

**Corporate Power and the Politics of Consensus
in Environmental Debates, 1976-1990**

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On 6 October 1976, an op-ed by the public relations executive John Wiley Hill appeared in the *New York Times*. Co-founder of the PR firm Hill & Knowlton in 1927, in the intervening forty-nine years Hill had grown the business from a small Cleveland concern into a team of 560 employees in thirty-six offices in the U.S. and 18 abroad, the largest public relations outfit in the world.¹ Though Hill had retired his position as CEO and chairman of Hill & Knowlton in 1962, he maintained a position on the firm's policy committee, preserving both his reputation and his commitment to the industry and his clients. He continued to appear at the office almost daily until a few weeks before his death in 1977.

The 1976 op-ed was not quite a swan song; but it did leave readers with a sense of both his imagined legacy and his concern for its future.

“I have lived through 21 Presidential campaigns and am now suffering through the 22nd,” the PR titan began. “I have seen 18 booms and busts in my lifetime and five wars.” Through the years he had helped his industry clients grow more and more powerful in the political arena. But now, he argued, business was losing its credibility, a result of its self-regard, its status as impersonal behemoth, and especially, its lack of attention to the public mindset. “If there's one thing the years have taught me it is that public opinion is the final, all-controlling force in human society,” Hill claimed. “Misled and poorly informed, it can come to false conclusions and do untold damage to business, the economy and the nation.”

Hill had reason to worry. By 1976, considerable damage to his clients had already been done. Commercial interests, or Big Business, with the capital letters implying an epithet, were on the back foot in 1976, as they had been increasingly since the mid-1960s owing to a combination of factors. After World War II, America's commitment to free enterprise and consumerism had meant that large corporations enjoyed unfettered access to capital and resources and relatively unobstructed decision-making about the shape and scope of markets. Industry's place in society was well assured. In the absence of government oversight or public pushback, however, corporate management had remained within its own orbit, largely indifferent to growing concerns over its size and power. This would change. "By 1970," writes the business historian David Vogel, "the corporation – its size, social role, political impact, and public accountability – would move from a peripheral to a central position on the nation's domestic political agenda."

The "David" pushing corporate Goliaths into this harsh spotlight was the public interest movement. The emergence and institutionalization of the public interest activist movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s represented the greatest challenge to business in the era and perhaps of the entire twentieth century. The rise of citizen groups focused on countering the political power of business in this time period was spurred by a number of factors: a more educated and expansive middle class and their changing attitudes toward political participation; the transformation of legal and political structures in the aftermath of the Watergate scandal; an increase in environmental and health disasters, brought to an increasingly national audience by the news media, especially television.

For PR men like Hill, one of the greatest threats posed by these groups was not their activism itself but the fact that it was undertaken in the name of "the public." In the decades after the end of WWII, companies were seen as important contributors to the war effort,

communicating their goals as being in symbiosis with those of society at large. Slogans like, “What’s good for General Motors is good for America,” or the Dupont Company’s “Better Things for Better Living...through Chemistry,” underscored major industries’ dominant self-understanding as directly aligned with the public interest. PR professionals, as managers of publics, spent their days crafting programs and campaigns to reinforce this alignment.

But by 1976, the ties were fraying. The dramatic expansion and institutionalization of public-interest groups, many organized collectively around citizen rights and the contestation of corporate governance and power, had created a new sense of the social body and of the need for diversity of voices in the political process. In the aftermath of the energy crisis and in the shadow of Watergate, business’s ability to connect self-interest with public needs was at an all-time low.

It was in the environmental realm that these new voices were especially loud. Since the publication of Carson’s *Silent Spring* galvanized its shocked and panicked readers, the political, legal and social opportunities for environmental advocacy had only multiplied. Civil society and government concern over environmental hazards accelerated throughout the 1960s.² Between 1967 and 1972, four federal environmental laws were passed and five national environmental organizations established: The National Environmental Policy Act (1969), the Occupational Safety and Health Act (1970), and important amendments to the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act (1972); and the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency (1970), the Environmental Defense Fund (1967), the Natural Resources Defense Council (1970), the Union for Concerned Scientists (1969), and Environmental Action (1970).³ Twenty million people took to the streets on America’s first “Earth Day” on 22 April 1970. Industry was in crisis mode, accused by all comers of ignoring the environmental impacts of its output and facing major changes to its means of production.

Hill's op-ed was a call to action. Business must learn to link "the vital elements of policies, performance and communications" in a bid for "openness, forthrightness and clarity in matters of public concern," he wrote. Its task: to wrest control of "the public interest" back from those who now operated under its banner. "Business must show, by policies and acts in the public interest and by speaking out clearly and convincingly to people, that it is worthy of their support and confidence. In my opinion, the survival of private enterprise will depend on how well this job is done."

This article tells the story of how business succeeded in this enterprise. Over the next ten years, business would work steadily to ensure that its policies and practices were undertaken in the name of the public interest. In the realm of environmental issues, the task was to show that business was not only *not* part of the problem, but in fact part of the solution to environmental concerns. Rather than adapt its practices to conform to emerging environmental standards, however, business took a different tack, adapting the *meaning* of the public and the public interest to make it more aligned with its own self-interested objectives.⁴ To do this, business leaders made use of the values their opponents had embodied: a commitment to pluralism in political debate; citizen participation in decisions around public policy; and transparency in the political process.

For private industry to regain its voice in political life, it needed to counter the increasingly coordinated and unified citizens' movement with a coordinated movement of its own. Organizational scholars have documented the resurgence of corporate political power during this time period.⁵ Barley describes the multiple pro-business populations that made up an "institutional field for shaping public policy": business and trade associations, political action committees, public and government affairs offices, law and lobbying firms, ad hoc "astroturf"

coalitions, foundations and think tanks, and public relations firms.⁶ Inspired by the manifesto of Lewis F. Powell in his infamous 1971 Memorandum, the populations in this institutional field echoed the values of free enterprise through a broad range of public and political channels.⁷

They amplified these values through a range of strategies, many of them borrowed from their antagonistic counterparts: grassroots organizing and coalition building, “cooperative oligopolies” formed via interlocking directorates; revolving door hiring among industry institutions; and appeals to human values and emotions.⁸ With these strategies in place, business would, in this era, eventually develop a structure of social and political legitimacy that would offset the gains made by citizen movements in the courts and among the public.

Central to the coordination, coherence, and effectiveness of these strategies was the integrative and communicative work of public relations. Not just Hill & Knowlton but dozens of other PR firms joined forces in this time period to reposition their corporate clients as active participants in the pursuit of the public interest. As an epistemic community – a group of experts with recognized authority over norms, rules and decision-making around governance issues – PR actors worked to create and structure specific kinds of knowledge around environmental action. This knowledge differed from the technical, scientific and legal information underlying the era’s calculations and calls for environmental regulation. Instead, PR actors advanced a managerial authority, producing standard-setting contexts where communication around environmental issues could take place in reasonable, rational, and disciplined forms.⁹

At the heart of the public relations principle is the effort to bring different publics toward a common understanding, whether through consensus, accommodation, or compromise. As Lee Edwards and Caroline Hodges define it, PR plays a crucial role “as a discursive force in society, shaping social and cultural values and beliefs in order to legitimize certain interests over others.”

PR is not merely a functional process carried out by organizations; rather, it is “a contingent, socio-cultural activity that forms part of the communicative process by which society constructs its symbolic and material ‘reality.’”¹⁰

Compromise is a process of building equivalencies: making ideas or things that are not alike into objects that resemble one another. One way to solidify a compromise, Boltanski and Thévenot write, “is to place objects composed of elements stemming from different worlds at the service of the common good.”¹¹ If all parties to the debate orient their cause to the idea of the common good, even opposing views can be made to appear to be acting in good faith and with a disinterested or altruistic approach. This is the technology of public relations in action.

