

RESEARCH ARTICLE

“Put Your Money Where the Kids Are”: Mobil Oil, Social Responsibility, and Cultures of Privatization in the 1970s

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Abstract

With the oil crises of the 1970s as a backdrop, this article explores the oil industry’s efforts to present its own interests as aligned with those of future generations in order to justify state disinvestment and environmental deregulation. Although histories of neoliberalism’s cultural dimensions have typically been treated as distinct from scholarship on the oil industry’s anti-environmental campaigns, this article bridges these histories’ intersections in the 1970s. Using Mobil Oil as a case study, I focus on three venues of address—advertising, television sponsorship, and education—to analyze how the industry naturalized its role in American life in a moment in which energy consumption and corporate power were called into question. By promoting its investments in children and families, Mobil bolstered its reputation as a socially responsible corporation committed to the public good. Ultimately, I argue that the oil industry participated in constructing “cultures of privatization,” sidelining alternate visions of economic redistribution.

Introduction

A 1975 *Wall Street Journal* column begins with an unlikely anecdote describing how a group of California school children sent a package of letters and a check representing 1,334 pennies they’d collected to Rawleigh Warner Jr., then-chairman of Mobil Oil. This donation was made in response to a recent Mobil advertorial featuring a large illustration of *Sesame Street*’s Big Bird and entitled “Endangered Species” which highlighted the series’ vulnerability and dependence on private funding.¹ The article goes on to describe a typical letter from the group of students expressing, “Dear Mobil Oil: Most people are mad at you but we like you. Thank you for helping Big Bird Stay on TV. We are glad to help too.”² The students’ donation, the article argues, was significant not in terms of its monetary contribution but what it demonstrated about the success of Mobil’s public affairs program in redefining the company’s image as a socially conscious corporation working in the interest of the public good.

¹Mobil Oil, “Endangered Species,” Advertisement, *New York Times*, Feb. 21, 1974, sec. 1, 33.

²Michael J. Connor, “Arguing Back: Mobil’s Advocacy Ads Lead a Growing Trend, Draw Praise, Criticism,” *The Wall Street Journal*, May 1975, 1. Within public relations, “advertorials”—a term that combines advertisements and editorials—are described as “paid messages in the media sponsored by organized interests to create and sustain a favorable political environment to pursue their respective goals.” See: Clyde Brown and Herbert Waltzer, “Every Thursday: Advertorials by Mobil Oil on the Op-Ed Page of *The New York Times*,” *Public Relations Review* 31, no. 2 (June 2005): 197–208.

As this column demonstrates, the oil industry's public relations programs, in addition to establishing and broadening the parameters of corporate "free speech," denying climate science, and obstructing international regulatory measures which would limit the worst effects of a rapidly warming planet, were mobilized to endorse particular cultural values.³ In the 1970s, in the midst of oil crises, environmental activism, and growing distrust in corporate power, the oil industry educated the public about its vital role in maintaining the stability of the economy and the "American way of life"—often represented through the family and, particularly, children.⁴ Through "petro-pedagogical" programs, oil corporations intervened in public debates surrounding energy, economic redistribution, social programs, and education, aligning the interests of future generations with the interests of free market capitalism broadly and the oil industry specifically.⁵ By bringing attention to the oil industry's investments in children and families, particularly those racialized as "disadvantaged," public relations programs performed an important function of deflection for the industry, most notably with regard to environmental regulations.⁶ Ultimately, during this period, oil corporations drew on public relations and sponsorship activities to highlight children as the beneficiaries of the industry's commitment to the future.

In this essay, I examine how the oil industry's public relations activities in the 1970s contributed to "cultures of privatization," particularly as they relate to children and the family as the primary symbols of social welfare. Scholars of neoliberalism and its intersections with family values have traced how neoliberalism ushered in conditions of austerity in which trust in the ability of government to promote social equality receded, with responsibility for well-being shifting from a role of the state to a role of the family.⁷ This privatization of social responsibility is evident in oil industry framings of social welfare, including social and educational programs, as essentially dependent on the unrestricted growth and generosity of corporations. By examining how oil corporations' public relations endeavors promoted an understanding of

³This article is indebted to the scholars and journalists who have analyzed oil industry deflection campaigns in relation to climate change. See Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming* (New York, 2010); Geoffrey Supran and Naomi Oreskes, "Assessing ExxonMobil's Climate Change Communications (1977–2014)," *Environmental Research Letters* 12, no. 8 (Aug. 2017): 084019; Amy Westervelt, *Drilled*, podcast, (2019–), <https://rigged.ghost.io/>; Robert J. Brulle, Melissa Aronczyk, and Jason Carmichael, "Corporate Promotion and Climate Change: An Analysis of Key Variables Affecting Advertising Spending by Major Oil Corporations, 1986–2015," *Climatic Change* 159, no. 1 (Mar. 2020): 87–101; Emily Atkin, "Introducing: The Fossil Fuel Ad Anthology," July 12, 2021, <https://heated.world/introducing-the-fossil-fuel-ad-anthology> (accessed Apr. 11, 2023); Katie Worth, *Miseducation: How Climate Change Is Taught in America* (New York, 2021); and Melissa Aronczyk and Maria I. Espinoza, *A Strategic Nature: Public Relations and the Politics of American Environmentalism* (New York, 2022).

⁴For a discussion of how oil production and consumption came to be identified with the "American way of life," see Matthew T. Huber, *Lifeflood: Oil, Freedom, and the Forces of Capital* (Minneapolis, 2013), xi–xv. For examinations of the relation between children and environmental politics and literatures, see Finis Dunaway, *Seeing Green: The Use and Abuse of American Environmental Images* (Chicago, 2015); and Rebekah Sheldon, *The Child to Come: Life after the Human Catastrophe* (Minneapolis, 2016).

⁵Emily M. Eaton and Nick A. Day have argued that industry-sponsored teaching materials represent the "pedagogical arm" of the fossil fuel industry's "regime of obstruction" to climate policy. I draw on this term more broadly to discuss how public relations programs educated the public about the role of the oil industry in society. "Petro-Pedagogy: Fossil Fuel Interests and the Obstruction of Climate Justice in Public Education," *Environmental Education Research* 26, no. 4 (Apr. 2, 2020): 457–73.

⁶Like "inner-city" and, later, "at risk," in the 1970s "disadvantaged" was one of many race-neutral terms invoked in place of discussing structural causes of racial and economic inequality. Paul S. B. Jackson, "The Crisis of the 'Disadvantaged Child': Poverty Research, IQ, and Muppet Diplomacy in the 1960s," *Antipode* 46, no. 1 (2014): 191–2.

⁷For discussion of family values as the intersection of neoliberalism and social conservatism, see Melinda Cooper, *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (New York, 2017); and Wendy Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West* (New York, 2019).

children's futures as objects of private investment, this article contributes to the historiography of the oil industry and its participation in perpetuating environmental degradation, as well as historical and theoretical analyses of how neoliberal ideologies enforced the privatization of the family.⁸ Caleb Wellum, moreover, has recently argued that energy history can meaningfully expand and revise understandings of the "dependence/independence" dualism, a "central binary in U.S. political and cultural history."⁹ Through the examination of oil corporations' public relations programs, I argue, we can see how oil companies promoted a vision of public goods as dependent on private growth in a moment in which their power in American life was coming into question.

In this article, I focus on the assembled efforts of Mobil Oil in the 1970s as emblematic of the major oil corporations that dominated the oil industry as a whole.¹⁰ Mobil Oil is significant in part due to the widespread attention paid to their public relations initiatives, including from other corporations which would embrace similar tactics, news outlets who were drawn into debates with Mobil over fairness in media, and government bodies that debated the growing role of corporate "speech" in policymaking.¹¹ During the 1970s, Mobil pioneered developments in advocacy advertising and educational sponsorship activities which were central to Mobil's self-projection as a socially responsible participant in American society.¹² Mobil, as the most notably vocal oil major, acquired a reputation for speaking broadly in defense of the oil industry's interests.¹³ By analyzing Mobil's public affairs activities during this period, I argue, the relationship between the oil industry and the construction of cultures of privatization becomes clear.

I begin with an examination of energy politics in the 1970s, examining the immense public debate over energy futures, environmental priorities, and the role of government in mediating the free market which was taken up by environmentalists, concerned citizens, everyday consumers, public officials, oil corporations, and the larger business community during this era.

⁸For discussion of the framing of children of color as human capital who, through private investment, could produce returns, see Jules Gill-Peterson, "The Value of the Future: The Child as Human Capital and the Neoliberal Labor of Race," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 43, no. 1/2 (2015): 182–90.

⁹Caleb Wellum, "The Use of Energy History," *Modern American History* 6, no. 2 (July 2023): 214. Natasha Zaretsky similarly examines the circulation of the dependence/independence dualism within the history of the oil crises in *No Direction Home: The American Family and the Fear of National Decline, 1968–1980* (Chapel Hill, 2007).

¹⁰Particularly as the major oil corporations—including Exxon, Texaco, Gulf Oil, Mobil Oil, Standard Oil of California, Standard Oil of Indiana, and Shell—encountered criticism for their record profits during the oil crises of the 1970s, individual corporations, industry trade groups, and public officials alike recognized the political interests of the oil majors as shared, while distinguishing between the divergent interests of the majors and independent oil companies. See *Congressional Record*, 93rd Cong., 2nd sess., Jan. 24, 1974, 726–28; *Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Consumer Economics of the Joint Economic Committee*, 93rd Cong., 1st sess., "The Gasoline and Fuel Oil Shortage," May 1, 2 and June 2, 1973.

