Breaking Down Climate Misinformation with Amy Westervelt and John Cook

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Greg Dalton: This is Climate One. I'm Greg Dalton. Spreading climate misinformation is a favorite tool of fossil fuel companies looking to protect their bottom line:

John Cook: Whether they're arguing climate change isn't real, therefore we shouldn't act. Or climate change isn't caused by humans, therefore we shouldn't act. Or solutions won't work, therefore we shouldn't act.

Greg Dalton: Companies use advertising and mass media to spread these messages. and in some cases, want to defend their actions as protected free speech:

Amy Westervelt: This idea that, you know, if it's something that connects to policy I want to see, then it doesn't have to play by the same rules.

Greg Dalton: But we can counter these false arguments through critical thinking and education:

John Cook: If we want a public who are resilient against misinformation, we need to build up their ability to spot these types of fallacies.

Greg Dalton: Breaking down climate misinformation. Up next on Climate One.

Greg Dalton: This is Climate One, I'm Greg Dalton. Fossil fuel companies have spent decades casting doubt in public about climate facts that their own scientists validated in company research. These tactics have included a concerted effort to recast political speech, banned and regulated in some contexts, as protected *free speech*, giving corporations more leeway in broadcasting their messages. This week's episode is a special collaboration with Amy Westervelt, an award-winning journalist and creator of the podcast *Drilled*. She brings us the backstory of the free speech argument fossil fuel companies are now using to support their

efforts to spread climate misinformation.

Amy Westervelt: Most people think the debate over corporate free speech in America started with the Citizens United case, in 2010.

> Citizens United Archival:
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> Ruth Bader Ginsburg: Mr. Olson, are you taking the position that there is no difference in the first amendment rights of an individual, a corporation after all is not endowed by its creator with inalienable rights. So is there any distinction that Congress could draw between corporations and natural human beings for purposes of campaign finance?
>
> Ted Olson: What the court has said in the first amendment context, is that corporations are persons entitled to protection under the First Amendment.

Amy Westervelt: That was the late Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg questioning attorney Ted Olson, with the firm Gibson Dunn, who argued…and won… the case. Just a quick recap here: the case was about a film that had been made criticizing Hillary Clinton the first time she tried to run for President. It was funded by a cohort of rightwing organizations and corporations, including Koch Industries, so the Federal Election Commission had said the movie couldn't screen without identifying itself as campaign material and noting its funders. The filmmakers and their attorneys argued that this violated their free speech rights, and they won, opening the door to unlimited corporate funding of political propaganda… what's generally referred to as simply "dark money." But Citizens United was not the first battle in the war over corporate free speech, nor was it the last. The story actually begins back in the late 1960s with Mobil Oil and its "issue advertising" program. It was a multi-faceted strategy that included defining a personality for Mobil, aligning the company with cultural institutions, and advertising ideas rather than just gas. The idea came from Mobil's VP of Public Affairs, Herb Schmertz, as a way to counter widespread criticism of oil companies in the press, and was championed by the company's CEO Rawleigh Warner. Here's Schmertz later in life, describing Mobil's personality

> Herb Schmertz (archival) we believe fervently that as a sort of a custodial of a large corporation and as custodians of vast resources and employment and everything else that we were not doing our job if we did not participate in the marketplace of ideas. Part of our personality was we believed in that a democracy is composed of a group of free institutions who believed in free markets, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, academic freedom, freedom to organize and participate in union activites.

Amy Westervelt: In addition to sponsoring Masterpiece Theatre starting in 1970, Mobil worked with the New York Times to create the advertorial. Every week, Mobil ran a piece in the New York Times' op-ed section, espousing some idea or another. Here's Schmertz describing them on the show Open Mind

> ***OpenMind Archival*** Herb, Thanks for joining me today.
>
> Herb Schmertz: A great pleasure to be here, Dick.
>
> ***OpenMind Archival:*** I want to turn as quickly as possible to a new fairy tale, the mobile ad or op ed piece or editorial, call it what you will, that

Herb Schmertz: we call them pamphlets,

Amy Westervelt: pamphlets, but they appear in newspapers. In the early 1970s, Schmertz and Warner figured they were having such great luck with the newspaper advertorials and their various PBS specials that it was time to get Mobil content onto commercial TV. They reached out to CBS, ABC, and NBC to buy time but got a surprise this time: CBS and ABC gave them an emphatic no. They described what Mobil was trying to do with their ads as propaganda, and claimed it violated various ethics policies and maybe even some FCC laws. Schmertz went one by one to independent stations to place his TV advertorials. Here's a taste of one:

Archival - Mobil Information Center: Good evening. I'm Dick Callahan. Most Americans have an exaggerated idea about oil company, profits

Amy Westervelt: Warner and Schmertz went on the offensive, writing letters to the network heads, placing multiple New York Times advertorials about how the big TV networks were trying to silence them, and giving speeches at various business groups about how this was a huge threat to corporate rights. It was the first time any company had talked about such a thing as "corporate free speech."

