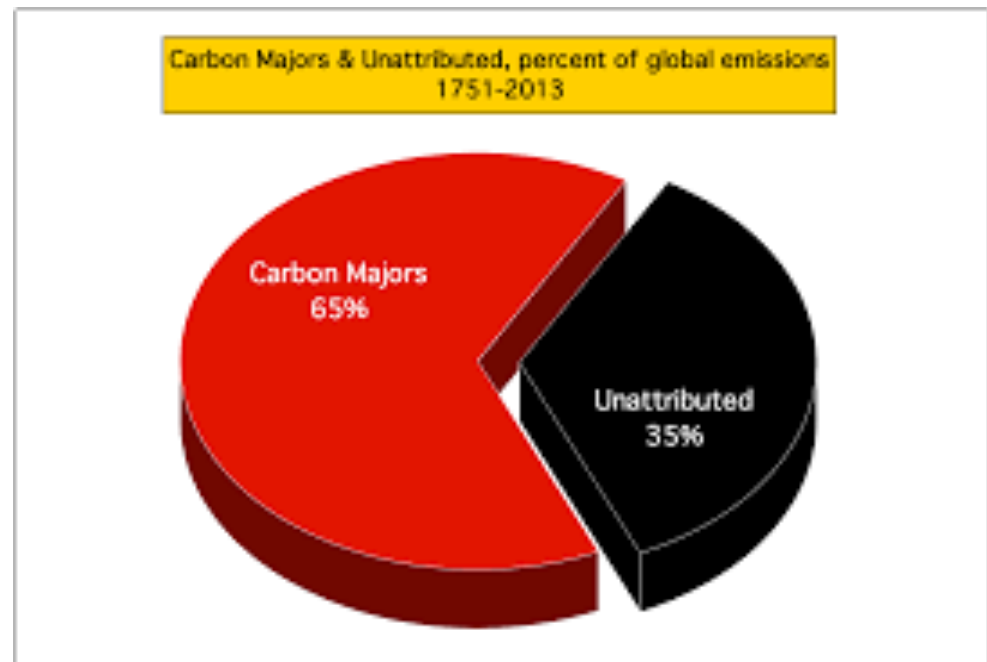


Table 3 Top twenty investor- & state-owned entities and attributed CO₂ & CH₄ emissions

Entity	2010 emissions MtCO ₂ e	Cumulative 1854–2010 MtCO ₂ e	Percent of global 1751–2010
1. Chevron, USA	423	51,096	3.52 %
2. ExxonMobil, USA	655	46,672	3.22 %
3. Saudi Aramco, Saudi Arabia	1,550	46,033	3.17 %
4. BP, UK	554	35,837	2.47 %
5. Gazprom, Russian Federation	1,371	32,136	2.22 %
6. Royal Dutch/Shell, Netherlands	478	30,751	2.12 %
7. National Iranian Oil Company	867	29,084	2.01 %
8. Pemex, Mexico	602	20,025	1.38 %
9. ConocoPhillips, USA	359	16,866	1.16 %
10. Petroleos de Venezuela	485	16,157	1.11 %
11. Coal India	830	15,493	1.07 %
12. Peabody Energy, USA	519	12,432	0.86 %
13. Total, France	398	11,911	0.82 %
14. PetroChina, China	614	10,564	0.73 %
15. Kuwait Petroleum Corp.	323	10,503	0.73 %
16. Abu Dhabi NOC, UAE	387	9,672	0.67 %
17. Sonatrach, Algeria	386	9,263	0.64 %
18. Consol Energy, Inc., USA	160	9,096	0.63 %
19. BHP-Billiton, Australia	320	7,606	0.52 %
20. Anglo American, United Kingdom	242	7,242	0.50 %
Top 20 IOCs & SOEs	11,523	428,439	29.54 %
Top 40 IOCs & SOEs		546,767	37.70 %
All 81 IOCs & SOEs	18,524	602,491	41.54 %
Total 90 carbon majors	27,946	914,251	63.04 %
Total global emissions	36,026	1,450,332	100.00 %