¹¹See Gerri L. Smith and Robert L. Heath, "Moral Appeals in Mobil Oil's Op-Ed Campaign," *Public Relations Review* 16, no. 4 (Dec. 1, 1990): 48–54; Robert L. Kerr, "Creating the Corporate Citizen: Mobil Oil's Editorial-Advocacy Campaign in *The New York Times* to Advance the Right and Practice of Corporate Political Speech, 1970–80," *American Journalism* 21, no. 4 (Oct. 2004): 39–62; Brown and Waltzer, "Every Thursday," 197–208; Vanessa Murphree and James Aucoin, "The Energy Crisis and the Media: Mobil Oil Corporation's Debate with the Media 1973–1983," *American Journalism* 27, no. 2 (2010): 7–30; and Burton St. John, "Conveying the Sense-Making Corporate Persona: The Mobil Oil 'Observations' Columns, 1975–1980," *Public Relations Review*, 40, no. 4 (Nov. 1, 2014): 692–99.

¹²David Vogel defines advocacy advertising as a specialized form of advertising "whose purpose is to persuade the public of the merits of the corporation's view on a particular issue." Mobil's innovations in the 1970s serve as a paradigmatic case study. *Fluctuating Fortunes* (New York, 1989), 216–17.

¹³In 1979, journalist Robert Sherrill described the 1970s as "a decade in which headlines such as 'Oil Giants Exploited Energy Shortage, Probers Charge' — a vintage piece from *The Washington Star* — have appeared almost as regularly as Mobil's ads proclaiming the industry's innocence." See Robert Sherrill, "The Case Against the Oil Companies" *New York Times Magazine*, Oct. 1979, 32; Rawleigh Warner, Jr., Letters: "If Our Government Went Into the Oil Business," *New York Times*, Aug. 8, 1979, A22.

Shifting to the petro-pedagogical forms that became important sources of deflection in this period, I then examine Mobil Oil's public relations program, focusing on the treatment of education and welfare in Mobil's newspaper advertorial program and Mobil's sponsorship of the Children's Television Workshop (CTW) in the 1970s. I then move to a discussion of oil corporations' production of industry-backed educational materials, which were widely used due to some of the very strains on public education that neoliberalism would exacerbate in the coming decades. Ultimately, I examine these petro-pedagogical forms to illustrate their participation in the construction of cultures of privatization which framed racialized projections of children's futures as dependent on the oil industry.

Corporate Activism and Environmental (De)Regulation in the 1970s

During the 1970s, American dependence on fossil fuels was newly contested within mainstream political cultures. The 1969 Santa Barbara oil spill, which sparked renewed environmentalist consciousness and mobilization, led to strident critiques of the oil industry's neglect of the environment, transcending self-conscious environmentalists and reaching into the center of public life. Within the Santa Barbara Declaration of Environmental Rights, entered into the *Congressional Record* in 1970, activists affirmed, "We must develop the vision to see that in regard to the natural world private and corporate ownership should be so limited as to preserve the interest of society and the integrity of the environment."¹⁴ The first Earth Day on April 22, 1970, likewise, demonstrated a widespread questioning of the relationship between the postwar political economic order and environmental degradation.¹⁵ Responding to these mobilizations, the late 1960s and early 1970s witnessed a transformation in policy approaches to regulating corporate "externalities." Legislation including the National Environmental Policy Act (1969), the Occupational Safety and Health Act (1970), amendments to the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act (1972), and the founding of the Environmental Protection Agency (1970) signaled government's willingness to regulate the practices of industry. Shortly thereafter, the 1973–4 oil crisis, and, later in the decade, the 1979 oil shock, generated widespread concern regarding the future scarcity of oil supplies and calls for greater exploration and deregulation that directly conflicted with the environmental protections established just a few years prior. The oil crises intersected with other long-term developments in American political economy, converging with a decline in economic growth, a rise of unemployment amidst deindustrialization, and inflation, as well as changes in political culture in which Americans reevaluated their relationship to government and the scope of its administration over public life. Within this climate, the increasingly embattled oil industry drew on technologies of public relations to align itself with the public interest, positioning itself as a benefactor of social welfare and government as a source of inefficiency and economic stagnation. In the process, the industry "retooled the notion of public interest in their image."¹⁶

From the perspective of the industry and its allies, the regulatory ethos of the New Deal, "tax-and-spend" tenets of post-WWII liberalism, and extension of social programs under the Great Society had resulted in the overextension of the federal government, which had impeded the otherwise effective functioning of the free market. In the early 1970s, oil corporations and trade

¹⁴*Congressional Record*, 91st Cong., 2nd sess., Jan. 20, 1970, 498–99.

¹⁵The first Earth Day also demonstrated the tensions underlying the coalition making up the environmental movement in this period, including disagreements between New Left and countercultural groups and established conservation groups over the analysis of capitalism's role in environmental problems and Black activists' criticisms of Earth Day's language of universalism, race-neutral assessment of environmental hazard, and marginalization of the concerns of working class and poor African Americans. Nathan Hare, "Black Ecology," *The Black Scholar* 1, no. 6 (Apr. 1970): 2–8; Robert Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement*, revised ed. (Washington, D.C., 2005), 148–58; Dunaway, *Seeing Green*, 57–62.

¹⁶Espinoza and Aronczyk, *A Strategic Nature*, 120.

associations warned that government regulations, including price controls, environmental standards, and the ban on the Trans-Alaska oil pipeline would stifle discovery and production, ultimately straining the domestic energy supply.¹⁷ Business historian David Vogel describes how, unlike earlier precedents, regulatory policy from 1969 and onward throughout the 1970s enacted sweeping change across industries—including in environmental standards, occupational health and safety, consumer protections, and tax reform.¹⁸ Representing a “kind of Great Society for the private economy,” this wider reach resulted in corporations becoming “conscious of their common or class interests.”¹⁹ In response, the oil industry assembled to recast its role in American society through the projection of corporate social responsibility.

The oil industry’s efforts to project itself as socially responsible in the 1970s are grounded in longer historical roots. The “petro-pedagogical” projects of Mobil and the broader oil industry in the 1970s drew on earlier paradigms, including the flourishing of public relations—termed the birth of the “corporate soul”—in the postwar era.²⁰ The oil industry’s efforts are consistent with the longer trajectory of postwar “corporate liberalism” charted by Jennifer Delton, wherein social responsibility came to be understood by business leaders as central to ensuring conditions of long-term profitability, such that “doing the right thing” was viewed as economically advantageous.²¹ By promoting private solutions to social problems, industry could supplant government interventions and forestall taxation.²² Likewise, Elizabeth Fones-Wolf has argued that during the postwar period, business leaders increasingly endeavored to shape not just social and economic policies, but the “less obvious” domain of ideas and values, in an effort to remake Americans’ understandings of their relationships to corporations and to the state.²³ In order to accomplish this, corporations “constructed and sold a specific vision of the reciprocal relationship of businesses and citizens that stressed mutual rights and responsibilities.”²⁴ Sidelining alternate visions of economic redistribution, the oil industry advocated for limited regulation and maximal growth, projecting itself as a “good neighbor” which would, in return, acknowledge its responsibility to the public good.²⁵

This stance resonated with the wider efforts of the business community to reignite its promotion of free market ideals in the face of social movements’ rejection of corporate power and public officials’ embrace of new regulations during the 1970s. Emblematic of this reorientation toward offensive, rather than defensive, responses to industry’s critics, the 1971 “Powell Memorandum” translated a posture into a program of action. The memo, officially

¹⁷Huber, *Lifeblood*, 118–19; Meg Jacobs, *Panic at the Pump: The Energy Crisis and the Transformation of American Politics in the 1970s* (New York, 2016), 34–6, 47, 66; David Nye, *Consuming Power: A Social History of American Energies* (Cambridge, MA, 1998), 218.

¹⁸Vogel, *Fluctuating Fortunes*, 13, 59.

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰See: Roland Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul: The Rise of Public Relations and Corporate Imagery in American Big Business* (Berkeley, 1998).

²¹Jennifer Delton, “The Triumph of Social Responsibility in the National Association of Manufacturers in the 1950s,” in *Capital Gains: Business and Politics in Twentieth-Century America*, ed. Richard R. John and Kim Phillips-Fein (Philadelphia, 2017), 183–7.

²²*Ibid.*, 191. See, for example: Mobil Oil, “Don’t shoot the piano player...he’s doing the best he can.” Advertisement, *New York Times*, May 9, 1974; Mobil Oil, “Windfall Profits or Windfall Tax?,” Advertisement, *New York Times*, Apr. 12, 1979.