Robert Kerr: the 70s, there was a lot of public opinion. That they would have been concerned about

Amy Westervelt: This is Robert Kerr, a researcher at Oklahoma State University who has written two books about the evolution of corporate free speech and Mobil's role in it. He's talking about the situation oil companies found themselves in during the early 1970s. There had been the big high-profile oil spill in California in 1969 and then in 1973, the oil embargo hit. In response to the U.S. support of Israel during the Arab-Israeli war, Arab members of OPEC put a ban on exporting oil to the U.S. The effect was immediate.

Robert Kerr: I lived through that and I remember it was people were scared all of a sudden, you know, this something that they were used to going to the pump and gas pump and getting for almost nothing was not only going way up in price, but you know, you might not even be able to buy that. And often you couldn't save the gas stations would run out of or you have a really long line, you'd wait for hours and then maybe you could buy any. So, yeah, the public was really alarmed and. Particularly the Carter administration in the late 70s seemed to be a lot .

Archival: Archival : Anger and bewilderment are growing as more and more Americans cope with gasoline lines and empty pumps.

Announcer: Good evening for millions of Americans, this may be the worst weekend they've ever faced for finding gasoline to give them the automobile freedom they take as their due. Gasoline shortages are spreading across the country to even service gasoline lines and closed gas stations are becoming increasingly common. And the news from overseas tonight gives no promise of quick relief.

Amy Westervelt: People were scared and angry and a lot of those emotions were being directed at oil companies. For Mobil, access to the press and ability to get out its version of the story was critical to the company's ability to weather this storm, and the refusal of

commercial stations to run its ads was a huge potential threat to that strategy. Mobil toyed with the idea of filing a case themselves that would formally establish the corporate right to free speech, but worried it could backfire. Instead, they started filing amicus briefs in other cases.

> *Robert Brulle:* Mobil was one of the leading corporations to fight for that legal right.

Amy Westervelt: This is Dr. Robert Brulle, an environmental sociologist at Brown University.

> *Robert Brulle* there was a pretty big effort to get a Supreme Court ruling that basically supported corporate speech and the right of corporations to do advertising of there,, but just product product advertising, but of their positions.

Amy Westervelt: That Supreme Court case was First National Bank of Boston v. Bellotti. First National, along with two other banks and three corporations wanted to spend money to publicize their opposition to a ballot initiative that would permit Massachusetts to implement a graduated income tax. The Attorney General of Massachusetts said that violated a state law against funding campaigns that would influence the outcome of a vote. The banks sued and the case went to the Supreme Court in 1977. The ruling came out in 1978. Here's Supreme Court justice Lewis A. Powell giving that ruling.

> Lewis A. Powell: The first Amendment's primary concern, and therefore the Court's concern always has been the preservation of free and uninhibited dissemination of information and ideas. If the restricted view of corporate speech taken by the Massachusetts court where accepted government would have the power to deprive society of the views of corporations.

Amy Westervelt: Powell is also credited with crafting the Powell Memorandum, which outlined the pro-corporate strategy that would guide the Republican party from the early 1980s to today. Bellotti is generally considered the precursor to Citizens United, and Mobil was hugely influential in securing that ruling. Here's Robert Kerr again

> Robert Kerr: You know, it actually was very close when it first got to the Supreme Court, the justices could have gone the other way. But Justice Powell kind of really finessed it and got that first precedent setting case Belotti into the case law. When it got to Citizens United. Justice Kennedy kind of ignores the overall body of case law, and he goes back to Belotti 24 times. It's really unusual to cite one case twenty four times.

Amy Westervelt: So, why does that matter today? Well, in addition to changing public discourse forever, it also laid the groundwork for the argument oil companies are using today to defend climate disinformation. In some two dozen climate liability cases, and some additional fraud cases, the oil companies are being accused with misleading the public on climate. The lawyer appointed to speak for all of the companies in these cases is Ted Boutrous, who's not only a well-known First Amendment attorney, but also a partner at Gibson Dunn, the firm that secured a win in Citizen's United. Here's Boutrous speaking on the ClimateOne podcast in 2020:

> Ted Boutrous: the plaintiffs lawyers and a lot of the climate change cases have been advocating is that the oil oil gas companies where they had secret knowledge and they were then putting out, you know, misinformation and they tried to analogize it to tobacco and other areas. It just it doesn't make any sense *because it was well known. the federal government knew that the problems of climate change, the potential*

causes and knew that there was an issue here.

Amy Westervelt: Other attorneys are making this argument on behalf of the oil majors as well. When it exhausted all options to dismiss the fraud case against it in Massachusetts, ExxonMobil filed an anti-SLAPP suit against the Attorney General's office there, claiming that the fraud case amounted to an effort to quash the company's First Amendment rights. SLAPP stands for Strategic Litigation Against Public Participation. *Anti*-SLAPP statutes like the one in Massachussetts were meant to protect the press and civil society groups from corporations that wanted to silence critics. But these days it's become equally common for corporations to use them to swat away legal complaints. Here's attorney Justin Anderson, a partner with Paul, Weiss, ExxonMobil's law firm, at a March 2022 hearing.

