

How Do the 'Merchants of Doubt' Sell Skepticism?

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MERCHANTS OF DOUBT SHOWS HOW SIMPLE IT IS FOR CORPORATIONS TO SELL LIES TO THE AMERICAN PEOPLE, AND HOW STUPID THE AMERICAN PEOPLE ARE TO BELIEVE THEM.

Robert Kenner's documentary *Merchants of Doubt* (2014) investigates the highly profitable industry of political spin. Based on Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway's book of the same title, the documentary exposes corporations that pay individuals to mislead the American people about their harmful products. The spokespeople are called "Merchants of Doubt" because they sell skepticism. They forgo substance for style, and do everything they can to present themselves as authentic scientific and medical experts with a credible contrarian point of view.

The actual scientific and medical communities publicly denounce their skepticism, but the American people fall for it anyway. Kenner tries to comprehend why the American people continue to believe the lies.

As the documentary shows, corporations invest in political spin because government regulation would hinder their profits. Lobbyists like the Koch Brothers, among others, cling to the [libertarian](#) ideology because it conveniently condemns "big government" regulation of any kind. Koch Industries has repeatedly been [fined](#) by the Environmental Protection Agency, and because it has skin in the game, it does everything it can to stall climate change legislation and support climate change skepticism. The greed is infuriating, especially when we realize that our livelihoods are at stake. ("[Not just the Koch brothers: New study reveals funders behind the climate change denial effort](#)", Drexel University, 20 December 2013).

However, this isn't just about oil companies and climate change. Kenner highlights other times throughout history when corporations have bought biased think tanks and bogus public relations agencies to con the American people.

For example, Kenner focuses on the tobacco industry's infamous assurances throughout the 20th century that cigarettes aren't unhealthy. These lies went unchallenged until Stanton A. Glantz leaked internal documents that illustrate that the tobacco industry knew about the connections between cigarettes and cancer as early as the '50s. Even after the leak, however, committed smokers refused to face reality.

Kenner posits that it's difficult for people to change their lifestyles and for governments to change their policies, so they ignore the truth and continue on a path of destruction. A lesser known example is of the chemical industry's insistence that the toxins in fire retardants do not cause cancer, despite research by *Chicago Tribune* journalists Patricia Callahan, Sam Roe, and Michael Hawthorne that demonstrate otherwise.

A number of film critics complain that *Merchants of Doubt* is one-sided. [Jessica Kiang](#) of *The Playlist*, for example, condemns "the film's own spin toward a liberal audience". [William Goss](#) of *The Austin Chronicle* similarly claims that the film "preaches to the left-leaning choir", but he takes it further when he writes that the film's focus on the urgency of climate change "invites viewers to question every case of propaganda except its own."

These criticisms are illegitimate because they imply that the ideas in *Merchants of Doubt* are "liberal" when they're just accurate. It's not "liberal" to say that cigarettes cause cancer. It's a fact. It's not "liberal" to say that chemicals in fire retardants are toxic. It's a fact. It's not "liberal" to say that climate change is a real, human-induced problem. It's a fact. It's not "liberal" to say that scientific and medical skeptics are paid for by the most profitable corporations. It's a fact. To suggest anything else is to miss the entire point of the documentary.

An industry of fabrication and manipulation has been funded by big money interests to persuade the American public that scientific and medical facts are instead liberal positions. This is problematic, and it perpetuates the false myth that there is still room for debate on issues like the dangers of cigarette smoking or climate change. It's one thing to debate solutions to the problem, it's something else entirely to debate the existence of the problem. As Paul Krugman puts it, "We can't have meaningful cooperation when we can't agree on reality, when even establishment figures in the Republican Party essentially believe that facts have a liberal bias." ("[Voodoo Time Machine](#)", *The New York Times*, 8 January 2015).

Tara Helle points out the problem with presenting false balance in journalism. As she writes, "False balance is presenting 'both sides' of an issue in a way that makes it appear as though both are weighted equally, when, in fact, one side carries the heft of all the scientific research behind it and the other carries only anecdotes and cherry-picked, non-replicated studies and case studies in lousy medical journals." ("[The Vaccine War: What You Should Know After You Watch PBS Frontline's Special](#)", *Forbes*, 25 March 2015) Helle refers to the vaccine debate and the many journalists who give a platform to anti-vaccine activists, but her assertion applies to any issue that has been settled by the scientific and medical communities.