²³Scholars have questioned the idea of business as a “monolithic force capable of manipulating people and institutions at will.” Fones-Wolf, however, contends that divisions between individual firms were less significant than the “unity of purpose within much of the business community on certain key issues, in particular, the necessity of halting the advance of the welfare state and of undermining the legitimacy and power of organized labor.” Elizabeth A. Fones-Wolf, *Selling Free Enterprise: The Business Assault on Labor and Liberalism, 1945–60* (Champaign, IL, 1994), 5–7.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 5.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 6.

entitled “Attack on American Free Enterprise System” was written by corporate lawyer and soon-to-be Supreme Court Justice Lewis F. Powell to Eugene B. Snyder, education director of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. The memo attributed the unpopularity of business to attacks that were emerging from New Leftist antiwar activists, radicalized college students, and “respectable liberals and social reformers” like Ralph Nader, consumer protection advocate whose *Unsafe at Any Speed: The Designed-In Dangers of the American Automobile* alerted many readers to corporate irresponsibility, specifically within the auto industry. According to Powell, the efficacy of these critiques was the result of the American public’s ignorance of the capitalist system and the apathy of business to challenge these attacks.²⁶

Powell argued that business must counter the emerging commonsense that the free enterprise system operated only to serve itself, challenging the targeting of corporate tax incentives—described in media as “tax breaks,” “loop holes,” and “tax benefits”—as working solely “for the benefit of business.” Rather, he argued, “it is dismaying that many politicians make the same argument that tax measures of this kind benefit only ‘business’ without benefit to the poor. The fact that this is either political demagoguery or economic illiteracy, is of slight comfort. This setting of the ‘rich’ against the ‘poor’, of business against the people, is the cheapest and most dangerous kind of politics.”²⁷ In order to improve the public perception of business, Powell outlined a multi-step plan of action which included developing textbook evaluation, building up conservative interests on school boards, funding faculty positions at universities, and producing economics education materials.²⁸ He also pushed businesses to introduce paid advertisements which, rather than advocating specific products or supporting institutional images, would actively endeavor to “support the system.”²⁹ Such efforts, Powell argued, would enable the business community to recover lost ground in public authority, including in political arenas connected to consumerism and the environment.³⁰ While not directly referenced as an inspiration of the Mobil public affairs program or oil industry sponsorship practices, the memo illuminates key concerns of the business community in this era which align with Mobil’s and others in the industry’s efforts to deflect opprobrium through a defense of corporations’ societal role.³¹ While resonant with wider business cultures advocating for free market ideologies and policy translations, the activities of the oil industry complemented the long-term constitution of oil, in particular, as integral to and synonymous with the postwar, privatized “American way of life” in a moment in which this equation was actively contested.³²

Over the course of the 1970s, many of the environmental policies installed at the beginning of the decade came under fire. American oil consumption doubled between 1950 and 1974, and by

²⁶Lewis F. Powell, Jr., “Attack on American Free Enterprise System,” (Aug. 23, 1971), Lewis F. Powell, Jr. Papers, Washington and Lee School of Law Scholarly Commons, 1–34.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 7.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 15–20.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 23–4.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 25.

³¹Although the memo’s initial distribution was restricted to high-ranking leaders of the Chamber of Commerce, journalist Jack Anderson obtained a copy and reported on it in *The Washington Post* in September 1972, shortly after Powell’s Supreme Court confirmation. Though Anderson sought to expose Powell’s immoderacy, some business leaders noted at the time that the publicity had only enabled the memo’s ideas to spread. While I have not found reference to the Powell memo within available Mobil documents, there is a documented connection between Mobil Oil and free market institutions like the American Enterprise Institute (AEI); as Herman Schmidt, general counsel of Mobil, remarked in a letter addressed to AEI trustees, “AEI has the program, we have the contacts.” Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement From The New Deal To Reagan* (New York, 2009), 158, 160–2, 174.

³²Huber, *Lifeblood*, xii–xvii.

that point the U.S. had long been the world's largest consumer of oil.³³ In 1973, OPEC price hikes and the Arab oil embargo resulted in a steep decline in the American oil supply.³⁴ As soon as the energy crisis became widely discussed and felt by American consumers, captured emblematically in images of snaking gas lines, oil industry groups responded to intensified scrutiny by framing recent environmental policy as the scapegoat.³⁵ Increasingly, environmentalist and conservationist calls for reimagining American consumption patterns came up against industry and political efforts to promote “energy independence,” which would cement the role of fossil fuels in America’s energy futures.

During the 1970s, the oil industry’s public relations campaigns intervened within a changing political terrain, as presidential administrations shifted between energy policies that required the conservation, or, alternately, the increased production and deregulation, of oil. On November 7, 1973, with the Watergate investigation already underway, Richard Nixon’s Federal Energy Administration introduced Project Independence, an initiative which endeavored to free the U.S. of reliance on foreign energy producers by 1980, encouraging both voluntary conservation measures at the level of the individual home and the development of alternative energy sources.³⁶ By November 16, 1973, Nixon authorized the construction of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline, which had previously been restricted after fierce activism of Indigenous groups, environmentalists, and fishery unions and due to regulations imposed by Indigenous land claims and the National Environmental Policy Act.³⁷ Upon becoming president, Gerald Ford likewise used the recession and Project Independence to justify environmental deregulation, supporting the weakening of restrictions on offshore drilling, drilling on federal lands, and nuclear power.³⁸ Later, Jimmy Carter’s energy plan authorized the passage of the National Energy Act on October 15, 1978, absent the extensive conservation measures he had previously envisioned, as the legislation was reduced to weakened regulations on national gas and utility rate reform and tax incentives.³⁹ Ultimately, price controls would be eroded by Ronald Reagan, who ended them entirely under the first executive order of his presidency on January 28, 1981.⁴⁰ This measure was interpreted as signaling a shift in national oil policy, affirming the oil industry’s view that the narrowing of government intervention and liberation of market forces would more effectively resolve the energy problems of the 1970s and the future.⁴¹ Amid the “oil gluts” of the 1980s, as prices fell and supplies rose, the earlier “conservation consensus” lost political traction.⁴²

³³Zaretsky, *No Direction Home*, 78; Hannah Ritchie, Max Roser and Pablo Rosado, “Energy: Oil Consumption,” *Our World in Data*, 2022, <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/oil-consumption-by-country?time=latest> (accessed Mar. 11, 2025).

³⁴David Nye argues that the term “energy crisis” had become common in American politics and media, even prior to the OPEC price hikes and Arab embargo that took place sequentially in the fall of 1973. Along similar lines, Timothy Mitchell argues that the widespread use of the “oil crisis” framing obscures “changes in multiple fields, involving various agents, into a unique event, so that a single moment, with a single agent appears responsible for a collapse of the old order”—in this case, the movement of power in oil pricing from consuming countries to producing countries, and with it, the upending of the “postwar petroleum order” governed by the United States. See Nye, *Consuming Power*, 218; Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (New York, 2011), 173–200.

³⁵For analyses of gas lines and popular reactions to the oil crises, see Dunaway, *Seeing Green*, 110–1; Huber, *Lifeblood*, 97–99, 108–10; Jacobs, *Panic at the Pump*, 80–1; and Zaretsky, *No Direction Home*, 84–5.

³⁶Zaretsky, *No Direction Home*, 98; Huber, *Lifeblood*, 103–8.

³⁷Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy*, 191; Jacobs, *Panic at the Pump*, 66; Peter A. Coates, *The Trans-Alaska Pipeline Controversy* (Anchorage, 1991), 175–7, 187–8, 217–22.

³⁸Jacobs, *Panic at the Pump*, 147; Nye, *Consuming Power*, 219–20.

³⁹Jacobs, *Panic at the Pump*, 179–80, 185, 193–4.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 271.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 271–2.

⁴²Caleb Wellum, “Energizing Finance: The Energy Crisis, Oil Futures, and Neoliberal Narratives,” *Enterprise & Society* 21, no.1 (Mar. 2020): 22–3; Interestingly, by the late 1970s some environmentalists favored decontrol,

Alongside the attenuation of previously established environmental legislation, social programs were framed by free market conservatives and many white middle-class consumers as incompatible with the new era of resource scarcity. Energy crises provided an alibi for the kinds of cuts conservatives already desired. While, materially, cuts to social programs would not take shape on a national level until the 1979 oil shock, in the early 1970s these shifts took place locally and discursively.⁴³ During the oil shortages caused by the Iranian Revolution in 1979, Carter would ultimately endorse the narrowing of social programs as a desired policy objective, undermining the New Deal compact and complying with social and market conservatives' positioning of social programs as dispensable. In his 1980 budget proposal, Carter expanded foreign aid and defense spending while limiting the growth of domestic social programs, prompting the resistance of many in his own party.⁴⁴ As assessed by Senator Edward Kennedy, "the Administration's budget asks the poor, the black, the sick, the young, the cities and the unemployed to bear a disproportionate share of the billions of dollars in reductions in Federal spending."⁴⁵ Carter did, however, sign the Crude Oil Profit Tax into law on April 2, 1980, which would produce general revenue that could be directed toward the subsidy of energy costs for low-income families, offsetting some of the effects of cuts to unemployment and welfare benefits.⁴⁶ Yet despite Carter's intentions, oil companies themselves came to see the tax as a small price paid in exchange for the scaling back of price controls, and, in the absence of a profits tax, the notoriously undertaxed oil industry would largely evade extensive regulatory consequences.⁴⁷

The public relations programs engineered by Mobil in the 1970s demonstrate how it attempted to shift the public perception of responsibility for the oil crises from unrestricted corporate power to government's excessive interference in the free market. Mobil engineered a brand of "free private responsible enterprise" that affirmed its responsiveness to customers, worldwide environmental concerns, and "people's aspirations for a better life."⁴⁸ Through this framing, Mobil positioned itself as a social benefactor, more capable than government in ensuring the security of American economic futures and, ultimately, social welfare. By equating its own interests with those of children and future generations, Mobil naturalized its role in the continuity of the "American way of life."⁴⁹

Advertorials: Privatizing the Public Good

In 1976, Herbert Schmertz, then-vice president of public affairs for the Mobil Corporation, reflected on the company's effort to alter its public image amidst the changing political climate of the 1970s which, in Schmertz's words, had authorized the scapegoating of oil corporations.⁵⁰ Beginning in the early part of the decade, Mobil Oil had developed a set of public relations tactics to counter the rising opposition it faced from the modern American environmental

anticipating that oil consumption would decline if consumers bore the unregulated costs. See Wellum, "A Vibrant National Preoccupation": Embracing an Energy Conservation Ethic in the 1970s," *Environmental History* 25, no. 1 (Jan. 2020): 85–109.