Key to this endeavor is to devise language and practice that is aligned with the public in question. The authority of the PR expert resides in their ability to identify and wield compromise “objects” – a set of designations and formulations that establish points of reference for all members of the debate. “A large part of the process of working out a compromise thus consists in reaching consensus as to the adequate term, finding a formulation acceptable to all – one that ‘sounds right.’”¹² Understanding how PR mediates consensus and compromise allows us to understand how business succeeded, in the 1970s and 1980s, in gaining control of the public interest. As in the Progressive era, the concept of the public interest was a powerful constellation of ideas about the role of the public in a democracy. Set against the heartless, crushing strength of industry’s self-interest, the public interest stood for the idea that citizens could participate in the political process; that a plurality of voices was endemic to democracy; and that information should be available to all.

By the middle of the 1980s, private industry had taken these qualities associated with the public interest for itself, establishing a deep foothold in the making of public policy around

environmental issues. It transformed environmental problems into problems that business could recognize and act upon, making the environment more manageable for business. These reframed problems were not about restitution for environmental destruction. On the contrary, they were about maintaining the distance between the concept of the natural environment and the role of humans in its destruction. What to do about the environment had to be turned into a matter of debate; and business had to be made into the smartest and most rational party to this debate. To understand how business regained its voice, we need to look closely at the communicative techniques and technologies employed by public relations.

“Survival in an Age of Activism”

If John Hill’s op-ed on 6 October 1976 diagnosed the disease afflicting PR counselors and their corporate clients, the cause of this malady is symbolized by the front-page story in the paper that same day: “Allied Chemical Gets a Fine of \$13 Million in Kepone Polluting.” For years, Allied Chemical had discharged process water laced with Kepone, a DDT-related insecticide, into the Chesapeake Bay in Virginia, poisoning the waterway’s fish and causing neurological problems in workers who had handled the chemical.

In the sentencing against Allied, the largest polluting penalty ever levied on a company, the judge made clear his reasons for such a powerful sentence. “The environment belongs to every citizen, from the lowest to the highest,” he said to the assembled parties in the courtroom. “As a nation, we are dedicated to clean water. I disagree with the defendant’s position that this was all done innocently. I think it was done as a business necessity, to save money. I don’t think we can let commercial interests rule our lives.”

The devastating effects of DDT (dichloro-diphenyl-trichloroethane, a chemical compound) were more or less completely unknown to the public until the early 1960s. In the immediate post-WWII era, DDT was celebrated as a highly effective and sophisticated means to protect citizens and crops from insect-related diseases. Cinematic footage showing people being doused with DDT to protect against polio was produced by American and British governments as a demonstration of the ongoing power of industry and its technical mastery over the environment.¹³

One of the many explanations for the outgrowth and institutionalization of citizen advocacy around environmental issues in the 1960s resides in the emergence of the public interest movement. Of course, “lobbying for the people” -- collective action by ordinary individuals around social or political issues in the name of influencing public policy -- is not unique to this era.¹⁴ In its community orientation, drive for institutional change, and push to limit corporate control, the public interest movement followed the path laid by earlier movements in the American reform tradition, such as the muckrakers of the Progressive era and the labor unions of the 1930s.¹⁵ In the 1960s, however, public interest groups took on a distinct character. The definition of public interest in this context was the pursuit of a noneconomic good that would benefit ordinary people in their everyday lives. This definition placed the public interest in direct opposition to the notion of self-interest: economically or politically motivated goals that favor elite and established groups.

The Allied Chemical fine was symbolic in another way. It illustrated a signature tactic of the environmental movement to gain attention to its cause: the use of lawsuits as a means of advocacy. The Environmental Defense Fund was incorporated in 1967 following a successful suit brought by scientists and bird watchers to stop DDT from being sprayed in Suffolk County,

New York.¹⁶ Backed by the National Audubon Society, and using the publicity generated by the legal case to mobilize additional supporters and funds, the anti-DDT campaign culminated in 1972 with a ban on DDT by the newly formed Environmental Protection Agency.¹⁷

Two legal concepts in particular were cornerstones in the consolidation of lawsuits as means of citizen advocacy and the further embedding of “public interest” as a collective good against private industry. These were the concept of “standing” and the concept of “class action.” Notably, both emerged from environmental concerns. The doctrine of standing refers to “who has a right to be heard in court on particular issues involving activities undertaken or regulated by public agencies.”¹⁸ Until the 1960s, standing was determined by interest, and interest referred to economic interest. Those with a right to be heard had to demonstrate their interest on the basis of economic impact. In other words, standing was for private parties and not for individual citizens with a concern for the public good.

Following two precedent-setting cases, the court reasoned that this notion of standing was too limited. Citizens have “an interest in actions that affect the nature of the environment, and that this interest is arguably within the zone of interests that are or should be protected by law.”¹⁹ The standing of the citizen took into account “as a basic concern the preservation of natural beauty and of national historic shrines, keeping in mind that, in our affluent society, the cost of a project is only one of several factors to be considered.”²⁰ Going forward, “citizens will be recognized in court as advocates of a public interest, on the grounds that, as members of the public, they have been or may be injured by the actions complained of.”²¹ Federal judges increasingly interpreted federal statutes “to guarantee a wide variety of groups the right to participate directly in agency deliberations as well as to bring their complaints to court.”²² Class

action expanded this emergent right for citizens to participate in legal and regulatory proceedings.

Closely connected to the problem of the public interest, for corporate leaders, was the problem of publicity. A key figure in the public interest movement, and arguably the motive force behind such publicity, Ralph Nader and his team of public interest lawyers had been pushing forward “citizen action as a countervailing force” against big business and irresponsible government. Born in 1934 in Winsted, Connecticut, the son of Lebanese immigrants, Nader’s career helped transform the format and genre of citizen and consumer advocacy. Nader, a graduate of Harvard Law School, understood not only the power of legal action but also the power of research and of grassroots networks. He created a set of organizations – the Center for Study of Responsive Law in 1969; the Corporate Accountability Research Group in 1971; and Public Citizen Inc. in 1971 (which itself spawned a volunteer-run national network of Citizen Action Groups, better known today as Public Interest Research Groups, or PIRGs) – all dedicated to exposing corporate, government and regulator malfeasance.²³

Beyond his legal skills, his capacity for research, and his organizational prowess, Nader was an exceptional and tireless publicist. Cross-country speaking tours, press conferences, congressional lobbying, petitions and letter-writing campaigns, small-scale advertising to solicit funding contributions (“voluntary contributions solicited through paid newspaper ads and mailings”), publication of research studies and working papers, attendance at public hearings – Nader and his “Raiders,” as his staff were known, wielded the power of the media in framing and amplifying their efforts, all in the service of public reform.²⁴ Colleagues and like-minded organizers did the same. John Gardner, profiled in the *New Yorker* in 1973 about his reform organization Common Cause, noted the need for citizen action to be supported by an informed

public. “The special interests flourish in the dark. Officials begin to respect citizen action when they discover that citizens are watching and the media are reporting what the citizens see.”²⁵

Barry Commoner, ecologist and research scientist, who spent his career demonstrating the relationships between scientific information and citizen action, in 1963 co-founded along with the anthropologist Margaret Mead a national organization, The Scientists’ Institute for Public Information (SIPI), which for two decades sought to ensure public participation in environmental politics.²⁶

As experts in matters of publicity, PR counselors were particularly worried about these activities, and even more so their own weakening grip on the public narrative. Throughout the 1960s and into the ‘70s, they had grown increasingly uneasy about the new conjunction of environment, public, and publicity, and a style of advocacy that left them in the cold. Many public relations managers diagnosed the problem as an excess of human “feeling” around environmental and other social issues, an emotional response produced by overdramatic extremists and ungirded by the facts of the matter.

