

Don't take greenwashing at face value, authors argue

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Environmentalists who wish to charge fossil fuel companies with "greenwashing" should use corporations' own statements against them, highlighting the gap between their public relations puffery and their paucity of concrete action to forestall global warming.

In an article in the *Western Journal of Communication* titled "Identifying and Challenging Greenwashing through Conciliatio," co-authors Brett Bricker, associate specialist in the University of Kansas Department of Communication Studies, and his former student Jacob Justice, assistant professor at the University of Mississippi, argue that corporations' own

words can be effectively used against them in such instances.

"Conciliatio" is a Latin term for using someone's own words against them in an argument.

"The basic premise is that it's very hard to figure out what companies are actually doing," Bricker said. "Lots of companies, particularly [fossil fuel companies](#), try very hard to not disclose their investments and their lobbying reports. It would be difficult to definitively answer the question 'Does ExxonMobil, for example, genuinely support a carbon tax?' by digging through their lobbying and their investments.

"There is an easier path to figuring out whether or not the corporation actually supports [green energy](#), and that path is 'Do they still rhetorically support a continued investment in [fossil fuels](#)?' Because that is antithetical to being green. It's such a simpler question than doing investigative reporting, which is not only difficult, but which also leads to conclusions that are not absolute.

"I think it's an [effective strategy](#) because it demonstrates hypocrisy—that someone's actions do not match their words. And you can even say that someone's words don't match their words when they talk out of both sides of their mouth, depending on the particular audience.

"I think exposing hypocrisy—in the ideal public sphere—definitely works. Now, does it work in a siloed social media ecosystem, where people never get exposed to the other side? I don't know. Our paper is not focused on that question. I have to begin from the premise that rational argument can work."

The article explores the case of ExxonMobil CEO Darren Woods, who in 2017 addressed "the Super Bowl of energy policy conferences" about his company's priorities, including, as Woods is quoted as saying, "support for a government-led, global, 'uniform carbon price.'"

A "carbon price" or "carbon tax" is a proposed regulatory scheme in which polluting corporations would be taxed in order to incentivize greener forms of energy production.

"ExxonMobil's embrace of carbon pricing earned the corporation praise and favorable media coverage," the authors wrote. Yet they go on to argue that "ExxonMobil's rhetorical defense of a carbon price reveals the hollowness of their environmentalism ... lofty rhetoric paired with lackluster follow-through."

They conclude "by explaining the benefits of supplementary, communication-centered evidence for making greenwashing accusations persuasive."

Bricker said he wrote his [doctoral dissertation](#) a decade ago on climate change discourse.

"I tried to answer the question "Why is climate denialism outpacing the consensus view of climate change?" Then I took a lot of time off from climate change stuff. It's depressing. The discourse evolves, but the actions never do."

Then in 2018, Bricker said, while teaching a graduate seminar on environmental rhetoric, students asked to explore the topic of greenwashing.

"Corporations don't really deny as much anymore," he said. "They basically take two approaches. One is to accept the harm of climate change and then greenwash. So they adopt net zero pledges or make superficial repairs to heavily polluting industries. Second, they take the approach that it exists, but the U.S. can't do anything because of (pollution by) China and India and Russia."

Bricker said he doesn't expect corporations to respond to such criticism of greenwashing, but he wanted to put forth the best tips on how to make the charge.

"These companies have a fiduciary duty to maintain fossil fuel profits. I get that," Bricker said. "But there shouldn't be *New York Times* op-eds patting ExxonMobil on the back because they said they support a [carbon tax](#). We should be a little bit more reflective and not so congratulatory, because they haven't really done anything."

More information: Brett Bricker et al, Identifying and Challenging Greenwashing through Conciliatio, *Western Journal of Communication* (2022). [DOI: 10.1080/10570314.2022.2087893](https://doi.org/10.1080/10570314.2022.2087893)

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