⁴³For example, during the 1973–4 crisis, fuel scarcity was used as a rationale to delay school desegregation achieved through busing programs. Frank Van Der Linden, "Antibus Factions Gaining," *Camarillo Daily News*, Dec. 24, 1973, 14; "Busing Foes Jump on Energy Crisis," *Detroit Free Press*, Dec. 27, 1973, 7-A; Jacobs, *Panic at the Pump*, 65–6.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 198.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 257–8.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 258.

⁴⁸Mobil Oil, "Free Private Responsible Enterprise?" Advertisement, *New York Times*, Sept. 7, 1972.

⁴⁹Huber, *Lifeblood*, xii–xvii.

⁵⁰Herbert Schmertz, "Idea Advertising: Talking to New Audiences," *Electric Perspectives* 6, no. 76 (1976): 2–3.

movement and what it viewed as an overly intrusive federal government.⁵¹ One such mechanism was its weekly advertisements in *The New York Times* editorial section, beginning in mid-1971.⁵² This form of promotion was, as Schmertz described, less an effort to promote a product than a “political campaign” focused on fundamental issues of American values around government and capitalism.⁵³ Its placement in the *Times* was intended to reach high level policy decision-makers.⁵⁴ In response to the success of the *Times* campaign, Mobil placed weekly advertisements in *The Washington Post*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and the eastern edition of *The Wall Street Journal*.⁵⁵ Mobil also expanded its reach during periods of particularly intensive scrutiny: during the 1973–4 oil crisis, Mobil advertorials were published within 103 newspapers across the U.S.; in 1976, the company advertised in over a hundred papers as Congress deliberated over an ultimately unsuccessful antitrust bill that would require the break-up of oil corporation monopolies.⁵⁶ Mobil also experimented with additional modes of communicating with the public, including the weekly *Observations* column, which took on a conversational tone addressed to the average reader and was published in the Sunday newspaper supplements *Parade* and *Family Weekend*, and contributions to *Reader’s Digest*’s “Business Roundtable,” intended as a “mini course in economics” from the underrepresented perspective of big business.⁵⁷

Mobil’s advertorial program was controversial in its time. A 1976 *Fortune* magazine appraisal of the public affairs program, entitled “Public Relations Isn’t Kid-Gloves Stuff at Mobil” assessed that “few corporations, if any, can rival Mobil in the aggressiveness and consistency with which it speaks out in defense of its interests, the interests of the oil industry, and what it perceives to be the national interest.”⁵⁸ A 1979 *Nation* article titled “Operation Op-Ed: Mobil News That’s Fit to Print” argued “it is highly unlikely that any reasonably intelligent person can fail to see through the patina of Mobil’s enlightenment . . . Mobil’s ads preaching the doctrine of unlimited and unregulated economic growth as the best way of lifting up the poor . . . are poorly disguised arguments against conservation and environmental laws.”⁵⁹ However, Mobil itself saw the campaign differently. Measuring the impact of its public relations program over a period that included two energy crises and forceful environmental activism, Mobil’s leadership understood its initiative as successful. In 1980, Schmertz declared, “We have established a franchise for a particular kind of view and have developed a free market constituency that is growing.”⁶⁰ By 1982, Mobil’s in-house review of the “Evolution of the Mobil Public Affairs Program” concluded that its programming had “enabled the company to become part of the ‘collective unconsciousness’ of the nation.”⁶¹

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 7.

⁵²Brown and Waltzer, “Every Thursday,” 198.

⁵³Laurence Jarvik, “PBS and the Politics of Quality: Mobil Oil’s ‘Masterpiece Theatre,’” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 12, no. 3 (Jan. 1, 1992): 254.

⁵⁴Smith and Heath, “Moral Appeals in Mobil’s Op Ed Campaign,” 49. Mobil’s advertorial campaign can be likened to utility industry publicists purchase of advertisements in exchange for the publication of corporate-authored essays in small town newspapers. See Daniel Robert, *Courteous Capitalism: Public Relations and the Monopoly Problem, 1900–1930* (Baltimore, 2023).

⁵⁵Vogel, *Fluctuating Fortunes*, 217–8.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*; Robert Sherrill, “Operation Op-Ed: Mobil News That’s Fit to Print,” *The Nation*, Jan. 27, 1979, 71.

⁵⁷The *Parade* and *Family Weekend* supplements were distributed in 43 U.S. newspapers, including the *New York Times*, and at its peak in mid-1980, the “Observations” column reached about half of American households. St. John, “Conveying the Sense-Making Corporate Persona,” 694; Philip H. Dougherty, “Advertising: New Series at Reader’s Digest,” *New York Times*, Jan. 9, 1975, 57.

⁵⁸Irwin Ross, “Public Relations Isn’t Kid-Gloves Stuff at Mobil,” *Fortune*, Sept. 1976, 106.

⁵⁹Sherrill, “Operation Op-Ed” 74.

⁶⁰Randall Poe, “Masters of the Advertorial,” *Across the Board*, Sept. 1980, 17.

⁶¹Mobil Oil, “Evolution of Mobil Public Affairs Program, 1970–1981,” 1982, II-A/1, <https://www.climatefiles.com/exxonmobil/mobil-collection/1982-evolution-of-mobil-public-affairs-program/> (accessed Mar. 11, 2025).

The political implications of these ads did not go unnoticed by policymakers. Within its campaign in the early 1970s, Mobil used its platform to actively defend the industry's rate of profit, particularly as oil majors' reports of record profits amid the 1973–4 oil crisis generated extensive media attention and public outcry.⁶² In January 1974, the Senate's Subcommittee on Investigations held an inquiry into the profits and taxation of the oil industry.⁶³ The committee's chairman, Senator Henry M. Jackson (D-WA) argued, "The American people want to know if this so-called energy crisis is only a pretext, a cover, to eliminate the major source of price competition—the independents—to raise prices, to repeal environmental laws and to force the adoption of new tax subsidies."⁶⁴ The hearings were met with opposition from oil executives, with the president of Gulf Oil U.S.A. describing the hearings as "absolute nonsense" akin to a "criminal trial."⁶⁵ The industry framed greater taxation as an obstacle to exploration and research, while politicians in favor of regulation protested the industry's evasion of taxation. Of particular issue was the oil industry's special status with regard to taxation, as oil companies avoided paying income taxes to the United States by deducting the taxes they paid to other nations and through the oil depletion allowance, a tax subsidy that allowed drillers to deduct a quarter of their revenues from their taxable income in order to incentivize new production projects.⁶⁶ The relationship of "private" enterprise to public subsidy generated by these tax policies is just one iteration of the "selective anti-statism" corporations consistently amplified during this period, denigrating the inefficacy of governmental power while relying on tax incentives and legislative exceptions.⁶⁷ Throughout the investigations, public interest organizations like Common Cause noted the pervasive issue of oil company contributions to political campaigns of members of the Senate Finance Committee as it considered whether to repeal industry tax breaks, highlighting the influence of industry pressure on energy and environmental policy.⁶⁸ Against party pressure, Ford would sign a tax bill into law just a year later that would finally do away with the depletion allowance, yet other forms of industry subsidy would remain intact.⁶⁹

Also in 1974, Senator Gary Hart (D-CO) led a hearing before the Senate Committee on Commerce's Subcommittee on Environment regarding oil and utility company's advertisements. The hearing focused, in particular, on the question of whether corporations had qualified advertisements as institutional advertising, and therefore as tax-deductible business expenses, rather than political messages, which according to FTC regulations were not eligible for tax-exemption.⁷⁰ During this hearing, the Media Access Project, a public interest lobbying group, presented a set of documents correlating the timing of the publication of oil industry advertisements to particular legislative and de-regulatory initiatives in 1973–4. These connections included the oil industry's efforts to legalize the previously banned

⁶²See, for example: Mobil Oil, "Now, About Those Record Profits of Ours . . .," Advertisement, *New York Times*, Aug. 16, 1973; Mobil Oil, "Anyone Who Says the Energy Crisis was a Surprise Hasn't Been Reading This Newspaper," Advertisement, *New York Times*, Jan. 2, 1974; and Mobil Oil, "Don't Read These Ads If You've Made Up Your Mind About Oil Profits," Advertisement, *New York Times*, Jan. 25, 1974.

⁶³" . . . The Senate and Big Oil Are Already Fighting," *New York Times*, Jan. 27, 1974, Section 4, Page 1.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*

⁶⁵*Ibid.*

⁶⁶*Ibid.*; Jacobs, *Panic at the Pump*, 19, 82–3.

⁶⁷According to Peter Roady, this conservative public opinion campaign to sow distrust in state administration of social programs and the legitimacy of taxation began long before the Reagan administration, with roots in the 1930s and 1940s. See Peter Roady, "Selling Selective Anti-Statism: The Conservative Persuasion Campaign and the Transformation of American Politics since the 1920s," *Modern American History* 6, no. 1 (2023): 1–23.