Helle argues that false balance is journalistic malpractice, and I agree with her. *Merchants of Doubt* warns about the dangers of false balance. On many mainstream corporate media channels in the US, for instance, hosts moderate debates between climatologists and climate-change skeptics. Oftentimes, the climatologists will be poor communicators who stick to the boring statistics, whereas climate-change skeptics are energetic personalities who enrage viewers with emotional anecdotes. The climatologists are correct, but they fail in the debates because they don't know how to engage with the bombastic skeptics. We don't need more of this back-and-forth sporting event. We need to loudly and proudly side with the truth, however "boring" it may be.

The documentary's ideas are important, but they're presented in a relatively conventional manner. Cinematically speaking, *Merchants of Doubt* doesn't exactly reinvent the wheel, and documentary enthusiasts may be disappointed with the result. Unlike Errol Morris, Werner Herzog, and most recently Joshua Oppenheimer, Kenner's politically important documentaries are cinematically generic.

The bonus features on the DVD/Blu-ray combo pack are worthwhile. There's a 17-minute interview with Kenner that was moderated after the documentary's screening at the Toronto International Film Festival. In the interview, Kenner states that "Merchants of Doubt" exist in other oil dominated countries like Canada as well. In addition, Kenner provides an interesting commentary over the soundtrack.

The most fascinating feature is "Unlikely Voices", a compilation of three brief profiles of people who care about climate change. The first, Debbie Dooley of the Atlanta Tea Party, is a self-described "right wing radical" who wants to transform the

world's energy system. According to Dooley, Georgia Power is the only company allowed to sell energy in Georgia, and it's illegal for third parties to lease solar panels. In protest, she formed the "Green Tea Coalition" to use tea party values to advance green energy. "Let all energy compete on a level playing field in the marketplace. Isn't that what conservatism is all about?" she asks.

The next unlikely voice is Ronald Reagan's former Secretary of State George Shultz. He identifies as a conservative and drives an electric car. He reminds us of the important environmental legislation that Republicans introduced, such as the Nixon administration's Clean Air Act, Safe Drinking Water Act, Endangered Species Act, and Environmental Protection Agency, as well as the Reagan administration's Montreal Protocol. "I can remember saying to the president, we have to contend with this because if we don't, and if most of the people who say this is happening are right, we have a giant problem on our hands," Schultz recalls. The irony is that many of the current Republican presidential candidates vow to eradicate government-regulated environmental protections.

Swiss Re is the final voice featured, and it is a global reinsurance company. "When the really bad things happen, we're the ones who write the really big checks," CEO J. Eric Smith says. "We're concerned about what climate change will do to society, and ultimately to our business in the years ahead. It can render part of our business obsolete, and that's a serious thing for society, because if businesses can't insure the railroads they own or the factories that they build, then all of that free enterprise becomes severely threatened."

Collectively, these "Unlikely Voices" challenge the stereotype that all Republicans are climate-change skeptics. It seems to be less of a Republican issue and more of an oil industry issue. The problem as it stands, however, is that most Republican politicians are funded by the oil industry. They promote climate change skepticism because they want the Koch Brothers and other fossil fuel lobbyists to cut them a check. ("[2016 GOP hopefuls gear up for 'Koch' primary](#)", by Fredreka Schouten, *USA Today*, 29 July 2015).

While *Merchants of Doubt* is clear that the spin doctors who misinform the American people are paid for by corporations, the documentary indirectly calls attention to a broader intellectual bankruptcy in the culture. Now more than ever, it feels like we are living in an age of relativism, in which everyone expresses his or her "truth", but no one's truth is accepted as absolute. That is, in today's self-esteem obsessed society, a misinformed statement is now considered an opinion that must be valued and respected. "You are wrong" has turned into "you have spoken *your* truth", as if the truth could ever be owned. Objective reality has been undermined by a flippant "it's all relative, man" subjective worldview.

Of course, skepticism is important, and we all need to cultivate an effective bullshit detector to make our way through the madness. However, the US has increasingly become a country in which amateurs can challenge the credibility of professionals and get away with it. Irrefutable facts are under threat, and once enviable leadership qualities like experience and expertise are scoffed at by a small minority of snarky know-it-alls. *Merchants of Doubt* shows how simple it is for corporations to sell lies to the American people, and how stupid the American people are to believe them.

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