

Department of Environmental Science and Policy

Seminar Series

Information Pollution

Amy Westervelt

Drilled Media

DATE: Friday, 10/27/2023 **TIME:** 09:00 am **ROOM:** Ungar 230-E

Zoom: <https://miami.zoom.us/j/92964807674>



Abstract: The fossil fuel industry's investments in disinformation do not begin and end with climate denial. The industry was an early client of the modern PR industry in the early 20th century and has consistently been one of the top spenders on PR and advertising in the world. It became the primary funder of think-tanks in the 1970s as well, finding them useful for getting out messages that oil companies themselves might not want to be publicly affiliated with.

Before it used these tools to mislead the public on climate change, the fossil fuel industry spent decades shaping how that same public viewed the environment, energy, and the economy. Absent that work, it's entirely possible climate denial would not have been nearly such an effective strategy. It's important for people to understand that PR goes far beyond simply securing an interview for an executive or weighing in on branding. The industry was created around the same time the U.S. passed its first regulations on business; the vote was also expanding to different demographics at the time, journalists were shining a light on corporate abuses of power, and labor unions were flexing their muscle—PR emerged to help industry subvert democracy. It includes everything from creating manufactured trends and outrage cycles to funding major centers at universities to arranging meetings with heads of state, and it has been integral in shaping not only how the public understands the problem of climate change but also how we're allowed to even think about solutions to that problem. As it faces an existential crisis of its own, the industry continues to lean heavily on PR, advertising, and think tanks to shape narratives that keep it in business and pollute the information ecosystem in ways that continue to materially undermine democracy.

Bio: Amy Westervelt is an award-winning investigative journalist who's been on the climate accountability beat for more than 20 years. She runs the multimedia reporting project Drilled, which includes multiple podcasts as well as cross-border print investigations that are co-published with an array of partners, including The Guardian, The Intercept, The New Republic, and many others. In 2023, Westervelt was named a Covering Climate Now Journalist of the Year, an award determined by leading climate reporters and editors. She's also won Edward R. Murrow, Online News Association, and Folio awards for her work, and was nominated for a Peabody in 2022.

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