⁶⁸"8 in Senate Oil Tax Study Linked to Industry's Gifts," *Los Angeles Times*, Mar. 11, 1975, sec. 1; Peter Milius, "Compromise Weighed On Oil Depletion Bill," *Washington Post*, Mar. 11, 1975, A2.

⁶⁹Milius, "Compromise Weighed."

⁷⁰U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Commerce: Subcommittee on Environment, *Energy and Environmental Objectives*, 93rd Cong., 2nd sess., Feb. 4/May 6/Jul. 18 1974.

Trans-Alaska oil pipeline, expand offshore drilling, eliminate price controls, and suspend emissions controls in order to conserve fuel.⁷¹ In 1973, for example, a series of Mobil ads focused on “educating” the public about the oil crisis and urging oil conservation, typically featuring pen and ink illustrations of families carpooling, commuting on pogo sticks, and expounding upon the rewards of completing numerous errands in one trip.⁷² Within these ads, Mobil appealed to families by repeatedly isolating “pollution-control equipment” in new car models as causes of energy inefficiency leading to the crisis.⁷³ Deflecting accusations that the industry was profiting excessively from oil crises, Mobil identified excessive government regulation as the cause of Americans’ economic instability and argued only the private market, rather than public institutions, could capably address the needs of the most vulnerable.

Alongside its efforts to shape energy policy, Mobil sought to position itself, and the free market more generally, as sponsors of the public good. In 1972, Mobil opined that the era of “free enterprise” had been replaced by “responsible enterprise,” in which big businesses would increasingly bear in mind the needs of society in addition to the needs of shareholders. Yet, this public beneficence, they noted, hinged on private accumulation, “because no company can be very responsive unless it is profitable: only a company that does well can do good.”⁷⁴ Moving beyond “pure image ads” to take positions on social issues, many of the advertorials produced in the 1970s focused on social welfare and education. In these ads, Mobil promoted its own investment, both conceptually and literally, in education and social programs with children at their center. In its view, due to the essential limits of government, public institutions were dependent on the private market for both capital and expertise.

A 1972 ad focuses on a work co-op program in a Manhattan high school called the High School Service Program. In text appearing alongside an illustration of two teenagers, one white and one Black, together conducting an oil change, Mobil describes the contrast between the typical educational failure of the school, where “attendance . . . is apt to be about 30 percent of the total enrollment,” and the Mobil service station program, which “averages 95 percent week in and week out.” As they describe, students in the program “do real work. They are paid good salaries. And they stay in school—with a new interest in math and reading, because they’ve begun to appreciate the importance of these subjects in the working world.” The ad ends with Mobil’s commitment, spurred by the support of the New York City Board of Education, to launch similar courses in additional cities, “So other kids can learn and earn. And drop in, not out.”⁷⁵ This ad speaks to a series of concerns of the 1970s that meet at the intersection of family and the economy, including the decline of American industrialism, the rise of unemployment, and anxieties regarding young people “dropping out” of normative, productive citizenship.⁷⁶ It also positions Mobil as more effectively supporting students’ economic opportunities than standard public education, presenting its investments as successful interventions in children’s futures.

⁷¹U.S. Congress, *Energy and Environmental Objectives*, 74–7.

⁷²Mobil Oil, “Starting Today, We Want to Show You How to Get Along on Less Gasoline,” Advertisement, *New York Times*, May 3, 1973; Mobil Oil, “Okay, Everybody, into the Pool,” Advertisement, *New York Times*, May 10, 1973; Mobil, “Dumb Bunny,” Advertisement, *New York Times*, May 17, 1973; Mobil Oil, “She Plans to Save a Gallon a Week,” Advertisement, *New York Times*, May 24, 1973; Mobil Oil, “Smart Drivers Make Gasoline Last,” Advertisement, *New York Times*, May 31, 1973.

⁷³These ads referenced the catalytic converter, which began to be introduced into new car models in the early 1970s in compliance with a new Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) regulation.

⁷⁴Mobil Oil, “Free Private Responsible Enterprise?” Advertisement, *New York Times*, Sept. 7, 1972; Kerr, *The Rights of Corporate Speech*, 51–2.

⁷⁵Mobil Oil, “The Way These Haaren High Kids Work Is an Education,” Advertisement, *New York Times*, Feb. 3, 1972, sec. 1, 33.

⁷⁶For discussion of how industrial decline and changes in the viability of the masculine breadwinner mapped on to perceptions of family decline, see Zaretsky, *No Direction Home*; and Robert O. Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s* (New York, 2013).

Another ad from 1974 features a young Black woman positioned with a camera in a photo over the headline, “I’m determined to get where I want to go.” As the ad goes on to explain, “Janine *will* get where she wants to go. Because of her attitude. She’s eager to work. And to take advantage of the available opportunities. Like those provided by the businesses and foundations (Mobil Foundation among them) that fund the Jobs for Youth Summer Work Scholarship Program.”⁷⁷ Like the ad that featured the High School Service Program, this ad highlights the work ethic of young students who are eager to participate in a burgeoning economy, and whose opportunity to do so relies on Mobil’s generosity and, underlying it, continued growth and profitability. The ad represents Janine as embodying her own economic risk; it applauds her responsible entrepreneurialization of the self while praising private enterprise for sustaining the promise of equal opportunity in place of economic equality.⁷⁸ The emphasis on young people of color in many of these ads does important work eliding both the relationship between free market capitalism and economic injustice and papering over the disproportionate effects of fossil fuel-induced environmental racism on Black communities, then and now.

This framing of private enterprise as the solution to government inefficacy similarly accompanied Mobil’s approach to welfare. Mobil endeavored to position social programs—and the well-being of the poor—as dependent on the unimpeded success of the free market. While it never publically opposed welfare programs wholesale, Mobil argued that social programs for the poor were the province of corporate sponsorship rather than government. This approach aligned with a neoliberal emphasis on charitable giving rather than economic redistribution as a solution to structural forms of inequality, particularly as inequality maps onto race and gender. This is summed up in a 1972 advertorial: “Partly because of its ability to adapt—which is simply another word for responsive change—private business remains the most productive element in our society and on balance the best allocator of resources.”⁷⁹ In a 1975 “Business Roundtable” feature, Mobil argued for a “pay-the-piper principle,” suggesting that, in the context of the regulation of the oil industry, citizens failed to consider the economic costs of environmental regulations—“In the final analysis, the bill lands in your lap.” Yet, they contended, “somehow we seem to abandon this logic when we venture upon ‘social goals’—from poverty programs to health care to aid to education,” advocating for a more moderate approach, they argued, “in setting each new social goal, we, as the people who ultimately pay, must ask ourselves: Are the benefits worth the costs?”⁸⁰ Mobil reaffirmed this premise in a 1976 advertorial, contending, “The social programs our country has developed—Social Security, Medicare, Aid to Dependent Children, child nutrition and school lunches, housing for the elderly, to name a few—are among the best in the world despite their flaws and inefficiencies, which can be corrected. But if we as a people unduly inhibit economic growth in the private sector, the United States will not long be able to afford such programs on anything like the present scale. It is just that simple.”⁸¹ The ad, however, is short on an explanation of exactly how Mobil’s uninhibited growth materially functions to benefit the social programs they reference. Less than a month later, an advertorial entitled “Social mobility or class warfare” similarly emphasized that restrictions of economic growth came at the greatest cost to the most marginalized:

⁷⁷Mobil Oil, “I’m Determined to Get Where I Want to Go,” Advertisement, *New York Times*, Jan. 6, 1977, sec. 1, 28.

⁷⁸My analysis here is inspired by Jules Gill-Peterson’s “The Value of the Future.” See also Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism*, 38–9.

⁷⁹Mobil Oil, “Capitalism: Moving Target,” Advertisement, *New York Times*, Oct. 12, 1972, sec. 1, 46.

⁸⁰Mobil Oil, “You Pay For What You Get,” Advertisement, *Reader’s Digest*, Oct. 1975, 212–3. Cited in Kerr, *The Rights of Corporate Speech*, 82.

⁸¹Mobil Oil, “Social Programs and Economic Growth,” Advertisement, *New York Times*, Apr. 15, 1976, sec. 1, 33.

If it becomes clear to everyone that the economic pie isn't going to get appreciably bigger, every group will begin fighting for a larger piece of that static pie. Women, blacks and other racial minorities, and young people of all backgrounds will be the hardest hit. College graduates will find job-hunting even tougher. More and more of them will have to take jobs lower in the economic scale. This will further squeeze every minority and everybody else. Rising social strife can create a backlash against efforts toward cleaner air and water and toward the funding of health services and education . . . Economic growth is the last, best hope for the poor and for all the rest of us. Sheer distribution of income cannot do the job. We must create a steadily larger income pie.⁸²

In this zero-sum game, Mobil insisted its own profitability was essential to the security not just of the very environmental regulations it campaigned against, but also to the most vulnerable classes of Americans. Tying its own interests to those of children and marginalized groups, Mobil participated in constructions of cultures of privatization which saw deregulation and privatization as means of achieving, rather than undermining, social and economic equality.