> Justin Anderson: the alleged misrepresentations are the statements that ExxonMobil has made about its views on climate policy on energy policy. The anti-SLAPP statute provides a mechanism to have a case that is brought against someone for petitioning activity dismissed at the outset before burdensome discovery is imposed on the party. Before we have our executives come in to give testimony and depositions before we're dragged into a courtroom where we have to defend ourselves.

Amy Westervelt: That phrase, "petitioning activity" is really key here because what it means in plain English is "political speech," and the argument ExxonMobil is making here, and that Boutrous has been making as well, is that because the oil companies' campaigns on climate are political speech, not commercial speech, they are protected by the First Amendment. It's the sort of argument Herb Schmertz would have been proud of. Here he is defending corporate PR in the 80s.

> Herb Schmertz: Government intrusion into the marketplace of ideas would limit freedom of speech and distort the selection of our leaders. …People feel frustrated when the press doesn't deliver a complete story or an accurate story. So they bring in people who have the ability to add to the spectrum of facts, opinions, views, philosophies, so that the public can get a more balanced view.

Amy Westervelt: Today, the groundwork that Schmertz and Warner laid–with Bellotti, with issue advertising, and with their general advocacy for corporate free speech–is the foundation for Big Oil's argument about climate denial. It can't be fraud, it's political speech! Protected by the free speech rights they've spent the past 50 years securing.

Greg Dalton: That was Amy Westervelt, creator of the podcast *Drilled.* We'll hear more from her later in the show.

Greg Dalton: You're listening to a Climate One conversation about tactics for spreading climate misinformation. If you missed a previous episode, or want to hear more of Climate One's empowering conversations, subscribe to our podcast wherever you get your pods. Coming up, one way to break down misleading reasoning:

John Cook: You can just take a flawed argument and transplant that logic into a parallel situation. Usually the most absurd and extreme situation you can think of and then use the same logic. And that makes it very clear and engaging and concrete when you try to explain the flawed logic to people.

Greg Dalton: That’s up next, when Climate One continues.

Greg Dalton: This is Climate One. I’m Greg Dalton, and today we’re talking about climate misinformation AND how to challenge it. John Cook is a postdoctoral research fellow with the Climate Change Communication Research Hub at Monash University in Australia. He focuses on using critical thinking to build resilience against misinformation. He says the most common *climate* misinformation in the U.S. centers on climate policy being harmful, expensive or ineffective.

John Cook: Ultimately, its goal is to delay climate action and maintain the status quo. And you will find that no matter what the argument is, the conclusion is always the same, whether they're arguing climate change isn’t real therefore we shouldn’t act or climate change isn’t caused by humans therefore, we shouldn’t act or solutions won’t work, therefore we shouldn’t act. It’s always that end thing. And so, it’s about delaying action by reducing public support for climate action and there are various pathways to do that. One is confusing people about the science. There is a famous 2002 memo written by a political strategist Frank Luntz where he basically argued for politicians who were trying to win the public debate about climate policy he said, if you want to win the debate about climate policy and basically stop climate action, cast doubt on the scientific consensus that humans are causing global warming. If the public get confused about the consensus their attitudes about the policy change accordingly.
Greg Dalton: Right. Which harkens that confusion and doubt. Of course, it goes back to the tobacco company saying doubt is our product. So, there's been a decades-long effort by oil companies and others to cast doubt on climate science to allow them to continue to profit the strategies taken many forms and evolved over time. Can you walk us through that evolution from deny, dismiss, delay, deflect?

John Cook: Yeah there has been a gradual shift. We've done an analysis of the last 20 years of climate misinformation. And the biggest shift we're seeing is a gradual transition from science misinformation to solutions misinformation as the scientific evidence evidence has gotten stronger and stronger and harder to deny. It becomes untenable to keep using the same zombie arguments that we've been reading on blogs and on social media for many years. And so, now they're arguing against climate solutions, arguing that climate policy might be harmful, arguing that renewables won’t work and just more subtle arguments than the usual climate change is a hoax type misinformation.

Greg Dalton: Right that's no longer tenable in a world where there's floods and fires that are rampant.

John Cook: I think what's most potent right now is culture war type misinformation. Arguments that other people who care about climate change, who are trying to get climate action, painting them as different to us and they’re trying to take away our lifestyle or impinge on our freedom. And generally, just trying to make the climate issue more tribal. The more tribal and polarized it becomes the harder it is to get progress.

Greg Dalton: Some of the techniques employed by misinformation you cite are magnified minority, cherry picking, false dichotomy. How are those employed and give some examples of each one if you could.

John Cook: So, attacking the scientific consensus on climate change has been a common strategy over the last few decades. And one way to do that is the use of magnified minorities.

In other words, take a small group and make them look much bigger than they actually are and much more significant than they really are. And the most popular version of this technique is the global warming petition project. This is a website that features 31,000 science graduates in the US who signed a statement saying that humans are disrupting climate. And the point of this website is to say, hey look, 31,000 people dissent against the consensus that proves that there isn't a scientific consensus. But when you look at the total number of science graduates in the US it's millions and millions and 31,000 while seeming like a big number is actually a tiny fraction of a percent. It’s magnifying a minority to make them look bigger than they really are.