The trade journals reflected this mounting concern. A 1969 opinion piece in *PR Journal*, *Survival in An Age of Activism*, describes a world of growing complexity and information overload which public audiences cannot digest. Instead, they are swayed by the “human feeling” conveyed by activists. “In the arena of present ‘attitude management,’ not the facts but the impression people get of a situation is the real reality. What the public thinks is ‘real’ will probably determine the result, and not the merits or the actual conditions.” The greatest problem, the author concludes, is that “communication in our society is in revolution. The standard processes whereby information and ideas seep through the populace, from the top down or

horizontally, cannot compete with the visible, dramatic, easy-to-sensationalize communication that results from activism.”²⁷

In another *PR Journal* article, *Environment: A New PR Crisis*, the director of PR firm W. R. Grace & Co. also noted the power of media “sensationalism” to influence publics around environmental issues, with troubling implications for industrial PR:

Industrial public relations men, particularly those in heavy industries such as chemicals, steel, cement, paper and petroleum – to name a few – will come to think of the 1970s as the decade that focused on every ill, real or imaginary, foisted on man by man’s own need for industrial products and by the disposal of the waste materials resulting from their manufacture and use.²⁸

“Far more ink and rhetoric and videotape flowed for Earth Day than for any special day or week or month that any of us ever devised,” complained the director of public relations for the Dow Chemical Company. “In that sense Earth Day must stand as a publicity triumph of the greatest magnitude.”²⁹

A 1971 report by Hill & Knowlton pulled no punches in condemning the activists, public interest organizations, and scientists whose growing influence and coordinated efforts were creating the problem. *Slings and Arrows, Inc.: A Report on the Activists*, highlighted Nader, Commoner, and Gardner as prime movers in the influence network, “able to enlist the support of millions – and the influential thousands – by pursuing causes and abrading grievances that are real enough to bring enthusiastic support – at the nation’s capital and ‘way down home.’”³⁰ The report reviewed annual directories of environmental science and conservation groups and

analyzed the backgrounds of board of trustees and advisory council members for a range of recently established organizations: The Environmental Defense Fund, Friends of the Earth, SIPI, and the Center for the Study of Responsive Law.

“These rosters show how a few dedicated people with a little money, a lot of publicity, and an idea with great appeal can today launch what appear to be mass movements, can influence politicians, harass industry, use laws and courts and regulatory bodies, enlist popular support for their objectives, and accomplish many of their objectives,” the report read. It continued:

And in pursuing their objectives some do not hesitate to use shock tactics, preaching doomsday because man is upsetting nature’s balance and destroying the environment. Deliberate exaggeration is part of their strategy and they defend it as necessary to dramatize their cause and get attention. So they picket, stage rallies and demonstrate, especially when the television cameras are turning. And of course, they write, they speak, they testify and they attend, and they disrupt meetings – endlessly, but with a dedication not matched by those whom they criticize and attack.³¹

Lists of disruptions to industrial projects (power plants, pesticides, auto manufacturing, trash collection...) and recent and forthcoming regulatory initiatives to further dampen industrial production were accompanied by a series of recommendations. “If anything has been shown in the last few years and in the preceding pages, it is that if business doesn’t take on some of these responsibilities – someone else will...it is obvious that if the businessman waits to be forced into action, he may find himself forced out of the action.” Ultimately, Hill & Knowlton concluded,

business needs to “offer better, more sensible and feasible, more viable and more honest alternatives...and beat ‘em at their own game – if we’re not too late.”³²

Milton Wessel and the Rule of Reason

Business, and especially the public relations profession, found its answer in the ideas of Mr. Milton Wessel.

Milton Wessel was an American trial lawyer who made his career in corporate practice. From 1970 until 1978, he worked with the chemical industry, as General Counsel to the Chemical Industry Institute of Toxicology (CIIT), and as Special Litigation Counsel to the Dow Chemical Company. Wessel’s primary concern was what he called socioscientific disputes. These, for Wessel, were problems that were based on complex scientific or technical formulas but that were of concern to society at large, and therefore required public favor in order to be resolved.

Wessel had experienced his share of socioscientific disputes. He had represented Dow in connection with the 2,4,5-T herbicide, a highly toxic contaminant developed by Dow and used in Vietnam under the infamous name, Agent Orange. He had witnessed the increasing failure of his corporate clients to win the lawsuits brought against them. But more concerning to Wessel was that these failures appeared to be the result not of justifiable guilt but of underinformed public opinion. A number of recent events, from the Three Mile Island nuclear disaster to the increased recognition of carcinogens in food to the awareness of air pollution caused by coal mining, were inspiring a growing distrust by the public in the benefits of scientific and technological progress. And this distrust was manifested in the number of legal cases being brought against companies

as well as the desire by the public to know how these companies affected their health and wellbeing.

Amidst this call for more information and greater transparency by industry, Wessel worried that his clients, and the legal profession more broadly, were being dragged through the mud. Wessel felt that the due process of the court was being displaced by the emotional tenor of the court of public opinion. A central problem with public-interest affairs, Wessel argued, is that while typical courtroom proceedings emphasize a focus on justice and fair process to determine the outcome, “the public wants the focus to be on ‘truth’ alone.” Yet ‘truth,’ Wessel explained, “is an uncertain and sometimes most illusory concept”³³:

The public does not care that the rules are carefully and properly followed, which is the primary focus of our traditional adversarial mechanisms... The public has great interest in the outcomes of these disputes, which involve important ‘quality of life’ problems. It cannot adequately evaluate those results, however, because of the enormous complexity and uncertainty which are always involved. As a result, the public will be satisfied with, and accept, the decisions in these disputes only if it has confidence in the integrity of the process by which those decisions are being reached.³⁴

Wessel’s solution was to develop an alternative process for debate; one that took socioscientific disputes out of the adversarial and procedural arena of the courtroom and into an environment with more room for discussion, negotiation, and compromise. In a non-confrontational, collaborative setting that brought opponents to the negotiating table, companies could engage in public-interest affairs on surer footing. Rather than being labeled as opponents of the public

interest, pursuing due process at the expense of moral or social truths, companies could find ways to create outcomes that demonstrated their social responsibility and commitment to society's progress.

Wessel called this alternative process the Rule of Reason. The Rule of Reason was a method of resolving disputes that involved long-range planning instead of short-term wins. It entailed a vision whereby “the leaders of science, industry and society” met to “reduc[e] confrontation and introduc[e] reason and logic into the resolution process.” It sought “transparency” in the process, more sources of information as evidence, and simplification of complex scientific concepts to facilitate public understanding. “There must be a major effort by all to understand the views of any opposition and to accommodate to it whenever possible.”³⁵ In sum, it offered a managerial, instead of adversarial, approach to resolving contentious issues.

Implicit in Wessel's alternative means to resolve social and environmental disputes was a deep desire to regain credibility for his clients and for his own profession. Prominent court battles between corporations and environmental groups were furthering the conceptual gap between the rapacious self-interest of business and the collective public interest of environmentally minded citizens and scientists. In a review of his 1976 book, *The Rule of Reason: A New Approach to Corporate Litigation*, the *New York Times* quoted Wessel on the motivation of his pen: “Environmentalists have discovered the soft underbelly of the industrialists... They sometimes provoke the hell out of the companies and win unsound cases as a result.”³⁶

The Rule of Reason was therefore a response to the damage caused to business and the law on multiple fronts. It advocated an alternative path to the seeming cut-and-dried outcomes of courtroom battles and the indisputable evidence of scientific research in environmental disputes.

By urging business leaders to fight back with appeals to reason, long-term thinking, and points of consensus, Wessel was offering a chance for business to participate in the environmental sphere on more even footing.

This insight landed in the PR community like a bolt of lightning. Here was the answer to the problems that plagued PR counselors in the environmental arena. Public relations agents could use the Rule of Reason to reposition business as a committed participant and partner in environmental problem-solving. By appearing to extend the olive branch in contentious environmental disputes, business could take on the role of the reasonable and rational party, while counterposing antagonistic response by environmentalists as unreasonable and extreme. And by framing business as operating *within* the public interest instead of against it, PR communicators could demonstrate their clients' ability to heed the power of public opinion as well as regain their own authority as managers of this public opinion. To be worthy of its name, public relations needed to take back the mantle of the public interest.