Right column compares each entity's cumulative emissions to CDIAC's global emissions 1751–2010. Excludes British Coal, whose production and assets have not been attributed to extant companies, and five of nine nation-states (FSU, China, Poland, Russian Federation, and Czechoslovakia, in that order)

Source: Heede, R. Tracing anthropogenic carbon dioxide and methane emissions to fossil fuel and cement producers, 1854–2010. *Climate Change*. January 2014, Volume 122, [Issue 1-2](#), pp 229-241

correspondence

Early oil industry knowledge of CO₂ and global warming

To the Editor — In a seminal 1960 article in the journal *Tellus*, Charles Keeling reported that the concentration of atmospheric CO₂ at the South Pole was rising at a rate “nearly that to be expected from the [global] combustion of fossil fuel”. His measurements, begun in 1957, allowed him to start constructing the famous Keeling curve — the continuous, direct record of rising CO₂ levels around the globe caused primarily by the burning of fossil fuels. Yet archival documents show that even before Keeling published his measurements, oil industry leaders were aware that their products were causing CO₂ pollution to accumulate in the planet’s atmosphere in a potentially dangerous

Perhaps the most interesting effect concerning carbon in trees which we have thus far observed is a marked and fairly steady increase in the C¹⁴/C¹³ ratio with time. Since 1880 the ratio has clearly increased markedly. This effect can be explained on the basis of a changing carbon dioxide concentration in the atmosphere resulting from industrialisation and the consequent burning of large quantities of coal and petroleum. If this explanation were correct, the carbon dioxide content of the atmosphere today would be about 5% greater than it was a century ago.

Fig. 1 Excerpt of research proposal to the API from Harrison Brown and colleagues in 1954. The proposal informed the API that fossil fuels had caused atmospheric CO₂ levels to rise by about 5% over the last 100 years. Image reproduced from ref. 1, Caltech Archives.

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ExxonMobil Misled Public About Climate Science, Study Finds

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An analysis of ExxonMobil's climate change communications shows that the world's largest oil and gas company misled the public about the state of climate science and its implications for nearly forty years, two [Harvard University](#) historians argue in a paper published in the journal [Environmental Research Letters](#).

ExxonMobil has called allegations that have emerged in recent years that it misled consumers, shareholders, and the public about the environmental and business risks of climate change — allegations that have led to lawsuits and investigations by two states attorneys general — false and “deliberately cherry-picked,” and has invited critics to “read the documents and make up your own mind.” Based on an analysis of a hundred and eighty-seven documents generated between 1977 and 2014, the study, [Assessing ExxonMobil's Climate](#)

Philippines: Carbon majors face national human rights complaint on climate change for the first time



Henry Shue about the Carbon Majors case

“... failure by corporate carbon producers to reduce the harms caused by their products now gives them additional responsibility to correct the damage done by their decades of neglect of the underlying negative responsibility” (Shue 2017: 591).



Shue's timeline of moral responsibility - climate change and business

Ca.1850

'Do no harm'