Sponsoring Children's Education on the "Petroleum Broadcasting Service"⁸³

The reinvigoration of Mobil's Public Affairs Program in the 1970s expanded beyond print media to television. Television sponsorship became a prominent platform for private corporations seeking to address consumer constituencies in the 1950s and 1960s.⁸⁴ In early 1970, the Children's Television Workshop, responsible for *Sesame Street* (1969-) and, later, *The Electric Company* (1971-7), recognized the need for business and industry support of educational public television. From the start, CTW founders argued that educational television suffered from structural limitations on its funding in both production and distribution, leaving it on unequal terms with commercial television.⁸⁵ The founders of CTW nonetheless insisted that *Sesame Street* could serve a vital social role of making early childhood education accessible and working to lift "disadvantaged" children out of poverty.⁸⁶ In comments before Senate hearings on the Public Broadcasting Act (S. 1242) in 1969, CTW Executive Director Joan Ganz Cooney expressed the potential of CTW programs to support young children's learning gains in the years before formal education begins, a determination based on recent research which found that, "There is no ground for believing that a child's academic fate is sealed by his seventh birthday . . . [However] In terms of sheer economy, it can be shown that the earlier the investment in systematic intellectual development is begun, the higher the rate of return."⁸⁷ Cooney describes how CTW's programming would act as a stopgap measure in the absence of state funded preschool:

Because these studies pointed to the fact that America may be literally squandering its most precious natural resources by ignoring the development of the intellectual capability of its

⁸²Mobil Oil, "Social Mobility or Class Warfare?" Advertisement, *New York Times*, May 6, 1976, sec. 1, 37.

⁸³Jarvik, "PBS and the Politics of Quality," 254. David Vogel notes that "approximately half of all corporate funds contributed to public television during the 1970s came from the oil industry," leading to the parody of the PBS moniker. Vogel, *Fluctuating Fortunes*, 216.

⁸⁴For discussion of earlier sponsorship activities taken up by corporations and foundations in the 1950s, see Anna McCarthy, *The Citizen Machine: Governing by Television in 1950s America* (New York, 2010).

⁸⁵"Remarks by Joan Ganz Cooney before the Senate Commerce Sub-community on Communications Hearings on Public Broadcasting Act (S. 1242)," Apr. 30, 1969, folder 2, box 118, Children's Television Workshop Records, Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries, College Park, Maryland. Hereafter cited as CTW, UMDSC.

⁸⁶Robert Morrow, *Sesame Street and the Reform of Children's Television* (Baltimore, 2006), 5.

⁸⁷"Remarks by Joan Ganz Cooney," CTW, UMDSC. Here, Cooney is quoting Dr. John Fisher, president of Columbia Teachers College, in a 1968 report from the National Advisory Council on the Education of Disadvantaged Children" to President Lyndon B. Johnson.

young, a number of opinion leaders . . . began calling for formal schooling for all children at age four, at public expense. While the reaction was laudable, the economic realities of such a suggestion were—and are—fearsome. One estimate said it would cost nearly \$3 billion to add the several million children to the school rolls—not including the cost of building classrooms to handle them.⁸⁸

It was in this context that the Ford Foundation, Carnegie Corporation, and U.S. Office of Education moved to fund “a unique joint experiment to determine whether the medium of television . . . can be effective in teaching preschool children.”⁸⁹ As Heather Hendershot notes, although CTW founders never positioned *Sesame Street* as an alternative to broad-scale school reform, the limited cost of *Sesame Street*—which, its founders argued, could be financed for as little as a penny per child per day—appeared as a “comparatively cheap alternative to structural school reform.”⁹⁰ Initially planned as a two-year experiment, CTW had an initial budget of \$8 million, “with participation on a 50-50 basis by public and private sources.”⁹¹ In March 1970, Bob Hatch, the program’s public relations account executive, sent letters to potential corporate backers, outlining the various forms of support required to enable the series to reach its intended audience, including billboard ads in inner-city neighborhoods, subsidy of utility bill and welfare check inserts, and grants to support utilization of *Sesame Street* among target demographics.⁹² Such fundraising directives demonstrate key tensions in how *Sesame Street* envisioned its audience and purpose, often conflating poverty with Blackness and poor Black communities with inner-cities; Black community organizers like Dorothy Pitman Hughes, for example, criticized CTW’s professed efforts to alleviate Black poverty as a strategy to win grants and support.⁹³ By June 1970, Mobil Oil had stepped in as a corporate sponsor with “long range interest” in supporting CTW.⁹⁴

During this period, Mobil was most well-known for its sponsorship of PBS’s *Masterpiece Theater*, with primarily British and historical fiction series carrying a connotation of high culture to public television. This sponsorship has been identified by scholars as well as Mobil itself as core to the company’s public relations success in the 1970s and onward, with one scholar nicknaming the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), the network of stations on which *Masterpiece* aired, the “Petroleum Broadcasting Service.”⁹⁵ Alongside this more famous sponsorship, in the 1970s, *Sesame Street* and *The Electric Company* became noted components of what one ad called “The Mobil Season,” a full line-up of Mobil-sponsored series and specials.⁹⁶ Sponsorship of CTW series in the early 1970s offered Mobil a different kind of

⁸⁸“Remarks by Joan Ganz Cooney,” CTW, UMDSC.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*

⁹⁰Heather Hendershot, *Saturday Morning Censors: Television Regulation Before the V-Chip* (Durham, NC, 1998), 142. For an example of Children’s Television Workshop’s “penny per child per day” projection, see: “Role of Private Foundations in Public Broadcasting,” Hearings before the Subcommittee on Foundations of the Committee on Finance, U.S. Senate 93rd Cong., 2nd sess. Sept. 9–10, 1974, 118, <https://www.finance.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/role1.pdf>.

⁹¹“Remarks by Joan Ganz Cooney,” CTW, UMDSC.

⁹²Memo, Bob Hatch to John Stahr, Mar. 2, 1970, folder 28, box 114, CTW, UMDSC.

⁹³Abby Whitaker, “*Sesame Street* and the City: Revitalizing the City through Popular Culture,” *Journal of Urban History* (Nov 2024), <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/00961442231211604>.

⁹⁴Letter, Robert Davidson (CTW Director of Development) to Herbert Schmertz, June 25, 1970, folder 3, box 118, CTW, UMDSC.

⁹⁵Mobil Oil, “Evolution of Mobil Public Affairs Program, 1970–1981,” 1982, <https://www.climatefiles.com/exxonmobil/mobil-collection/1982-evolution-of-mobil-public-affairs-program/>; Jarvik, “PBS and the Politics of Quality,” 254.

⁹⁶Mobil Oil, “The Mobil Season,” Advertisement, *New York Times*, Oct. 2, 1974, 23. For examples of how sponsorship supported Mobil’s reputation, see “Mobil Gives \$250,000 to Aid New Children’s TV Series,” *New York Times*, Oct. 12, 1971, 72; Gene I. Maeroff, “‘The Electric Company’ TV Program Found Helpful to Children,” *New York Times*, Mar. 28, 1973, 94.

visibility than its sponsorship of adult programming. Whereas *Masterpiece Theater* was intended to appeal to elite consumers, *Sesame Street* was designed with an explicit goal of equalizing opportunity to access to early childhood education. *Sesame Street*, which originated during an era of children's television reform activism wherein groups such as Action for Children's Television sought greater regulation of commercial television as degrading to children, gained an early reputation as an outlier in production and content.⁹⁷ The series promoted itself as the "first time that television has been used for some kind of socially useful purpose," and was recognized as "epitomiz[ing] programming free of commercials."⁹⁸ For Mobil, support for public television programming earned public favor that could be translated to political approval; as one PR official described, "These programs build enough acceptance to allow us to get tough on substantive issues."⁹⁹ Critical public relations scholars Maria I. Espinoza and Melissa Aronczyk have noted that PBS's status as public, noncommercial television transitively offered legitimacy to Mobil, such that Mobil's voice could be "perceived as public and noncommercial."¹⁰⁰ In its sponsorship of public television, therefore, Mobil avoided charges of commercialism and instead claimed to act as benefactor of the public good, an assertion that was bolstered by its explicit appeal to investing in "disadvantaged" children and their educational—and therefore, economic—futures.

Mobil's relationship with CTW began with its underwriting of free copies of *Sesame Street Magazine*, a publication including games, cut-outs, and illustrated features that was intended to complement the series and reinforce children's learning.¹⁰¹ The magazine's distribution was made free to a large disadvantaged population and by subscription to those who can afford it.¹⁰² Mobil proposed distributing copies from its filling stations directly, noting that Mobil had more inner-city gas stations than any other oil company.¹⁰³ As a condition, they asked that CTW announce on the air where the publication could be obtained, with reference to Mobil stations, while making it clear that no purchase would be necessary.¹⁰⁴ In its promotion of the partnership to station owners, Mobil framed the magazine distribution as "a chance to perform an important community service at no cost to you or your neighbors" and an opportunity to "build good will at your station," expounding, "Fifteen stations in the Watts area of Los Angeles are participating in the program. Your inner-city neighbors will appreciate that you are trying to help their children and will drive in for free copies."¹⁰⁵ An ad announcing Mobil's funding of the magazine with an illustration of two toddlers, one white and one Black, encouraged readers to pick up a copy and provided a list of distribution centers.¹⁰⁶ Next to its logo at the bottom of the page was a sign off in *Sesame Street* fashion—"Free Sesame Street Magazines are brought to you as a public service by the letters m, o, b, i, l."¹⁰⁷

As announced at an October 1970 news release, Mobil's grant of \$250,000 would cover the cost of a total of five million giveaway copies of the four issues of the Magazine to be printed alongside the 1970–1 broadcast season; Mobil, in turn, would receive credit via a cover blurb for

⁹⁷Morrow, *Sesame Street*, 121–2.