PR Expands Its Authority

Public relations counselors realized that applying the lessons of the Rule of Reason to environmental problems involved a series of maneuvers. First, they needed to establish their own authority as arbiters of reason, independently of the legal profession. For it was not only business whose reputation was suffering in the 1970s. In the aftermath of the Watergate scandal, trust in the legal profession was at an all-time low. As Wessel himself delicately observed in the preface to his book, "Public dismay at the Watergate disclosures regarding the improper conduct of so

many lawyers, and the burgeoning complaints regarding the inadequacy of trial attorneys, reflect the reduced esteem in which the profession is presently held.”³⁷

The Watergate scandal was a point of inflection for the public relations industry as well. Increasing public scrutiny in the mid-1970s, and congressional reforms distributing power among subcommittees, made old-style centralized lobbying ineffective.³⁸ For some PR firms, the solution was to gain distance—at least in appearance—from lobbying activities. But as managerial elites began to consider a stronger role in public policy making, business groups sought more, not less, access to Washington corridors.

Traditionally, the tasks of negotiating with power brokers in Congress (“government relations”) and appealing to audiences in state and local arenas to gain support for a policy position (“public relations”) were discrete functions carried out by separate and not necessarily related authorities. But as *Business Week* reported in 1979, “Businessmen are quickly searching for new lobbying techniques that are better suited for gaining the favor of a more independent Congress. They recognize that public opinion has greater sway over most policymakers in the post-Watergate era, and congressmen, in particular, appear much more responsive to the demands of their constituencies and less to the wishes of party and congressional leaders.”³⁹

In response, companies integrated the two types of advocacy, either by assembling an in-house public affairs team or by working with external PR/public affairs firms (some of which were staffed with former employees). Public affairs slowly gained authority as an executive function rather than merely an administrative one. By connecting government relations with public relations, and by increasing the number of PR representatives both within private sector firms and in their own PR firms across different states, the effect was to dramatically increase the channels of communication of an issue, so that constituents “back home” effectively joined

Washington negotiators in lobbying around questions of public policy.⁴⁰ This allowed contentious industry players to “decentralize” their efforts, impacting municipal or state populations instead of just on Capitol Hill.⁴¹

At the same time, prominent PR firms and companies began to employ well-connected lobbyists to operate from within their firms.⁴² The job of public relations itself took on a more expansive role, adding to its standard tasks technical knowledge about environmental and health problems, regulatory knowledge about environmental policy issues, and legal knowledge about navigating trials.⁴³ Writing in *PR Journal* in 1977, E. Bruce Harrison encouraged his colleagues to see themselves as managers and to treat the capitol as a “management system”:

Laws are not “enacted by Congress”; they are the end product of the efforts of successful managers. Regulations are not “promulgated by” a certain agency; they are the result of successful management. News and commentary are not mere outpourings “of the media” or “of the *Washington Post*”; they are the yield of planning, motivating and regulating the tasks of persons who are writers, editors, and broadcasters.⁴⁴

In some cases, instead of working through existing trade associations or industry groups, PR counselors would create their own organizational forms to manage specific issues – especially if those issues required urgent attention. One PR expert, Matthew M. Swetonic, described his experience working for Johnson-Manville Corporation’s asbestos-health management committee in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Facing growing media scrutiny over asbestos exposure, Swetonic encouraged Johnson-Manville to form a trade association that would exclusively handle the communications aspects of this issue. In this way, Johnson-Manville would reduce its

own individual media exposure and create an actor to represent the entire US industry, decreasing the firm's direct liability. The association, created in 1970, was called Asbestos Information Association/North America (AIA/NA), and its responsibilities went far beyond what was considered standard public relations at the time. This is how Swetonic describes it: "The Association would not just deal with the media, but would create a technical information arm to advise industry members on the appropriate ways to control asbestos exposures in the workplace; a regulatory information arm to work with government agencies on the development of reasonable workplace and environmental standards; and, in the future, a legal arm to assist the industry as whole in defending itself against liability claims."⁴⁵

With every "arm" created, we see the further reach of managerial strategy into political and social spheres. Constructing the environment as an object to be managed is the outcome of concerted and ongoing control by industry actors, constituted and coordinated in large measure by PR managers. Each arm makes the environment more stable as a concept and more difficult to shift in the public mind. What had to shift, then, was the terrain on which activism could take place. Forced to do battle with an increasingly intractable idea of the environment as a product of technical information, industrial standardization, and public mediation, activists found themselves renewing their emphasis on consumer-oriented, rather than citizen-oriented, tactics. This terrain was far more familiar to industry leaders and their PR managers, allowing them to continue to set the rules of engagement.

Displacing Scientific Evidence

A second way public relations counselors aimed to instill the Rule of Reason into environmental debate was to produce a different style of negotiation that would take the place of courtroom disputes. Here they innovated with a managerial negotiation style, one designed to reach points of consensus, agreement and compromise rather than antagonistic opposition.⁴⁶

This was achieved by transforming what counted as evidence in negotiations. One of the problems plaguing environmental battles, for corporate actors, was the reliance on scientific expertise. The criteria used by scientists to judge the efficiency and dangers of chemicals, and especially to determine what was necessary to safeguard the public, was heavily relied upon in the court cases brought by the environmental movement. Until the early 1960s, industry had a stranglehold on scientific research conducted on the health effects of their products. Moreover, leading up to and immediately after the Second World War, “Americans assumed that science was good, that chemicals were necessary, that these experts could be trusted, and the side-effects of chemical use would be negligible.”⁴⁷ But in the postwar years, with greater government funding, and more public and Congressional scrutiny of the health hazards of industrial products, arm’s-length scientific work uncovered serious concerns, bolstering and extending the environmental movement’s impact.⁴⁸

Wessel argued that the burden of scientific consensus – its slow, incremental, and highly technical nature – was at odds with the need to communicate to the public about society’s major environmental problems. “We no longer have the luxury of awaiting a final scientific consensus in this traditional sense. Decisions *must* be made now. There is no other alternative. We either do or do not use a chemical; we either do or do not use nuclear power. To await the final, traditional

scientific consensus may mean that the barn door was closed long after the animals escaped. We must find a scientific alternative.”⁴⁹

“Forming the best possible public policy decisions in socioscientific disputes requires a very different kind of scientific consensus than that of the past,” Wessel argued. To foster democratic decision-making around issues of public concern, people needed more information about scientific matters, and particularly in which areas scientists *did* find consensus in terms of how science impacted public policy. Where there are “substantial areas of agreement, the public is entitled to have the benefit of such agreements,” he wrote.⁵⁰

Wessel’s paradigm emerged from a highly publicized controversy: the trial brought by the Environmental Protection Agency with the Environmental Defense Fund against the Dow Chemical Company over the toxicity of the chemical 2,4,5-T. In 1948, the chemical was registered as a pesticide in the U.S. and used to manage agricultural crops and control weeds. It was little known to the public until the Vietnam War, when it was used as a defoliant known as Agent Orange. By the end of the 1960s, reports emerged that the defoliant was having severe health effects on local populations in Vietnam. News reports began covering administrative and class action suits charging that the herbicide caused birth defects and cancer, raising public alarm. In the early 1970s, the Environmental Protection Agency moved to ban the chemical, sparking further media coverage of the growing controversy.

On 8-9 March 1974, a conference was held by the Dow Chemical Company to prepare for the upcoming trial. As counsel to the company, Wessel advised his client to review the scientific evidence as carefully as possible to see where it might not hold up. “New understanding or information might suggest that more testing and research were required, or that some preconceived view of the scientific evidence should be modified.”⁵¹ Although the lawyers

from EPA/EDF were not initially invited, the publicity surrounding the event eventually forced their opponents to allow them to attend.