Negative general forward-looking

1970s - 1990s

Carbon majors

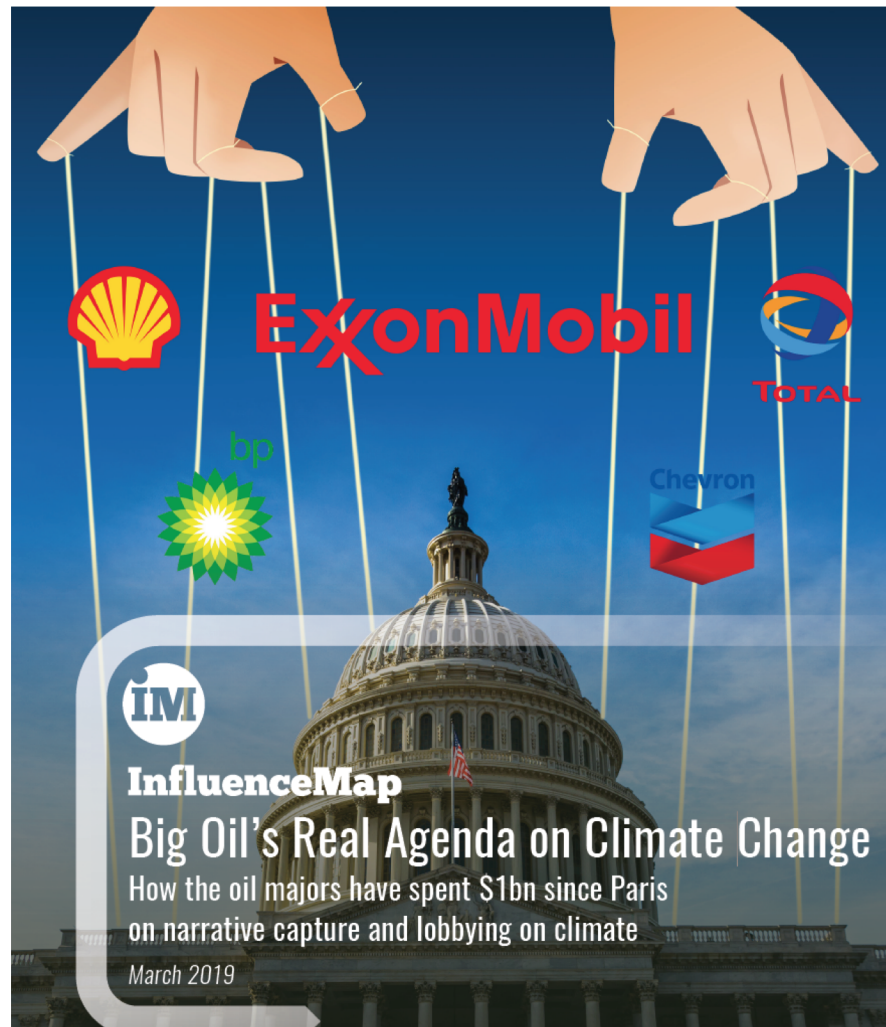
Positive special backward-looking (compensation until fulfilled)

2015

future

Positive forward-looking?

Corporate Ecological Citizenship



<https://influencemap.org/report/How-Big-Oil-Continues-to-Oppose-the-Paris-Agreement-38212275958aa21196dae3b76220bddc>

The theory of corporate moral agency

- If a corporate agent has an ***internal decision structure*** it is *functionally* seen an intentional moral agent (French 1979)
- Problem and limitation: is *synchronic* and functionalist

Peter French 2017:
Diachronic corporate moral agency
-The narrative account

A corporate 'self-narrative' is based on:

“annual reports, in advertising, in legal documents, in internal and external statements of corporate culture, and in policies” (French 2017, 62)

(an example of a *petrified* narrative?)

The narrative account is 'self critical'

..the narrative must not be manipulative about past events and acts, since “ignoring, forgetting, misdescribing, or allowing the firm’s public relations department to construct for its own ends the story of the firm’s past synchronically responsible misdeeds does not produce a qualifying corporate self-narrative for diachronic moral responsibility purposes”.

Internal and external checks and balances offer correction, in order to ensure that the “corporate self-narrative is a developmental element of the policy aspects of a corporate internal decision structure” (63)

Concerns about the narrative approach to corporate moral agency – the dilemma

1. The **risk of hegemonic storytelling** (due to corporate power), eg. The carbon majors support climate sceptics in research
2. Even when counter narratives make corporate agents more 'relational', 'embodied' and 'accountable' by for instance 'mnemonic' communities of former employees, civil societies, families etc. who succeed in telling their stories, the risk is a deconstruction of the corporate 'autonomous' agent into mere relations – **so, we cannot hold them accountable as agents**