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Com Ethics

Contemporary Issues

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Communication Ethics and Climate Change

Over the years climate change has become a growing concern in our society. The reason for this is because of the increase in natural disasters such as hurricanes and wildfires. For example, the Camp Fire in Butte County was the deadliest wildfire on record in California, with more than 80 confirmed casualties after it roared to life on November 8 (Brinklow). Also, Hurricane Florence which rocked the southern United States this past fall had a death toll of over 50 people (Borter). Not only that, these natural occurrences caused billions of dollars in damage. Natural phenomenon's such as these have only increased in recent years causing many to speculate that climate change is to blame. This has sparked debates and has caused many people to take a side. In the following paper, I will discuss what climate change is, the different sides people take on the issue, how companies such as ExxonMobil communicated unethically on the topic of climate change, and the possible solutions ExxonMobil could use to recover from their unethical communication.

Climate change, also called global warming, refers to the rise in average surface temperatures on Earth (TakePart). Several gases, such as carbon dioxide and methane, exist naturally in the atmosphere and contribute to the warming of the Earth's surface by trapping heat from the sun, in what is known as the greenhouse effect. When greenhouse gases in the atmosphere are stable, the effect is beneficial to the Earth, making surface temperatures warmer and alleviating temperature swings. However, human activity is increasing the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, which is already causing average temperatures to rise

(EESI). An overwhelming scientific consensus maintains that climate change is due primarily to humans burning fossil fuels in vehicles and power plants emitting potent greenhouse gases, including carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide (TakePart). Also, the clearing of forest lands through burning or logging trees also releases carbon dioxide into the atmosphere and contributes to the greenhouse effect. Impacts from this warming already have been observed through: increases in global average air and ocean temperatures, accelerated melting of snow and sea ice, widespread retreat of glaciers, and rising global average sea level. Also, climate change has been observed through extensive changes in weather patterns, including changes in precipitation levels and increased storm intensity (EESI). Climate change is a growing subject of debate with the opposition and those who support the belief.

For the side that opposes climate change, there are several ideas and beliefs that cause them to take the side of opposing climate change. Climate change deniers often claim that recent changes are not due to human activity and that they are part of the natural variations in Earth's climate and temperature (TakePart). One of the reasons they use to defend their position is that Earth's climate has always warmed and cooled, and the 20th century rise in global temperature is within the boundary of natural temperature fluctuations that has occurred over the past 3,000 years. In fact, researchers at the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics found in 2003 that many records reveal that the 20th century is probably not the warmest nor a uniquely extreme climatic period of the last millennium. They even suggest that sea levels have been steadily rising for thousands of years, and the increase has nothing to do with humans. There was even a 2014 report by the Global Warming Policy Foundation that found sea levels have been rising slowly and globally for the last 10,000 years. Climate change deniers also believe that increased hurricane activity and other extreme weather events are a result of natural weather patterns, not

human-caused climate change (ProCon). With ideas such as these, it is hard for the opposition to see the scientific evidence that supports that climate change is happening now and we are to blame.

As for the side that supports climate change, one of the main reasons that they support that climate change is real and that we are to blame is the fact that 97 percent of climate scientists support this belief (Potenza). Supporters also believe that the rise in atmospheric carbon dioxide over the last century was clearly caused by human activity, because it has occurred at a rate much faster than natural climate changes could produce. In fact, carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere have risen drastically from 1958 to 2013 and are only expected to rise by 2040. Along with this, there is evidence that the specific type of carbon dioxide that is increasing in earth's atmosphere can be directly connected to human activity. They can support this because carbon dioxide produced by burning fossil fuels such as, oil and coal can be singled out in the atmosphere from natural carbon dioxide. Also, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 20th century measurements of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere confirm that rising carbon dioxide levels are the result of human activity, not natural causes (ProCon). With scientific evidence and the rise of destructive weather, many climate change activists have an advantage on those who oppose it.

As for ethical issues regarding climate change, companies such as ExxonMobil knew about climate change for years and continued to downplay it. ExxonMobil is the world's largest oil and gas company. In the 1970s and 1980s the company employed top scientists to look into the issue and launched its own determined research program that sampled carbon dioxide and built rigorous climate models. During the duration of the research, reporters at Inside Climate News interviewed former Exxon employees, scientists and federal officials and analyzed

hundreds of pages of internal documents. They found that the company's knowledge of climate change dated back to July 1977. It was on this date, Exxon's senior scientist James Black stated to the Exxon's management committee that, "the most likely manner in which mankind is influencing the global climate is through carbon dioxide released from the burning of fossil fuels" he even also went on to say "that man has a time window of five to ten years before the need for hard decisions regarding changes in energy strategies might become critical" (Hall). Even with this knowledge, ExxonMobil issued ad campaigns that mislead the public on climate change.