What ensued, in Wessel's terms, was an unprecedented opportunity for dialogue between adversarial groups. By examining opposing evidence and sharing points of agreement, "It became more and more clear that many apparent scientific differences were not differences at all, or were really differences in the kinds of risks people believed worth taking – value differences, and not scientific differences."⁵²

Three and a half months later, on 24 June 1974, Deputy EPA Administrator John Quarles announced that the EPA was terminating its proceedings. For Wessel, it was a moment of transformation:

Whatever future scientific research and investigation might suggest, EPA's "public-policy" decision on 24 June 1974 was that the benefits of permitting continued use of 2,4,5-T outbalanced the hazards. People might differ with this value judgement; no one differed sufficiently with the scientific evaluation to complain legally. As the result of the "rule of reason" conference, "science" had thus been factored into "public policy" with enough credibility to at least end the legal fight for the time being.⁵³

In years to come, the battle would continue to rage, in and out of the courtroom. But in this moment, the outcome of the 2,4,5-T debate was to open the door to shifting the basis of knowledge from scientific to dialogical norms of consensus. With a focus on dialogue, values, cooperation, and compromise, industry and its representatives could gain a stronger foothold in the policy debates.

By the 1980s, the idea of “alternative dispute resolution” had made considerable inroads into business strategy. By 1985, at least 113 companies had signed a “Corporate Policy Statement on Alternative Dispute Resolution,” a voluntary pledge that commits the signatories to engage in ADR “as a method of first resort,” before turning to the courts.⁵⁴ The chemical industry in particular was a staunch advocate of ADR. The president of the Chemical Manufacturers Association (CMA) sent a letter to its members encouraging them to sign the pledge. “If our industry is seen as generally inclined to consider ADR in intercorporate disputes, that reputation may have a spillover effect when we deal with Washington issues in convincing people that we are serious about trying to cooperatively solve problems in that arena as well,” the president of the CMA told *Chemical Week*.⁵⁵ The spirit of compromise embedded in ADR made it a superior strategy for polluting industries. It was hard to fault a company that embraced dialogue, reason, and joint efforts to reach agreement. But the greater effect of zeroing in on common cause and shared values was to sidestep incontrovertible scientific evidence of environmental problems. It was far easier for companies to regain legitimacy through a democratically inflected commitment to dialogue and collective participation than to push over the competent and critical integrity of scientific findings.

The EPA also developed a regulatory negotiation project, including groups like the CMA, the National Agricultural Chemicals Association and the U.S. Dept of Agriculture to work out issues surrounding pesticides.⁵⁶

PR and the Court of Public Opinion

A third maneuver undertaken by public relations counselors from the late 1960s through the 1980s was to anoint the court of public opinion, rather than the court of law, to render final judgement on environmental issues. To a certain extent, this had already been done for them. As Michael Schudson has written, this was the era of “the right to know,” in which public audiences called for increased transparency and availability of information as the “currency” of democracy. “Information and its availability to the public at large became a theme for a wide variety of reforms and reformers in just the years that Nader came to national influence in the mid-1960s and into the 1970s.”⁵⁷

The passage of environmental laws in this era, such as the 1969 National Environmental Policy Act and its “most potent element,” the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), mandated the disclosure of the potential environmental hazards of any proposed legislation or other major Federal action. The EIS was by decree a document subject to public review. It instilled a mechanism of accountability, via information, into the Federal government in the realm of environmental protection. Most important for our purposes, it moved the idea of the public from a beneficiary of environmental action to an active participant in its outcome and preservation.⁵⁸ It would transform both citizen interventions and institutional culture for decades to come.

As Stephanie Lemenager has pointed out, “Transitions between mass media platforms have coincided with innovations in environmental action/philosophy.”⁵⁹ The rise of television as a medium of environmental action created immediate and visible forms of evidence for their cause. The environmental organization Greenpeace had burst onto the scene in 1970 using television as a central tactic in its direct-action protests. Greenpeace helped to create an international, middle-class audience for environmental issues, using both their own footage and news coverage of their actions to build resonance with this new public.⁶⁰

In the national context, the task for corporate PR counselors was to find ways to create and circulate information about the environment on behalf of their clients that could match the power of the information emanating from the media and from executive agencies. It had to resonate with the values of the era: transparency, accountability, and democracy. And it had to operate in the name of the public interest.

PR representatives had already worked hard to generate a wealth of *internal* information for their clients about air and water pollution. The American Petroleum Institute, for instance, had developed extensive information banks for its members, including newsletters, bibliographies, and background papers. It prepared briefings and testimony for public hearings and sponsored research at government facilities.

This internal information now needed public forums to resonate with the values of the era's "right to know." To get this information from the hands of members into the hands of the public, one of PR agents' roles was to develop more sophisticated relationships with media makers and opinion leaders, which they did increasingly over the course of the 1970s.

Advertorials – a portmanteau for advertising and editorial commentary – were one way industrial organizations aimed to create dialogue in the public interest in the 1970s. Advertorials to promote a political position, also known as advocacy advertising, had been used to great effect throughout the twentieth century. Brown and Waltzer describe one of the earliest advertorial campaigns in the 1908 push by the American Telephone and Telegraph Company for a monopoly national telephone system.⁶¹ The impact of industry advertorials on political discourse was dramatically expanded on 26 September 1970, when the *New York Times* created an op-ed page, assigning the lower right quadrant of the page to noncommercial speakers.⁶² Less than a month later, Mobil ran its first op-ed ad.⁶³

“For a free society to survive, the public must have access to the widest spectrum of news, facts, and opinions,” Schmertz opined in an interview a few years later. “In 1970 it was our view that business in general, and the oil companies in particular, was failing in its obligation to inform the public.” In addition to offering solutions to the energy shortage, Schmertz highlighted another prime function of the advertorials: “We felt that litigation, legislation, and regulation were creating problems for our nation by impeding energy production and raising energy costs.” The advertorials, therefore, were another source of non-scientific evidence in the name of the public interest. “Mobil sought to foster a dialogue by expanding the spectrum of views, opinions and facts and by alerting people to the dangers that threatened the economic health of the nation.”⁶⁴ But the traditional efforts of speaking to journalists was of limited use, given the tendency of the media, in Schmertz’s terms, toward “simplification and distortion.” By ensuring Mobil’s own voice was heard, in its own words, advocacy advertising could gain the ear of the public for the problems as they themselves wanted them articulated.⁶⁵ Throughout the 1970s, Mobil maintained a massive advertising and op-ed campaign “with continuing emphasis on the need for growth in energy and the economy.”⁶⁶

By 1973, Mobil was placing its advertorials in five other major newspapers: the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Boston Globe*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Washington Post*.⁶⁷ A year later, in an effort to reach beyond urban publics to the “heartland-community readers,” they added a magazine campaign, placing its advertorials in popular magazines like *Reader’s Digest*, *Time*, *Parade*, and *Family Weekly*, and in service-club magazines such as *Rotarian*, *Kiwanian*, *Moose*, and *Elks*.⁶⁸ The advertorials ran every Thursday for nearly thirty years, from 1972 through 2000.⁶⁹ As an internal report of Mobil’s public affairs

campaigns concluded, “In a relaxed way, these columns got across Mobil’s major themes, not only the need for energy but the need for less regulation.”⁷⁰

Mobil’s public relations and advocacy program extended far beyond newspaper advertorials. To respond to the television coverage of environmental action protests and what the company perceived as unfair reporting on the energy crisis and the Arab embargo, Mobil sought to turn this medium to its advantage. One strategy involved a campaign of media “blitzes,” coordinated by public relations managers, by Mobil executives around specific issues. Between 1975 and 1977, Mobil conducted three blitzes, on Mobil’s proposals for a National Energy Plan, on the divestiture issue, and on the topic, “Is America running out of Oil and Gas?” On this latter topic, “23 senior Mobil managers...visited 29 cities in 21 states, calling on 30 newspapers and appearing on 69 television shows and on 68 radio programs.”⁷¹