Greg Dalton: So, policy is harmful. What's that attack?

John Cook: Usually arguing that climate policy is harmful takes a form of arguing those either going to ruin the economy or raise prices to people. And it really depends on the specific policy but typically what this does is cherry picks or oversimplifies the policy. For example, this is a very Australian centric one but it’s the one that immediately comes to mind. We brought in a carbon price in order to send a signal to the market to transition from fossil fuels to renewables. And this carbon price generated revenue for the government but all that money was then given back and it was mainly given back to lower income families. And so, it was a revenue neutral carbon price; the public shouldn't have any change in their household budget. But what the misinformation targeting the policy did was say this is putting a price on carbon that’s gonna raise prices for families while ignoring that money was going back to families. So, usually attacks on climate policy will focus on one part of it, but ignore the entire policy and the aspects of it that make it work better.

Greg Dalton: And what are some other non-policy attacks on solutions?

John Cook: The most basic arguments attacking renewables are the sun doesn't shine at night or wind doesn't always blow and therefore renewables aren’t a reliable source of energy. Which ignores again is cherry picking the information because it ignores the fact that we have battery storage. And also, when you have combinations of wind and solar particularly across a region, wind might not be blowing in one place but it is at a different place. And when you have a network of renewables then you get a more reliable source of energy.

Greg Dalton: And then false dichotomy. What's an example of that?

John Cook: False dichotomy is when you're given two choices and you have to choose one of them. When both might be true or maybe there’s a third choice. And the most common example of this in climate change and this is a little bit technical and complicated but it's looking at the ice core record. When we look at ice cores going back hundreds of thousands of years, in Antarctic ice cores we see that when temperature goes up, CO2 goes up afterwards by several hundred years, roughly. And what that tells us is temperature went up before the CO2 and climate deniers look at this and say well, either temperature drives CO2 or CO2 drives temperature. You have to choose one or the other. But that's actually a false dichotomy because it’s not a choice between one or the other. Both are actually true. Temperature does drive CO2 when it gets warmer, the ocean gives up CO2 in the atmosphere. And then when you have more CO2 in the atmosphere that causes warming because it's a greenhouse gas. Put those two together and you get a reinforcing feedback. And it's actually that reinforcing feedback that pulled the earth out of ice ages in the past

over the last 800,000 years.

Greg Dalton: John, you've also written about how people often substitute judgment about complex topics such as climate science with more simple judgments. For example, the character or tribal identity of a person talking about climate science. How is that reliance on shortcuts fuel climate misinformation?

John Cook: Yeah, it's important to recognize that all of us are hardwired to make decisions based on snap mental shortcuts or heuristics. And generally, it serves us well. It's how we're able to escape a saber tooth tiger jumping out of the bushes or just immediate threats. The problem is in this modern world sometimes those mental shortcuts can lead us astray and it can also make us vulnerable to bad arguments or misinformation. And it's an unfortunate reality that the solution to this problem is critical thinking. We need to be able to get better at spotting misinformation and spotting attempts to mislead us. What are those different fallacies? Is this argument a false dichotomy or does it use magnified minority or cherry picking or other misleading techniques? If we want a public who are resilient against misinformation, we need to build up their ability to spot these types of fallacies.

Greg Dalton: Right. And sort complexity can, yeah, we want things, especially these days we want things that are fast, simple, understandable and social media often distorts in doing that and distilling things. I was watching some videos online of you kind of dissecting the premise and does the conclusion logically follow the premise. And it all seem very reasonable and I thought yeah, but this is like bringing a knife to a gunfight So, I'm just curious about your sort of very reasoned approach logic-based in an information age where things are viral and fake and spreading so quickly, regardless of their veracity.

John Cook: Yeah, it's really hard. I've struggled with those thoughts for many years. When we develop this critical thinking approach where you deconstruct arguments into premises and conclusion. I did that work with two critical thinking philosophers. They introduced me to the idea of parallel argumentation. You can explain logical flaws by not yet have to going to the whole premise premise conclusion logical like is it logically valid all that kind of analysis. You can just take a flawed argument and transplant that logic into a parallel situation. Usually the most absurd and extreme situation you can think of and then use the same logic. And that makes it very clear and engaging and concrete when you try to explain the flawed logic to people. And when they introduced this technique to me, I realized that this was what late-night comedians use every night. They'll say this person said this statement and well that's just like being in this situation and then using the same logic. Everyone laughs. They can immediately see that it's wrong and they're entertained. But most importantly, like the comedian has actually introduced a bit of critical thinking because it's shown a logical fallacy in a very concrete engaging way. The beauty of this approach is you can use non-polarizing examples to explain how misinformation is misleading or to explain a fallacy.

Greg Dalton: So, let's start practice this. If I say the climate's changed before it's changing now, it's always been changing. Yeah, climate changes that's what it does. How would you respond?

