

How Do Organizations Threatened by Deinstitutionalisation Communicate to regain their Legitimacy and Delegitimise their Critics?

Summary

Heading into the new decade, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) predicts that we will suffer dire and irreversible consequences if we fail to keep our carbon emissions below the safe threshold of 1.5°C by the end of 2030, (IPCC, 2018). The imminent threat of climate change impacts society in every aspect – health, agriculture, water supply, transportation, energy, ecosystems, and more (GlobalChange, 2019).

The need to tackle the challenge of man-made climate change is not new. We have known for decades the negative impact of emitting carbon into the atmosphere. That is to say, for decades, scientists have been warning about the dangers of carbon emissions. However, to this day, we still have a split in opinion on the issue. The emergence of climate change denialists or skeptics has instilled doubt around the issue of climate change. These so called “merchants of doubt” utilize various tactics to discredit the science behind climate change which is evidently working as still over 30% of Americans do not believe in man-made climate change (Oreskes & Conway, 2013; Saad, 2017).

In order to better understand the reason why climate change denialists have been successfully able to disseminate doubt and delay progress for decades, I turn to the legitimacy literature. An organization must be viewed as legitimate in the eyes of its constituents in order to survive and thrive (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Three types of legitimacy have been identified by Suchman (1995) which are cognitive (comprehensibility and taken-for-grantedness), pragmatic (appealing to audience’s self-interests), and moral (the right thing to do). Numerous studies discuss the types of legitimacy strategies firms use to gain legitimacy (Vergne, 2012; Anteby, 2010; Hudson & Okhuysen, 2001).

Deinstitutionalization is the process by which a previously taken-for-granted institution loses its legitimacy (Oliver, 1992). There are previous studies done on how outgroups are able to influence public opinion to delegitimize an institution (Maguire & Hardy, 2009). However, there is a lack of studies on the strategies used by the organizations who are threatened by the process of deinstitutionalization and how they defend themselves as well as fight their critics.

As a result, this study aims to understand how organizations threatened by deinstitutionalization communicate in order to (re)-gain their legitimacy and delegitimize their critics. I draw on storytelling literature, and in particular, emotions, to analyze the communication methods to understand this phenomenon. The organization threatened by deinstitutionalization are the climate change denialists who are often funded by self-interested players such as conservative politicians and oil & gas industries. The institution that is being challenged here is the fossil fuel/carbon-intensive industries who are damaging the environment. The rise in the environment movement is what is currently threatening climate change denialist’s legitimacy and putting them at a risk of deinstitutionalization.

Our study looks at how climate denialists communicate through film and online texts. We use a mixed-method narrative analysis approach adapted after Soppe & Pershina (2019). The sample is all English climate change denialist movies released between 2007-2017. We analyze the videos through verbal, visual, and audio storytelling. Textual analysis is applied to the transcripts of the movies where sentiment analysis is also performed. For the visual analysis, we use machine learning to take a still frame of the film every 15 seconds and then to code the image by category and sentiment. Finally, we manually listen to the sound effects and movies used throughout the movie to determine what kind of mood or effect it has on the audience.

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Additionally, we collect archival data from web sites, reviews, and replies to critics to triangulate our findings. Climate denialists are actively creating web sites which mimic climate change scientist and environmental NGOs and provide false information about climate science. There are videos and podcasts available as well.

Our findings show that climate change denialists use juxtaposition of emotions in order to gain legitimacy while delegitimizing critics. Critics are presented in a serious, negative tone followed by a positive and humorous tone when referring to themselves. This alternation between emotions plays a great impact in the emotional perception of audience members in order to transfer values and norms.

Our study contributes to the legitimacy literature by identifying communication strategies used by organizations that are under threat of deinstitutionalization to (re)gain legitimacy. Further, we identify strategies to respond to critics.

The learnings have a real-world implication. For companies suffering from a legitimacy threat or loss, they can apply similar communication strategies in order to not further damage ones legitimacy but to re-gain legitimacy and support. Further, knowing exactly how climate change denialists communicate effectively can allow climate change scientists to better communicate their own messages to avoid being targeted or allowing denialists a greater chance at discrediting them.

Future research could look at all climate change films, not just the ones provided by denialists. A comparison of the communication strategies between climate change films and climate denialist films would be interesting to understand which storytelling elements lead to more action among viewers. Further, this study can focus on the evolution of climate change storytelling in film over time to gauge whether the scientists have changed their communication tactics or not. There is a large debate about the “failure” of scientists to communicate, and we can see the evidence through film (Brunhuber, 2016).

Our study is not without limitations. As this is a case study on climate change denialist frames, the results may not be generalizable to different contexts.

Keywords: disruptive institutional work, narratives, emotions, legitimacy, deinstitutionalization, documentaries, climate change, denial

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