In addition to media relations, from 1975 through 1981 Mobil produced Public Service Announcements for television. This move allowed them to sidestep television network rules limiting airtime to commercial viewpoints on political issues. These 60-second spots, which aired regularly on around 175 stations, used third-party commentators and dealt with such issues as “offshore drilling, federal lands, and environmental protection.” The company also created 2-minute “news clips” for TV stations – commercials promoting Mobil’s take on energy issues – that reached broad audiences.⁷²

Perhaps the most impactful of Mobil’s onscreen public relations efforts to align their company with the public interest lay in their sponsorship of public television programming. Herbert Schmertz described his impetus for Mobil’s sponsorship of cultural programs in two ways. First, as an opportunity to position the company’s leaders “as corporate statesmen whose concerns go beyond the bottom line...and intellectually entitled to be listened to on vital public-

policy issues.”⁷³ Second, “we now find that when we give certain publics a reason to identify with the projects and causes that we have chosen to support, they will translate that identification into a preference for doing business with us.”⁷⁴

The American Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) was an ideal venue in Mobil’s eyes. As public, non-commercial television, it did not carry advertising. Mobil’s voice in this context was therefore perceived as itself public and noncommercial. Starting in 1971, its sponsorship of the immensely popular television show, *Masterpiece Theatre* (replacing the Ford Foundation as the largest sponsor of PBS) aligned the company with the genteel elitism of the English drama. Mobil did not only sponsor the show; it selected the theme music and the host. Mobil also controlled all of the publicity for the show, presenting it as Mobil *Masterpiece Theatre*. Though the company was not allowed to advertise on the channel, it created a tagline that was voiced over the show each time it aired: “Made possible by a grant from Mobil Corporation, which invites you to join with them in supporting public television.”⁷⁵ As media critic Laurence Jarvik notes, Mobil’s PBS affiliation earned it considerable legitimacy in other realms where public relations was required. It greased the wheels of their lobbying efforts against oil company divestiture as well as in the wake of President Jimmy Carter’s National Energy Plan of 1979.⁷⁶

Such efforts, with Mobil at the helm, “reflect a concerted effort to symbolically establish the corporation as a viable citizen in modern democracy.”⁷⁷ Public relations had dramatic effects on the ways that corporations retooled the notion of public interest in their image. More to the point, this influence and these efforts shaped the way we understand environmentalism today. The messages that were communicated, such as those which balanced energy needs and economic growth, conspicuously avoided any mention of the environmental hazards of their actions. Indeed, the environment was painted as secondary to energy in this corporate-political

discourse. The reasonable path was to focus on energy and economy. Activists pushing for policies and regulation that put environmental needs first were increasingly painted as unreasonable, irrational, and extreme.

Business in the Public Interest

Two more rule-of-reason-based strategies by public relations counselors would be of consequence for the transfer of business interests into the public interest. One was the portrayal of corporations as activists in and of themselves. This strategy was devised to express devotion to the spirit of public advocacy while in practice toppling the pedestal on which environmentalists had been perched. The other was the proliferation and institutionalization of industry–environmentalist partnerships to further entrench a consensus logic into environmental problem-solving.

Now that PR agents had seeded opportunities for clients to present their environmental commitments to concerned publics, they encouraged them to develop a more a sustained program of communication, to anticipate environmental problems and become leaders in solving them. Like many of the other initiatives proposed by PR agents in this era, this was a means to promote their own competence as much as it was to help burnish their clients' image. PR counselor Howard W. Chase was one of the more vocal proponents of this idea, which he termed “issue management.” Issue management envisioned a systematic approach to information, one that not only communicates preestablished ideas but also forms them; that not merely manages environmental objectives but also anticipates and constructs them. Rather than asserting that the

values of the corporation are in the public interest, he argued, the PR professional ought to *create* the public interest by helping to direct and indeed make public policy.⁷⁸

Increasingly, articles about corporate political involvement characterized companies as “activists” in their own right.⁷⁹ Writing in the *California Management Review*, business professor Prakash Sethi described an evolutionary process by which companies became “activist” organizations to influence public policy. Companies should move from (1) a defensive, adversarial mode devoted to maintaining the status quo, past (2) an accommodative mode engaged in short-term campaigns in response to external factors, into (3) a stage of “positive activism.” The positive activism mode involved long-term strategic planning “on the basis of a normative concept of ‘public interest’ and ‘policy agenda’ supported by the corporation.” In this mode, senior management moved from “informal and secretive lobbying of key legislators” to “speaking out on public issues and offering advice and assistance to executive and legislative branches [of Congress]”; from noncontroversial community affairs and corporate contributions to the “development of new groups ... in support of a national policy agenda”; and from resistance to other groups’ viewpoints to “emphasis on the development of third sector as bulwark against increasing government encroachment in the social arena” as well as public communications and education to advocate for specific policies and programs.⁸⁰

“The essence of corporate political activism,” Sethi concluded, “is for the corporation to develop a cogent view of the public interest and, then, political positions and strategies that embody this notion.”⁸¹ Corporate communicators helped their clients become “activists” by adopting not only the title but also the techniques of public interest groups, such as coalition building for indirect (grassroots) lobbying. This approach caused the director of one of Ralph Nader’s research groups to complain to the *National Journal*, “[Business coalitions] have taken

the techniques, such as working with the press and grass roots, that we've been successful with, but they do it better because they have more money and manpower.”⁸²

One way business leaders sought to get out in front of the environmental issue was to create forums for dialogue, in the spirit of “cooperative pluralism.”⁸³ Could “producer groups,” such as coal companies and electric utilities, interact with “countervailing power groups,” such as environmental advocates, without government involvement in order to negotiate and seek consensus around matters of public policy? Some saw a productive answer in the National Coal Policy Project (NCP).⁸⁴

The immediate background of the NCP was the desire by industry to influence American domestic energy policy in the aftermath of the 1973–1974 oil crisis. But a broader postwar context is more instructive. Coal-fired power plants had approximately doubled their sulfur oxides emissions every decade between 1940 and 1970.⁸⁴ Throughout the 1960s coal producers (and consumers) as well as electric utilities opposed any government regulation of air pollution. This “coal coalition,” as historian Richard Vietor describes it, prevented amendments to the Clean Air Act in 1963 and stymied federal emission standards for industrial air pollutants in 1967. It was not until 1970 that the new Clean Air Act finally gave the federal government the authority to control air pollution.⁸⁵

The NCP was industry's effort to retrieve some control over policymaking and over air pollution standards. Its stated purpose was “to bring together individuals from industry and environmental organizations for the purpose of achieving a consensus on a detailed plan to permit the responsible use and conservation of coal in an economic and environmentally acceptable manner.” Over the course of the five-year project, a series of meetings were held between environmental action groups, coal mining executives, and industrialists to find areas of

compromise through the exercise of reason. Journalists were sought out and invited to observe, as were (on a limited basis) government officials. The participants were enjoined to “avoid[] the lawyers’ standard tactics based on deceit, ad hominem attack, procedural devices and delays – tactics designed to win by any means – tactics that do not serve the public interest.”⁸⁶

The NCPP’s 1978 report, tellingly titled, *Where We Agree*, dedicated over 800 pages to “narrow[ing] the policy differences separating environmentalists from the producers and consumers of coal.” The ultimate outcome of the NCPP was not, however, to transform policy on coal but to give PR executives another form of justification and publicity for their objectives. As business professor Reed Moyer wrote in a review of the report that same year, “This work’s greatest value...is not necessarily its informational content. Rather, it is perhaps most important for its delineation and sharpening of issues separating environmentalists and industry representatives and for its creation of a model for conflict resolution, the adoption of which could profit other adversarial groups.”⁸⁷