John Cook: That argument is the same logic as saying well people died of natural causes before cigarettes were invented. Therefore, cigarettes can't cause harmful effects, or people died of cancer long before cigarettes were invented. Therefore, smoking doesn't cause cancer. It's the same logic. And it commits single cause fallacy. In other words, saying that

whatever caused something in the past must also be causing it now when you can have multiple causes.

Greg Dalton: Let's try another one. If I say that models are unreliable. All climate models. They're not accurate.

John Cook: So, actually we're doing an experiment on that now. And so, our approach is being to say models are a simplification of reality but it didn't capture all of reality. And we use models to get astronauts to the moon this simplified versions of reality. Newton's laws of motion and Newton's laws of gravity are simplifications. Models don't need to be perfect in order to give us useful results. And climate models they're not perfect. They don't capture absolutely everything but they capture enough to tell us that humans are causing climate change and that climate change has serious impacts.

Greg Dalton: Many fossil fuel companies now are engaging in what some call greenwashing or climate washing where they're making net zero commitments and stating that they're working toward climate solutions. You mentioned earlier they're attacking solutions? There's other approach, which is they're kind of co-opting solutions saying we share the solutions we're part of the solution.

John Cook: Yes, greenwashing is another form of climate misinformation, particularly from industry. And it's a hard one. Often you need a lot of background information in order to fact check whether what they're doing is actually helping the environment or whether it's just token behavior in order to portray themselves as being environmental when actually they're actually being quite destructive. But generally speaking, the strategy to counter greenwashing is the same as the strategy other forms of climate misinformation: learn the techniques and become familiar with them. So, when you see them in some corporate advertising that's a red flag. The techniques of greenwashing just a few of them that come immediately to mind is vague terms or kind of meaningless terms. So, they'll say it's environmentally friendly or they'll just use either colors or imagery or environmental sounding words but it's all very loosey-goosey. The other red flag is when they are a company that's their main bread and butter of their business is environmentally destructive and then they talk about something that they're doing that's environmentally positive. Usually in those cases what they're spending on this environmental activity is a tiny, tiny fraction of their overall budget.

Greg Dalton: Yeah, that's the magnified minority. We're spending millions on renewables, but they're spending tens of billions on fossil fuels. Amy Westervelt reported elsewhere in the show that freedom of speech is often viewed as sacrosanct. We all know that. And it has been used by fossil fuel companies as cover for their misinformation campaigns. What are the bigger implications of that in terms of free speech?

John Cook: it really depends on the specific situation. but generally speaking my policy or my approach is the antidote to bad speech is more speech, good speech. And that is kind of the principle that informs building public resilience against misinformation. So, helping people to see through these false arguments from fossil fuel companies or other sources of misinformation.

Greg Dalton: Right. And we've seen lots of attacks on science and there seems to be, you know, that's related to the distrust of institutions. And that's certainly been rampant during

COVID-19 pandemic and this led to real harm and even death of some vocal anti-vaxxers. Have you done research on whether personal experience does that affect people's receptivity to these myths if they know someone who's been affected by climate or know someone who's been affected by COVID?

John Cook: There's an interesting research done by my colleagues at George Mason University, Teresa Myers and Ed Maibach. They looked at how personal experience can influence people's perceptions about climate change. And the way to think about it is imagined there's three segments of society. There's the alarmed and concerned people who are on board about climate change. There's the dismissive at the other end. Then there's the mushy middle, there's the undecideds in the middle. What they found was personal experience about climate change doesn't affect the two groups at the ends. The people who are alarmed stay alarmed. The people who are dismissive stay dismissive. It's the people who are undecided in the middle when they have personal experience with climate related events like increasing extreme weather. Those are the ones whose perceptions about climate change shift.

Greg Dalton: You work with Facebook to help them combat misinformation. What does that work look like, particularly in the climate realm?

John Cook: So, Facebook launched the Climate Science Center. And initially the Climate Science Center was just about providing authoritative reliable, accurate facts about climate change. And this was done in response to a lot of criticism they received about letting misinformation spread on their platform. And a lot of people were critical that this was not enough, including myself. I didn't have any association with them at the time so I was quite blunt in saying producing facts while letting misinformation spread was like poisoning someone and then giving them a pamphlet about vegetables. But to their credit, they always recognize that just producing the Climate Science Center was a first step and their intent was to gradually ratchet up their ambition and proactiveness in taking on current misinformation. So, their next step was to work with myself and two other climate communication researchers. Tony Leiserowitz and Sander Van Der Linden. And we went through the process of looking at the most common myths about climate change and then we advise them on how to write debunkings about them. It's important when you're debunking misinformation not just to explain the facts although that's crucially important, but also to explain the technique used to distort the facts. So, fact, myth, fallacy fact is the general structure that we recommend for debunking misinformation. And they use that So, we produced those with them debunking the most common myths about climate change. Since then it's been an ongoing collaboration and they're still looking at other ways to use their platform to counter misinformation. It's been slower than I would have liked, but there has been incremental progress. Misinformation is a really complicated problem. It involves psychology, culture, technology science like whole range of different factors and we need to be throwing a lot of different tools at it.

Greg Dalton: John Cook, thanks for sharing your insights on how to identify misinformation and respond to the misinformation.