⁹⁸*Ibid.*

⁹⁹Sherrill, "Operation Op-Ed," 65.

¹⁰⁰Espinoza and Aronczyk, *A Strategic Nature*, 117.

¹⁰¹Memo, Joan Ganz Cooney to Utilization City, "Sesame Street Magazine," Sept. 22, 1970, folder 37, box 114; Letter, Robert Davidson (CTW Director of Development) to Herbert Schmertz, June 25, 1970, folder 3, box 118, CTW, UMDSC.

¹⁰²Memo, Joan Ganz Cooney to Utilization City.

¹⁰³Letter, Bob Davidson to Joan Cooney, Bob Hatch, Tom Kennedy, and Gene Aleinikoff, Apr. 14, 1970, folder 32, box 114, CTW, UMDSC.

¹⁰⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵"Good News From Mobil," Oct. 8, 1970, folder 3, box 118, CTW, UMDSC.

¹⁰⁶Mobil, "Starting November 9, there'll be more things for your kids to do on Sesame Street," Advertisement, folder 3, box 118, CTW, UMDSC.

¹⁰⁷*Ibid.*

all of the English language giveaways of the first issue of the season.¹⁰⁸ According to CTW, the circulation of the first issue (2.4 million) would rank it 20th among the nation's magazines were it a commercial publication and would make it the highest circulating children's magazine.¹⁰⁹ In an accompanying statement from the founder and president of CTW, Joan Ganz Cooney remarked, "Mobil Oil . . . has demonstrated a sense of community concern and social awareness in the finest sense of those qualities . . . We also share and admire their optimism for the youth of America."¹¹⁰

Mobil's sponsorship was praised beyond CTW's leadership. In a letter addressed to Mobil, one writer from Olean, New York attested, "I have been a Mobil credit card holder for ten years and have always been pleased with your products and services. I just want to thank you for providing the funds that enabled the Sesame Street Magazine, to be distributed to kindergarteners in my community."¹¹¹ Another letter, written on behalf of Robla Preschool in Sacramento, California, thanked Mobil for the magazine booklets, remarking, "We, in the field of education, appreciate receiving material of this nature from the private enterprise segment of our society."¹¹² Alongside this praise, Mobil received letters from individual parents, public school librarians and teachers from across the country seeking copies.¹¹³

While sponsoring the CTW, Mobil also ran attention-grabbing advertisements in the *New York Times* attesting to the need for private sponsorship of public educational programming. One ad, from 1971, features multiracial children donning graduation caps and gowns, alongside the headline, "After Sesame Street, what?"¹¹⁴ The ad announced the introduction of *The Electric Company*, a literacy education series created by CTW for children who had aged out of *Sesame Street*. Another promotion ran under the headline, "Why America needs another Electric Company," and described the program's goal of tackling illiteracy as "generat[ing] a different kind of power."¹¹⁵

An ad running in 1974 featured the aforementioned image of an endangered Big Bird, described "financial pains" experienced by the CTW amidst substantial funding cuts.¹¹⁶ The ad emphasized both the demonstrable needs of the workshop, which reached nine million children, and the responsibility of corporations to contribute. It then highlighted Mobil's role in keeping *Sesame Street* and *The Electric Company* on the air, "So we are giving \$100,000 to help keep the shows on the air. And we're asking other corporations to lend a hand too. Put your money where the kids are. Help keep Big Bird on the big tube."¹¹⁷

Mobil's sponsorship of CTW was not universally viewed as a disinterested contribution to the public good. In a *Newsday* editorial, for example, columnist Patrick Owens described the "Endangered Species" ad as arresting but contended that its message rang false, under the headline, "This Oil Company Needs Help; Send Money."¹¹⁸ Owens recounted a friend who reacted by writing to Mobil's president, parodying the ad, "Big Car looks healthy enough, just ask any of the 9,000,000 kids who sit for hours in the back of their parents' car; in lines, waiting to purchase gasoline. This time could be spent watching *Sesame Street*."¹¹⁹ Owens, separately,

¹⁰⁸Memo, Bob Hatch to Joan Cooney, "Briefing Paper for Mobil Oil News Conference," Oct. 19, 1970, folder 38, box 114, CTW, UMDSC.

¹⁰⁹*Ibid.*

¹¹⁰"Statement by Joan Ganz Cooney," Oct. 21, 1970, folder 38, box 114, CTW, UMDSC.

¹¹¹Letters to Mobil Oil Corporation, Jan. 5, 1971, folder 3, box 118, CTW, UMDSC.

¹¹²Letters to Mobil Oil Corporation, received Jan. 7, 1971, folder 3, box 118, CTW, UMDSC.

¹¹³Letters to Mobil Oil Corporation, received Feb. 6, Feb. 9, and Mar. 1, 1971, folder 3, box 118, CTW, UMDSC.

¹¹⁴Mobil Oil, "After Sesame Street, What?" Advertisement, *New York Times*, 1971, <https://pin.it/24n83ix>.

¹¹⁵Mobil Oil, "Why America Needs Another Electric Company" Advertisement, *New York Times*, Oct. 14, 1971.

¹¹⁶Mobil Oil, "Endangered Species."

¹¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹¹⁸Patrick Cowan, "This Oil Company Needs Help; Send Money," *Newsday*, Apr. 4, 1974, folder 3, box 118, CTW, UMDSC.

¹¹⁹*Ibid.*

asked a Mobil publicist how much Mobil was spending to advertise its \$100,000 gift to CTW. He learned that Mobil had spent \$55,843 in promotion of the donation in *Forbes*, *Fortune*, *Business Week*, *Time*, *The New York Times*, *Newsday*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Washington Post*. The publicist, however, framed the campaign as an effort to encourage other corporations to make similar contributions. This rationale was echoed by Mobil's chairman, Rawleigh Warner, Jr. in "An Open Letter to American Business," which kept up the messaging that represented Big Bird and his friends as "endangered species" needing rescue. The letter asserted that "foundations and government money helped launch the shows through the Children's Television Workshop, but their funds are designed to start projects like these, not sustain them."¹²⁰ A similar letter drafted by Herbert Schmertz specified that the U.S. Office of Education had needed to cut its support to \$3 million for the 1974–5 season.¹²¹ Warner concluded with a call for other corporations to join Mobil in its funding support, signing off, as in the ad, with the call to "Put your money where the kids are."¹²²

And, it seems, Children's Television Workshop agreed with Mobil's framing of its role. Joan Ganz Cooney, in a letter addressed to Schmertz, wrote to this effect, "I have been trying to reach you to tell you how grateful we are for the Mobil gift and ad campaign," adding that IBM had inquired while General Telephone & Electric Corporation had already sent its own gift.¹²³ As Abby Whitaker describes, the 1974 CTW funding crisis significantly altered CTW's reliance on government investment as it increasingly sought to balance its reputation for noncommercialism while depending on commercial partnerships.¹²⁴ Consequently, in 1974 CTW moved toward "neoliberal thinking as executives moved away from imagining *Sesame Street* as a public good that should be funded by the federal government, and prioritized thinking of itself as a self-supported nonprofit with *Sesame Street* being its most lucrative commodity."¹²⁵ In this way, corporate backers contributed to CTW's privatization while furnishing its reputation as supporting the public good.

Mobil's relationship with CTW extended into the late 1970s, including its support for the initial series production of the Gilded Age social history *Best of Families*, which ran for one season in 1977.¹²⁶ Mobil agreed early on to financially back the first season, yet correspondence between Schmertz and CTW leaders demonstrates friction in their working relationship. In March 1977, Bob Hatch, then CTW's Vice President for Public Affairs, described Mobil advertising support as "a problem and an opportunity at the same time," explaining, "Mobil will doubtless do some advertising in a unilateral way and for their own corporate purposes."¹²⁷ He then laid out Mobil's approach to public relations as uncompromising, noting that Mobil had strict guidelines for the display of underwriters and insisted on writing its own ads.¹²⁸ Referring broadly to "the Mobil problem," Hatch suggested that a pattern of disagreements and last minute revisions had made the partnership untenable, noting it would need to be managed by higher-ups thereafter.¹²⁹ These disagreements make clear the underlying tensions between

¹²⁰Raleigh [sic] Warner, "An Open Letter to American Business, Subject; An Endangered Species," Undated, folder 3, box 118, CTW, UMDSC.

¹²¹Letter Draft, Herb Schmertz, "Dear (Moneybags)," Undated, folder 3, box 118, CTW, UMDSC.

¹²²Warner, "An Open Letter to American Business."

¹²³Letter, Joan Ganz Cooney to Herb Schmertz, Mar. 22, 1974, folder 3, box 118, CTW, UMDSC.

¹²⁴Whitaker, "*Sesame Street* and the City," 13–4.

¹²⁵*Ibid.*

¹²⁶Memo, David Britt to Joan Cooney, "Mobil Support for History Series," Oct. 16, 1974; Letter, Joan Ganz Cooney to Herb Schmertz, Aug. 5, 1976, folder 26, box 97, CTW, UMDSC.

¹²⁷Memo, Bob Hatch to Paul Firstenberg, "Best of Families, Promotion Funding Needs and Plans," Mar. 22, 1977, folder 1, box 101, CTW, UMDSC.