PR people were paying close attention. An editorial in *Chemical Week* cited the NCPP as an overture to “a 1980s era of cooperation.”⁸⁸ *Chemical & Engineering News* noted that while the project had not had the anticipated impact on federal policy decisions around coal, it had nevertheless shown the value of “reason and mutual respect to find areas of agreement” which may influence decisions down the road.⁸⁹ E. Bruce Harrison, writing in *PR Journal*, said the NCPP “puts a fresh light on fair play as a way to solve legal and public relations problems of the corporation.”⁹⁰

The 1980s era of “cooperation” was indeed at hand, notably in the proliferation of industry–environmentalist partnerships. One reason, paradoxically, for the success of the partnership model was that it seemed more oriented toward accommodation of different

viewpoints than did the earlier tactics of environmental advocates. Increasingly, the path of litigation was obstructed by industry's "voluntary" efforts to deal with pollution problems in a transparent way, and the accompanying publicity effects of its efforts. Initiatives by environmentalists to protest economic growth at the expense of environmental protection were painted as anti-progress, backward-looking, and unrealistic. Second, as environmental organizations set up offices in Washington, a different kind of compromise took place. Grassroots activists were no longer able to work at the grassroots, having to play by the "rules of the game" in Washington.⁹¹ Some of the more conservative or "apolitical" environmental organizations, such as the National Wildlife Federation, established partnerships in an effort to balance environmental goals and economic growth. The Federation's Corporate Conservation Council, established in 1982 and made up of executives from seventeen major corporations, aimed to transfer managerial and technical skills to public sector actors. "Public sector managers who combine the 'stick' of traditional 'command and control' regulation with the 'carrot' of profitable business opportunities offered by environmental protection will be better able to carry out their jobs."⁹²

The case of the Nature Conservancy reveals the degree to which business had gained legitimacy in the environmental realm. The Nature Conservancy was at that time the only nonprofit national conservation organization devoted exclusively to land preservation. Their methods were rooted in trying to persuade owners of ecologically important land parcels to either sell their land to the Conservancy for subsequent sale to the government or by arranging direct transfer. According to the Conservancy, in 1978, over one hundred million acres of land in the United States were owned by 20 major U.S. corporations.⁹³ The conservancy began to realize in

the 1970s that appealing to the company's economic (tax-deductible) incentive of transferring their land could be amplified by the reputational dimensions of acting in the public good.⁹⁴

The organization created an extensive public relations campaign, including newsletters and brochures, press releases and business-media relations, slide presentations and a short film, and special ceremonies to honor corporate land contributors. Painting itself as a pragmatic, compromise-seeking, and industry-allied environmental group, the Conservancy gained the favor of company leaders. As one magazine article explained,

This is a different breed of environmentalist. The Conservancy doesn't speak of a corporation's questionable environmental planning or of its sins against nature. It speaks instead of...the reasons why conservation makes good economic sense...This new approach, free of emotional pleas and threats of legal challenges, has paid off. The Nature Conservancy now claims 105 American corporations as paying members in the organization, and it boasted assets of \$100 million in 1976.⁹⁵

One executive said, "experience in working with the Conservancy to develop realistic conservation projects nationally helped assure us that this project would be completed in the public interest."⁹⁶ Wary of being characterized as a "sell out," the Conservancy instead highlighted its relationship with business as a positive opportunity in which openness and dialogue could lead to benefits for all concerned. In 1979, the Nature Conservancy presented its case study to the Public Relations Society of America, winning the association's "Silver Anvil" award for effective PR.

Conclusion: Compromising the Environment

When, in 1990, President George Bush Sr. signed into law new amendments to the Clean Air Act, it was taken by PR counselors as a hard-won victory: “The result,” as E. Bruce Harrison put it, “of more than a decade of compromise between government, environmentalists and industry.” By 1991, the federal government would establish the President’s Commission on Environmental Quality (PCEQ), cementing the legitimacy of public–private environmental partnerships. “The idea behind PCEQ was to find a way to replicate on a wider basis the success of certain private sector initiatives in economically protecting the environment, explained Michael Deland, chairman of the Council on Environmental Quality in the Executive Office of the President. “We asked people with proven successes in industry to join with members of the environmental, foundation, and academic community, to get them working in common cause. These were people who if they had communicated before, it probably would have been through lawyers in a courtroom.”⁹⁷

In “An Obit for an -Ism,” an opinion piece in the public affairs newsletter *Impact* in 1992, Harrison argued that industry had “become the managing partner of the environment,” with business “taking possession of greening.” For Harrison, this moment signified “the death of environmentalism,” a political concept no longer needed in the last decade of the twentieth century. History would show Harrison to be wrong. But he was right about one thing: the decade of compromise, consensus-making, and collaboration would prove devastating to the promotion of the environment as a public problem.

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¹ Not including affiliates. See Golden Interview with John Hill, 304. See also “John W. Hill, 86, Dies; Led Hill & Knowlton,” 43.

² Punctuated by a massive oil spill in Santa Barbara, California in 1969, and four additional spills in the next several months. See Hoffman, *Heresy to Dogma*, 56.

³ Vogel, *Fluctuating Fortunes*, 65.

⁴ Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, chapter 6.

⁵ Vogel, *Fluctuating Fortunes*; Walker, “Legitimizing the Corporation through Public Participation”; Mizruchi, *The Structure of Corporate Political Action*; Schuler, “Corporate Political Action: Rethinking the Economic and Institutional Influences”; Kay and Tierney, *Organized Interests and American Democracy*; Knoke, *The Organizational State*.

⁶ Barley, “Building an Institutional Field.”

⁷ Powell’s Memorandum warned about the social and political threat to the American free enterprise system, arguing that corporations and industry must wrest control of the economy from leftist inclinations: “Conservatives must capture public opinion by exerting influence over the institutions that shape it: academia, media, church, courts.” Powell, “Attack on the Free Enterprise System.” Powell, who was in 1971 a corporate lawyer, would go on to become a Supreme Court Justice, with considerable influence over such institutions. In 1973, top US Steel public relations counselor William G. Whyte spoke before the PRSA. As part of a Task Force appointed by the President of the US Chamber of Commerce to coordinate actions around the Powell Memo, he and other PRSA members directed the preparation of an information kit for distribution to local Chambers of Commerce (other kits were prepared for state Chambers and for trade and professional associations). Called the Interpreting Business Kit, it contained guidelines for these organizations to promote the values of private enterprise to as many

segments of society as possible: Public relations advisors, as the managers of the image of business, were to play a central role: “We are living in a different world, one that makes the role of the public relations official ever more important...no place in the Nation does the slipping image of business come home to roost any more than it does in Washington, DC. There – image, power, and influence are pretty closely related. And when one slips, so does the other.”

Whyte, “Remarks before Public Relations Society of America.”

⁸ On corporate grassroots strategies, see Walker, *Grassroots for Hire*; on cooperative oligopolies, see Munkirs & Sturgeon, “Oligopolistic Cooperation”; on interlocking directorates, see Hayden et al., “Corporate, Social and Political Networks.”

⁹ In this sense, we may see PR actors’ positionings of authority as engaging in the same kinds of politics underlying the legitimacy contests of science advisory committees. See Jasanoff, *The Fifth Branch*.

¹⁰ Daymon and Hodges (2009), quoted in Edwards and Hodges, *Public Relations, Society and Culture*. This is different from the Habermasian understanding that PR is a kind of staging: “The consensus-concerning behavior required by the public interest, or so it seems, actually has certain features of a staged ‘public opinion.’ ...The resulting consensus, of course, does not seriously have much in common with the final unanimity wrought by a time-consuming process of mutual enlightenment, for the ‘general interest’ on the basis of which alone a rational agreement between publicly competing opinions could freely be reached has disappeared precisely to the extent that the publicist self-presentations of privileged public interests have adopted it for themselves.” Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 193-195.

¹¹ Boltanski and Thevenot, *On Justification*, 278.

¹² *Ibid.*, 281.