John Cook: Thanks, Greg. It was great to talk to you.

Greg Dalton: This is Climate One. Coming up, the implications of podcasts not being regulated the same way as other types of media:

Amy Westervelt: Every person who's putting out a podcast, it's up to them entirely what their process is for fact checking or any kind of backstop there on truthfulness. And we've really seen in the last few years what that can lead to.

Greg Dalton: That's up next, when Climate One continues.

Greg Dalton: This is Climate One. I'm Greg Dalton. We're talking about climate misinformation. This week's show is a special collaboration with Amy Westervelt, an award-winning print and audio journalist. She's founder of the Critical Frequency podcast network, which includes her own show *Drilled* -- a true-crime style podcast about climate change. I asked her to join me to reflect on what we've heard so far in this show about ways fossil fuel companies spread misinformation. Amy, welcome to Climate One. I'm excited to be talking with you.

Amy Westervelt: I'm super excited to be here. Thanks for having me.

Greg Dalton: Well, reflecting on your piece that opened this episode. It was really interesting and I've been thinking about the distinction between commercial speech and political speech. Fossil fuels have amazing energy density and they enable us to live our lives every day and fossil fuels are killing the natural systems that we rely on every day. Both are true. Where do you see the line between commercial speech and political speech that you talked about in that opening segment?

Amy Westervelt: Yeah, I mean, I find that really interesting to just from a legal strategy standpoint. This idea that you know if it's something that connects to policy, I want to see then it doesn't have to play by the same rules as you know something that's about a product that I'm selling. So, to me, actually it reminds me of the conversation that sprung up when The Guardian stopped taking fossil fuel ads a couple years ago. So, a lot of people kind of question that and said, well, where do you draw the line what about airplanes and air travel and cars and it has to do with climate change and/or a product's impact on you know, the environment or the world at large, you could theoretically just get rid of any kind of advertiser. And they had this very succinct response to that which was well, all of those other categories are selling a product and the fossil fuel industry is very much selling ideas and policy positions. They don't advertise gas anymore. Nobody really chooses their gasoline based on brand, right, it's a commodity. So, to me there's a very, very clear difference between the way that the fossil fuel industry advertises for the last 10 to 15 years and the way most other industries advertise that is a pretty good illustration of the difference between commercial and political speech.

Greg Dalton: Right. And then that advertising often gets into its branding. Another part of your segment that was real interesting is Mobil VP of public affairs, formerly, Herb Schmertz remarking on the company's personality and its participation in the marketplace of ideas. Of course, these days corporations are often invited into public discourse by partisans and advocates. Disney just called for rescinding Florida's Don't Say Gay Law which I said, yay. Oil companies are not the only ones shaping their image in the public policy sphere. So, why is it bad for oil companies to do what Disney is and others are doing?

Amy Westervelt: I personally believe it's not great for any of them to do it, actually. Whether we agree with them or not is sort of irrelevant. I think the invitation to corporations into the public square has been a real problem in America since the 70s. I think that you see this,

right, in this history of Mobil kind of involving itself with this. That it was very much like we need to maintain this position in society to be able to effectively lobby both the public and politicians for these kinds of policies that we want to control the narrative about what's happening with our industry. It's actually really interesting time to be talking about this because very similar things were happening then that are happening now where, you know, the gas prices were high and the oil companies were saying it's not our fault it's the government's fault. And there was this kind of, you know, jockeying for control of the story.

Greg Dalton: When I heard that piece that you did I thought of, you know, the status of corporations as individuals, as legal individuals to kind of another extension of what you pointed out. They have First Amendment rights and they are an individual, which made me think immediately of Stephen Colbert's line a while back where he said, I'll believe that corporations are individuals when Texas executes one.

Amy Westervelt: [Laughs] Yes. Yeah, exactly and I mean Herb Schmertz's whole personality thing really played into that too. This idea of like, oh, if we imbue corporations with a personality and opinion and a soul like a morality too, right, then that makes it easier for us to convince the public that we're good faith actors; we care about more than just our bottom line. But the reality is that they don't have to play by the same rules as any other member of the community. Nobody else gets as many benefits as corporations do in the realm of where they're not humans.

Greg Dalton: And I'm curious, you know, we had John Cook talking about deconstructing climate myths, how to identify and respond to misinformation. What struck you about his piece?

Amy Westervelt: I find him so interesting every time I read anything of his or listen to him talk about this stuff. So, the thing that struck me this time was this notion and it wasn't necessarily new to me but just the way he phrased it as you know we had like 20 years of science denial and then 20 years of solutions denial. It's a very straightforward way to understand it and you really have seen that over the years of, you know, okay now we believe the science like let's focus on these other things that will help us delay policy and regulation and allow us to kind of get as much out of these assets as we can before we have to retire them. Which is the name of the game. And to be honest I don't necessarily blame oil companies for doing that; they're doing what corporations are encouraged and incentivized and enabled to do, right? So, I kind of have the opinion of well, if we wanted to change then we have to change the rules so that they can't do these things that are beneficial to them and kind of impose a lot of liabilities and risks on the rest of us.