Scientific reports and articles written or co-written by Exxon Mobil employees acknowledged that global warming was a real and serious threat. They also noted it could be addressed by reducing fossil fuel use, meaning that fossil fuel reserves might one day become stranded assets. However, since the 1970s to 2004, ExxonMobil published advertisements about climate change in the Op-Ed pages of The New York Times. The advertisements were about climate change and were designed to reach and influence the public. The potential readership was in the millions. Most of the advertisements overwhelmingly emphasized scientific uncertainties about climate change. This promoted a narrative that was largely inconsistent with the views of most climate scientists, including the company's scientist (Supran, Oreskes). An example of this can be seen in the 1997 ad titled *Reset the Alarm*. In the ad it stated that "The science of climate change is too uncertain to mandate a plan of action that could plunge economies into turmoil" and that "We still don't know what role man-made greenhouse gases might play in warming the planet". Also, even though they knew that climate change was a serious threat, a 2000 ad titled *Unsettled Science* stated that "less IS known about the potential or negative Impacts of climate change" (Polluterwatch). The fact that companies like

ExxonMobil made narratives that opposed their scientists and other scientists to protect their industry is very unethical.

Much of the reason this is unethical is because ExxonMobil was told that humans were likely the cause of climate change due to fossil fuels yet, they refused to tell the truth to the public. This is very dangerous when considering the consequences surrounding climate change. Some of these consequences include the rising of sea levels which will threaten coastal communities, wetlands, and coral reefs. Heavier rainfall has also been a concern. Warmer temperatures have led to more intense rainfall events in some areas, causing increased flooding. Heat waves will be more common. Not only that, climate change is causing extreme droughts that are causing a decline in crop productivity around the world. Decreased crop productivity can mean food shortages, which have many social implications. Stronger hurricanes, forest fires, and intense storms will also increase and cause damage and death (UCAR). These are just a few of the consequences with climate change; however, problems such as these will cause economic problems, death and disease, and damage to our infrastructure. So the fact that Exxon Mobil misled the public on climate change when they knew that it was a serious threat is completely unethical.

With the situation of ExxonMobil, I believe the situation connects to the concept of risk communication found in our text book. Risk communication is when organizations have a special responsibility to communicate with the public about the dangers their operations or products may pose to people and the environment (Neher, Sandin, 261). In ExxonMobil's case I believe that they failed to do this. Though they communicated to the public through the advertisements in The New York Times op-ed section, they failed to communicate everything they knew and the dangers of climate change. Since the 1970's they knew that their man-made

gases such as fossil fuels were to blame for climate change. However, they used ads in The New York Times to spread doubt about climate change and human involvement through fossil fuels. According to Lloyd Keigwin, a senior scientist in geology and geophysics, they included explicit factual misrepresentation. For instance, they directly contradicted the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and presented data in a “very misleading” way. Also, roughly 80 percent of the ExxonMobil’s academic and internal papers acknowledged that climate change is real and human-caused. However, 81 percent of their climate change advertorials in one way or another expressed doubt (Supran, Oreskes). Due to these reasons ExxonMobil acted unethically with these advertisements.

Another reason that ExxonMobil acted unethically was because they failed to communicate the truth and accuracy of the situation of climate change. People turn to the media for the accurate reporting of the facts (Neher, Sandin, 211). By giving out misleading information, they were misinforming the public. In fact, this information was estimated to have been read by millions (Supran, Oreskes). This is also a form of Agenda Setting. This is when the media shapes, as well as restricts the general impressions people have of the world (Neher, Sandin). ExxonMobil used their ads to influence the way people thought about climate change. They restricted and shaped the information they gave out in order to help their own agenda. ExxonMobil are not the only ones to blame, you could also place blame on The New York Times for allowing the misleading information to the public. They did not have to release the advertisements in their op-ed section. The New York Times could have turned down ExxonMobil; however, they did not. The most likely reason for this is likely due to money. In fact, each advertorial that ExxonMobil released cost the company roughly \$31,000. By turning down ExxonMobil’s ads, they could have prevented millions of readers from being misinformed.

With all this being said an ethical way to help a company like ExxonMobil is to come out and be truthful. ExxonMobil needs to tell people that climate change is indeed caused by the burning of fossil fuels. ExxonMobil also needs to issue an apology for misinforming the public on climate change. The New York Times should also issue an apology as well for allowing those advertisements to be published and be seen and read by millions. ExxonMobil needs to be a part of the solution in finding a real solution to climate change and they can start by decreasing their use of fossil fuels. To do this, they will have to take a utilitarian approach with their business. The utilitarian approach is when the ethical action is the one that results in the greatest good for the greatest number (Neher, Sandin 60). The greatest good in this case is for ExxonMobil to reduce the use of fossil fuels and to be more honest. This may hurt them financially; however, it will go a long way in slowing down climate change and this will benefit the greater number because it will help not only the world today, but also the world in the future. In essence, ExxonMobil and other companies like them will most likely have to take a hit financially in order to help the world from climate change.

In conclusion, climate change is a very daunting and real issue of our time and steps need to be taken now to ensure the safety of humanity and this world. The consequences of climate change are being seen right before our eyes with extreme weather patterns, enormous wildfires, rising sea levels, melting glaciers, and droughts. On top of that, more death and destruction will occur. With companies such as ExxonMobil giving out misinformation and casting doubt on climate change to the public, this doubt delays progress in trying to help stop climate change. In all, companies like ExxonMobil need to be more honest about how fossil fuels is likely the cause. Hopefully, this can sway climate change deniers into seeing the truth.

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