¹³ Dunlap, *DDT: Scientists, Citizens, and Public Policy*, 3. For an example of cinematic footage, see “The Story of DDT,” AKS Production, B.3004, 1944.

¹⁴ Berry, *Lobbying for the People*; Clemens, *The People’s Lobby*; Vogel, “The Public Interest Movement and the American Reform Tradition.”

¹⁵ See David Vogel, “The Public Interest Movement.”

¹⁶ Bosso, *Environment, Inc.*, 42.

¹⁷ Dunlap, *DDT*.

¹⁸ Carroll, “Participatory Technology,” 649.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ The two cases were *Scenic Hudson Preservation Council v. the Federal Power Commission* (1965), also known as the Storm King case; and *Sierra Club v. Morton* (1972), whose opinion was drafted by the Supreme Court based on the Storm King case. Lambert, “Scenic Hudson and Storm King.”

²¹ Carroll, “Participatory Technology,” 650.

²² See Melnick, *Regulation and the Courts*.

²³ “Through their mere choice of words, self-described defenders of the ‘public’ interest implicitly condemned the ‘private’ sector for its inability to protect consumers, citizens, and the environment. And no one person typified that animus more than a young lawyer named Ralph Nader.” Waterhouse, *Lobbying America*, 38.

²⁴ Whiteside, “Profiles: A Countervailing Force – I,” 84.

²⁵ Drew, “A Reporter at Large: Conversation with a Citizen,” 39.

²⁶ Björk, “Emergence of Popular Participation in World Politics.”

²⁷ Lesly, “Survival in an Age of Activism,” 8.

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- ²⁸ Moore, “Environment: A New PR Crisis,” 7.
- ²⁹ Brandt, “Wanted: Environmentalists,” 19.
- ³⁰ Hill & Knowlton, “Slings and Arrows,” 2.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 4.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 31-32.
- ³³ Wessel, *Science and Conscience*, 34.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 201; Wessel, *Rule of Reason*, 21; 202
- ³⁶ Parisi, “Book Brings the Rule of Reason to Corporation-Public Clashes.”
- ³⁷ Wessel, *Rule of Reason*, xi.
- ³⁸ Sethi, “Corporate Political Activism,” 40.
- ³⁹ “New Ways to Lobby a Recalcitrant Congress,” 148. See also Freed, “Melding PR and Lobbying Impact.”
- ⁴⁰ As Donald Colen, vice president and director of public affairs of New York Citibank claimed: “In public relations now, all roads lead to the Hill” (quoted in Harrison, “Washington Focus”). This alliance between lobbyists and PR would shift again in the late 1980s in the aftermath of news investigations into “honoraria” paid to congresspeople. See Jackson, “Easy Money”; Tom Kenworthy, “Courting the Key Committees.”
- ⁴¹ “Juice: The Future of Power and Influence in Washington.” See also Moore, “Have Smarts, Will Travel.”
- ⁴² Wittenberg and Wittenberg, *How to Win in Washington*.
- ⁴³ “New Ways to Lobby a Recalcitrant Congress,” 148. See also Jones and Chase, “Managing Public Policy Issues,” 9: “In the world of today, the diverse activities we call government and

public relations, lobbying and issue advertising, must all be part of an integrated management strategy.”

⁴⁴ Harrison, “Washington Focus.”

⁴⁵ Swetonic, “Death of the Asbestos Industry,” 9.

⁴⁶ Similar initiatives took place around the same time within the dispute resolution forums at Harvard Negotiation Project, an initiative piloted in 1979 that led to the subsequent publication of *Getting to Yes*, by project leaders Roger Fisher and William Ury.

⁴⁷ Dunlap, *DDT*, 235.

⁴⁸ Dunlap, *DDT*; Conley, “Environmentalism Contained.”

⁴⁹ Wessel, *Science and Conscience*, 145.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 157.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 158.

⁵⁴ Rich and Jacobson, “Alternative Dispute Resolution.”

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵⁷ Schudson, *Rise of the Right to Know*, 1.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 181, 185-186.

⁵⁹ LeMenager, *Living Oil*, 45.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 45. See also the documentary film, *How to Change the World*, about Greenpeace’s innovative adoptions of media and high-profile, dramatic events to gain public attention.

Greenpeace’s legacy is evident in more recent climate awareness campaigns by organizations

such as Extinction Rebellion and popular movements such as school climate strikes. Its legacy was also apparent in some of our interviews with industrial public relations actors. One derisively characterized climate activists who used such publicity tactics as “these people who seem to be sensational opportunists that are trying to play upon the emotions without any real fact behind their arguments, because they just want to buy a boat” – in reference to Greenpeace’s origin narrative in 1971, when a group of activists sailed from Vancouver to Amchitka Island in Alaska in a fishing boat to protest President Nixon’s nuclear weapons tests.

⁶¹ Brown and Waltzer, “Buying National Ink.”

⁶² Brown and Waltzer, “Every Thursday,” 25.

⁶³ Schmertz and Novak, *Goodbye to the Low Profile*, 139.

⁶⁴ Schmertz and Novak, *Goodbye to the Low Profile*, 20. For an overview of Schmertz’s approach to public relations, see St John III, “The ‘Creative Confrontation’ of Herbert Schmertz.”

⁶⁵ “Industry Fights Back.”

⁶⁶ “Evolution of Mobil’s Public Affairs Programs,” I-C/5.

⁶⁷ Schmertz and Novak, *Goodbye to the Low Profile*, 145.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁶⁹ Brown and Waltzer, “Every Thursday,” 200-201. Mobil continued to place advertorials after the year 2000, though with less frequency. Geoffrey Supran and Naomi Oreskes count Mobil’s more recent advertorials (1989-2004) as part of a large-scale campaign by the company to sow doubt around climate science. See Supran and Oreskes, “Assessing ExxonMobil’s Climate Change Communications.”

⁷⁰ “Evolution of Mobil’s Public Affairs Programs,” I-C/9.

⁷¹ Ibid., I-C/10.

⁷² Ibid., I-C/10; II-B/12.

⁷³ Schmertz and Novak, *Goodbye to the Low Profile*, 210.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 216.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 221-230.

⁷⁶ Jarvik, "PBS and the Politics of Quality," 265.

⁷⁷ Kerr, *The Rights of Corporate Speech*, 2.

⁷⁸ Chase, *Issue Management*, 6-7; Sonnenfeld, *Corporate Views*; David Rockefeller, "Free Trade in Ideas," *Chief Executive Magazine* (Autumn 1978); Aronczyk, "Public Relations, Issue Management, and the Transformation of American Environmentalism."

⁷⁹ Harrison, "Green Communication."

⁸⁰ Sethi, "Corporate Political Activism," 38.

⁸¹ Sethi, "Corporate Political Activism," 34. See also Sethi, "Serving the Public Interest."

⁸² Cohen, "Business Lobby," 1050.

⁸³ McFarland, *Cooperative Pluralism*.

⁸⁴ Vietor, *Environmental Politics and the Coal Coalition*.

⁸⁵ The late 1960s and the 1970s were also a period in which coal miners took part in thousands of wildcat strikes. See, e.g., Turl, "The Miners' Strike of 1977-78."

⁸⁶ National Coal Policy Project, Hearing before the Subcommittee on Energy and Power, 95th Cong., 2nd sess. (10 April 1978): 2-3.

⁸⁷ Moyer, "Where We Agree," 971.

⁸⁸ Quoted in Hoffman, *Heresy to Dogma*, 93.

⁸⁹ "National Coal Policy Project a Mixed Success," 8.

⁹⁰ Harrison, “Rule of Reason,” 1.

⁹¹ Bosso, *Environment, Inc.*, 130.

⁹² Buchholz et al., *Managing Environmental Issues*, vii-xiii.

⁹³ “We Can Work with You,” 7.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Libbey, “Conservation and the Corporation.”

⁹⁶ “We Can Work with You,” 79.

⁹⁷ “Environmental Partnerships Help Business Find Effective Solutions.”