Greg Dalton: The idea of kind of solutions also for me was really clarifying and crystallizing when John said we've moved from climate misinformation to solutions misinformation. And made me think of how many times I've heard people question what happened to EV batteries after the useful life of the car. And I've heard that so many times and I'm suspicious of where that's being seeded and how that's being seeded. Like, those people all come up with that organically or, you know, is there some Facebook posts somewhere that campaigned to like sow doubt about EV batteries at the end of life. And we know that is a solvable problem and now there's a new company by the founder of Tesla that's gonna try to harvest those batteries, etc.

Amy Westervelt: Yeah, it's so tough because I think there are important and nuanced

conversations to be had about some of the unintended consequences of the solutions to climate change too, right. Like I know there's a lot going on around lithium mining right now. Those are very important conversations to be having. We don't want to go into you know the next energy generation with the same exact mindset except for like the source of energy or else we're gonna repeat, you know, the same mistakes and end up with a new problem, right. And unfortunately, it's like you almost can't have those conversations without it being weaponized by people who don't want to see climate policy or who don't want to see energy transition to say, oh, there's problems with this too, there's problems with all of it. The other thing I thought was interesting in your interview with John where he talks about how there's a real focus on kind of weaponizing the human tendency towards tribal identity and kind of group, sticking with our group and digging into our opinions and those kinds of things because you really see that in the fracturing of the climate movement too. Not just like climate people versus people who don't think we should act on climate or centrist versus progressors or whatever like. Even in these things like should we or should we not mine lithium for electrification. It's like people can't even have, you know, a remotely nuanced conversation about it.

Greg Dalton: A lot of this is playing out in the podcasting place. And there was a big dustup recently with Joe Rogan. He's been peddling in both climate and COVID misinformation for a long time but it's COVID that got him in trouble. And then you tweeted recently that, you know, he interviewed Michael Shellenberger, who I've interviewed numerous times who's running for the governor of California. So, how does he embody kind of the evolution from science misinformation to solution information and what do you think about when you saw Rogan and Shellenberger together?

Amy Westervelt: It was so interesting because I was just listening to your conversation with John and then I saw that that interview had happened. And I was like, oh, this is like a perfect example of this evolution because Joe Rogan has interviewed lots of kind of garden-variety climate deniers. Who will say actually CO2 is good for us in the atmosphere and things of that nature. And now he's graduated to Shellenberger, you know, who likes to kind of burnish his environmental credentials and say I was an environmental activist and now I'm apologizing to the world for all the alarmism that we created about climate change. And yes, it's a problem but we don't need to actually make any drastic changes. Very, very much a big user of one of the strategies that John Cook talked about, which is cherry picking data points. I went through his book when it came out and found I think 3,000 examples of cherry-picked data that was like making a very flawed argument.

Greg Dalton: So, how much of this is, you know, you and I both came out of traditional news backgrounds. When I worked at the AP there was a saying that if you think your mother loves you, you better call and confirm that it's still true. And so, but in pod land in the realm of podcasts which are those traditional rules don't apply; they're regulated differently. So, talk about how much of this is a real function of the surge of podcasting and how can pod land avoid becoming the cesspool that is social media.

Amy Westervelt: Yeah, I'm actually very concerned about this because it is governed by the exact same rules as Twitter and Facebook, podcasts are. But I think the public thinks of podcasts as being media, right, and therefore governed by media rules like websites or newspapers or whatever and it's not actually. So, every person who's putting out a podcast it's up to them entirely what their process is for fact checking or you know, I mean, There are some basic consumer protection laws. But in terms of any kind of backstop there on truthfulness, no, it's kind of up to each organization and we've really seen in the last few

years what that can lead to. Joe Rogan is a perfect example of you know he kind of takes this approach that, well I'm just sharing my opinion. And the problem there is that when you're sharing your opinion and it sounds like expertise then it can be very misleading to people.

Greg Dalton: He learned from Mobil oil maybe he took a page from Herb Schmertz, yeah.

Amy Westervelt: Yeah, exactly. So, I think that you know I'm not a fan of censorship and I think also like the horse is kind of out of the barn, like you're not gonna go back in time and set up rules that the podcast industry can live by necessarily. But I do think that there's an argument to be made to bring podcasts under FCC regulations instead of the Federal Trade Commission, FTC, which it's under now. Not that the FCC is perfect obviously we see tons of misinformation on cable news for example, as well. But there is at least some amount of more proactive action to try to curb that there. And the other thing is I do think that you're seeing the industry itself start to sort of take somewhat of a turn. You're always gonna have these kinds of rogue actors, but the podcast platforms are thinking about you know what can we do to sort of let the more kind of high quality, reported stuff rise to the top and highlight that stuff versus some guy in his mom's garage. And companies are starting to hire fact checkers more and more too. This is like become just in the last couple years I've seen a major, major shift where I had to really convince people before that that was worth spending money on. But because of the FTC thing the other problem with podcasts is that the ads don't go by the same rules.

Greg Dalton: We struggle with that. How you like fact check the ads that come on your platform. The Daily got called out for some things on natural gas I think it was that does not quite meet the standards of the New York Times.

Amy Westervelt: Right. Exactly. the fact that you saw this explosion in oil companies in particular advertising in podcast a few years ago. It's for a reason. They don't spend money on stuff just to try things out. They're very smart and very strategic. So, if they're investing a lot there and in social media ads it's because they have more control over the story there.

Greg Dalton: Right. Which all gets to the need for that educated discerning public to sort of check ourselves. What's the difference between the editorial the podcast the advertisement? One of the themes running through this is the narrative of personal responsibility both for climate action and I guess for the information we take in versus corporate responsibility for climate corporate responsibility the producer responsibility for media and for energy. BP popularized the idea of the personal carbon footprint 20 years ago. I respect your work a lot and you have really gone after the villains, energy companies, energy suppliers as villains in the climate story. And I've also pursued the limitations and the truth of the personal responsibility. And I want to play a clip from Britt Wray who is a researcher at Stanford University who had this to say.

Britt Wray: It's a huge part of a lot of activist rhetoric that we shouldn't be focusing on our individual minuscule impacts in relation to who's out there really spreading the damage. Fossil fuel companies the corrupt politicians, the lobbyists etc. that are fueling the damage as we speak and have been for decades. And I really think that that is of course true on an intellectual level in many ways. But there is also perhaps a propulsion to turn away from looking within because it brings up shame it brings up guilt it brings up intolerable emotions that produce a bunch of defensive reactions.

Greg Dalton: That's Britt Wray who has a PhD in climate science communication. So, I'm gonna ask you as someone, can villainization sometimes be easier than looking at ourselves in our own complicity.

Amy Westervelt: I definitely think it can be. And I also agree with Britt and I also think that there's again, I sound like a broken record here, like a real need for nuance in the conversation around personal responsibility. Because the reality is that the top 10% of consumers globally which most Americans fall into are responsible for a much larger proportion of global CO2 emissions than everyone else in the world, right. So, I absolutely think that we should look at that and take responsibility for you know the ways that we're contributing to that. I also think just as a human it feels better to live according to your values than not on a real basic level. and I think also that there's something to be said for individual action beyond consumerism. This is something that like really bugs me that the personal responsibilities have always gets down to where we buy, right, or how we travel. But like individual action can also be civic action. It can be political organizing. It can be, you know, finding ways to make your community more resilient. It can be mutual aid. There are lots and lots and lots of things that have nothing to do with buying different stuff that our individual actions that are very important and that are a critical part of how we not only address this problem but actually survive it.

Greg Dalton: Bill McKibben said to me years ago the most important thing an individual can do is not act as an individual. And I'm increasingly thinking about the best thing you can do is have relationships. Make this part of your life and your relationships whoever those relationships are with to make climate part of it.

Amy Westervelt: Yeah, and I know Katharine Hayhoe talks a lot about the power of talking to other people about this, not just in the vein of, you know, persuading people to see your point of view or things like that but just to create community to like actually to help with processing those feelings of shame and fear and anxiety and grief, and all of those things that come up with this too. Like you can't do that alone you need to talk to people. But you speaking to someone else about it can absolutely help them to feel more like they're able to kind of work through that stuff and get to a place where they can act. And to me it's actually not about finding villains at all. It's about figuring out what drove a problem like the climate crisis in the first place. Like how do you have a society that allows a small group of people to make decisions that impact the whole world. How does that happen? How does it get to this point where we're facing this, you know, catastrophe and everyone feels really powerless to do anything about it. So, that is interesting like how do the system get built and who built it and why do they have the power to build it? Because for me, I don't think you get to effective solutions if you don't understand that. How do you solve a problem when you don't even know the roots of it or where it came from? We have to deal with the power structure, not just the power source.

Greg Dalton: Right. It is ultimately about power, right. Swap out fossil energy putting green energy and leave the rest of the structures in place. You've only solved part of the problem for some of the people.

Amy Westervelt: Right. Right. And for probably a short amount of time before we yeah.

Greg Dalton: Well, Amy Westervelt, thank you so much for coming on Climate One. It's been a pleasure and honor.

Amy Westervelt: Yeah, thanks for having me. Thank you so much.

Greg Dalton: On this Climate One… We've been breaking down climate misinformation tactics and ways to respond. Special thanks to Amy Westervelt for this collaboration. Check out her excellent podcast, *Drilled*. Climate One's empowering conversations connect all aspects of the climate emergency. To hear more, subscribe to our podcast on Apple or wherever you get your pods. Talking about climate can be hard-- but it's critical to address the climate emergency. Please help us get people talking more about climate by giving us a rating or review. It really does help advance the climate conversation. Brad Marshland is our senior producer; our producers and audio editors are Ariana Brocious and Austin Colón. Our team also includes Arnav Gupta, Steve Fox and Tyler Reed. Our theme music was composed by George Young (and arranged by Matt Willcox). Gloria Duffy is CEO of The Commonwealth Club of California, the nonprofit and nonpartisan forum where our program originates. I'm Greg Dalton.