¹²⁸*Ibid.*

¹²⁹CTW's internal communications provide a sense of how Mobil's sponsorship activities were interpreted by the recipients of its fundraising endeavors, as well as CTW's recognition of how the positive perception of CTW was functionally transferred onto Mobil through this partnership. *Ibid.*

Mobil and CTW; just as CTW staff recognized that Mobil's contributions helped to keep CTW programming afloat, they understood how the partnership underwrote Mobil's own reputational interests. Ultimately, Mobil's public-facing alignment with *Sesame Street* and educational television for "disadvantaged children" enabled the company to present itself as invested in public goods as they became increasingly privatized.

"Petro-Pedagogy" in the Classroom¹³⁰

A January 1973 Mobil advertorial opened with a set of questions: "You being gouged on prices? Just how much *do* leading U.S. manufacturing corporations make on each dollar of sales?" According to Mobil, "if you guess zero, you'll be a lot closer than most people." Like many of its communications in this period, this ad argued that Americans mistakenly misperceived the extent of the oil industry's profits, in part due to a pervasive anti-business atmosphere. The solution to this perceived "widespread economic illiteracy," they proposed, was education: "We teach young people everything from Latin grammar to Japanese flower-arranging, but virtually nothing about our own economic system. (The economic system that is, in fact, so productive that it has made possible the most widespread public education in the history of the world.) The result of this curricular anomaly is that teachers and their students tend to have the same lack of understanding."¹³¹

In this ad, Mobil portrays its public relations platform as a pedagogical tool to "explain to people just how well the *system* works," yet also gestures more concretely to an already unfolding program of industry interventions in public education curricula.¹³² As Elizabeth Fones-Wolf charts, corporate leaders endeavored to influence education beginning in the early 1940s, and increasingly after WWII, as part of a larger effort to influence cultural values.¹³³ Drawing on advertising tools, business leaders promoted the economic value of education as "akin to capital invested in a business enterprise."¹³⁴ Frank W. Abrams of Standard Oil and the Committee for Economic Development, for example, regarded education as essentially linked to economic productivity and growth, contending, if "our hope of an advancing American economy involves reducing costs, increasing individual productivity, and devising better ways of doing things, we must consider that we have a major interest in helping American education."¹³⁵

In support of this initiative, corporations developed teaching materials as a means of directly communicating with teachers and students.¹³⁶ The production and distribution of business-sponsored teaching materials, including booklets, films, lesson plans, and comic strips, proliferated during the postwar period.¹³⁷ Described in *Public Relations Journal* in 1957, industry-sponsored materials "came of age" in the postwar period.¹³⁸ Partnerships between industry and educational organizations, in particular the National Science Teachers Association, resulted in the production of standards for sponsored materials, which included the following tenets: "1. Keep 'Advertising' to a Minimum, 2. Avoid Unfair Slanting or Bias, 3. Plan Materials to

¹³⁰Eaton and Day, "Petro-Pedagogy," 458–9.

¹³¹Mobil, "Croesus, Inc.," Advertisement, *New York Times*, Jan. 4, 1973, 37.

¹³²*Ibid.*

¹³³Industry groups like the National Association of Manufacturers, Center for Economic Development, and the Chamber of Commerce, as well as individual corporations including Standard Oil, Gulf Oil, and Alcoa, engineered a series of practices, including philanthropic contributions to higher education, educator conferences for university faculty and secondary education teachers, and speakers bureaus. Fones-Wolf, *Selling Free Enterprise*, 189, 193–4, 196–7.

¹³⁴*Ibid.*, 198–9.

¹³⁵*Ibid.*

¹³⁶*Ibid.*, 199.

¹³⁷*Ibid.*, 203.

¹³⁸Mary June Burton, "Sponsored School Materials are 'Coming of Age,'" *Public Relations Journal* 13 (Apr. 1957), 8–9.

Fit the Curriculum, 4. Keep Materials Easy to Read, and 5. Make Them Interesting.”¹³⁹ According to the article, science was identified as a particularly fertile terrain for partnerships due to the rapidity of new developments and the wide reach of the subject among students as schools increasingly encouraged careers in science and engineering.¹⁴⁰ Along these same lines, a *New York Times* article describing the trend in 1959 noted that “an estimated one in five major corporations” supplied teaching aids, viewing this distribution as “both a responsibility and an opportunity” to connect with future consumers and “build a favorable corporate image.”¹⁴¹ As the distribution of sponsored materials grew, their use in classrooms became normalized as a means to supplement tight school budgets and keep curriculum up to date. By the late 1950s, a publication from the National Science Teachers Association contended “teachers and administrators have greater confidence in industry and in the motives behind industry’s offerings to schools.” Taking for granted that the materials were “to some extent motivated by self-interest,” business was increasingly understood to have “a real interest in the welfare of all the people.”¹⁴²

Responding to the anti-business climate intensified by environmentalists and consumer protection activists, industry-sponsored educational materials once again proliferated in the 1970s. In 1979, Sheila Harty, a researcher at the Ralph Nader-founded Center for Study of Responsive Law, published an analysis of what she termed “instructional advertising” in *Hucksters in the Classroom: A Review of Industry Propaganda in Schools*. In it, Harty offered an explanation for why schools, particularly at this historical moment, were so susceptible to industry propaganda. As Harty described, this receptivity is built into education’s funding structure; with most of the annual educational budget going to salaries, utilities, and food services, teachers rely on free print and audio-visual materials to keep up with new curricular demands.¹⁴³ This was particularly true in subjects like nutrition, consumer economics, energy, and environmental science, which Harty characterized as “areas of vested interest for utilities, manufacturers, and other corporate enterprises.”¹⁴⁴ While companies could benefit from directly promoting products, Harty argued that materials often went “beyond the product,” to express political ideologies.¹⁴⁵

According to Harty, industry-sponsored energy education efforts often focused on elementary education, with materials including films, comic books, and cartoon graphics. Harty framed many of the materials, and the free market values they promoted, as a response to the Powell Memorandum. With this broader politicization of the business community as a backdrop, the fossil fuel and broader energy industry’s emphasis on educating students about free enterprise as much as energy in this period becomes more directly comprehensible. Harty noted that films and television series are especially useful to industries looking to reach students in the classroom due to the minimal evaluation of the educational integrity of the materials by comparison to textbooks.¹⁴⁶ An educational film called *Solar Energy*, one part of *The Capitalist Energy Primer* multi-media package, seemed initially to be supportive of solar energy, and included testimonials of solar energy users, before framing it as unreliable and expensive, an instance of “big hopes and dreams” that were neither practical nor rational.¹⁴⁷ Instead, the film proposed that the “future depends on a healthy economy today” which will come from “the oil

¹³⁹*Ibid.*, 9, 18–9.

¹⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁴¹Alexander R. Hammer, “Aids to Teachers Are Building Big Potential,” *New York Times*, Jan. 4, 1959.

¹⁴²Burton, “Sponsored School Materials,” 8. The quoted excerpts come from a National Science Teachers Association article entitled “How Science Teachers Use Business-Sponsored Teaching Aids.”

¹⁴³Sheila Harty, *Hucksters in the Classroom: A Review of Industry Propaganda in Schools* (Washington, D.C., 1979), 2–3.

¹⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 2, 15.

¹⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 11–2.

¹⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 91–2.

¹⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 53–4.

and petroleum industry,” while “coal and nuclear power will prime the energy pump for the future until alternative energy sources are possible.”¹⁴⁸ Such materials supported the self-presentation of the oil industry as an engine of economic growth necessary to American progress and welfare.

Access to sponsored educational materials was facilitated through the publication of resources like the *Educators Grade Guide to Free Teaching Aids* series, published annually between 1955 through 1996.¹⁴⁹ The editors of the books framed the series as a source of cooperation between industry and education. Within the guides, industry materials were promoted alongside materials distributed by government and foundations. For example, in the first edition to include environmental education in 1970, the guide included materials from environmental organizations and government services—a pamphlet on air pollution from the National Wildlife Foundation, a conservation activity booklet from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and a series of texts entitled “The World Around You” from The Garden Club of America.¹⁵⁰ These texts were set alongside materials sponsored by oil corporations and industry associations, including a booklet entitled “Conserving Our Wildlife” from Standard Oil Company of California, a packet of charts and maps entitled “Oil Producing Industry in Your State” from the Independent Petroleum Association of America, and a booklet on environmental conservation efforts in the oil industry entitled “Protecting Our Resources” from the American Oil Company.¹⁵¹ Such positioning framed the oil industry as a worthy participant in environmental education, as well as a socially conscious actor in environmental politics. Although it was not the sole source of sponsored materials, private industry possessed resources with which to overwhelm competing voices.¹⁵²

Other sponsored materials included a Union Oil Company of California booklet entitled “Petroleum and the Environment,” which used comics to highlight the role of the petroleum industry in combatting pollution; several American Petroleum Institute sponsored texts entitled “Facts About Oil,” “Earth Science and Energy,” and “Chemistry and Petroleum” which included how-to experiments and demonstrations; and Phillips Petroleum’s “The Magic World of Petrochemicals” booklet, which detailed the role of “modern magicians” (petrochemical scientists and engineers) in producing football helmets, toys, medicines, and “all those thousands of fabulous things that come out of this new world and make your own life more enjoyable.”¹⁵³ Some materials addressed the oil crises of the 1970s directly, such as Amoco Oil Company’s “Living With Energy” package including a twenty-six minute film, lesson plan, and activity sheets that promised to guide students through “the complex dimensions of the energy problem” to which there were no “easy, clearcut answers,” or a brochure telling the story of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline sponsored by Alyeska Pipeline Service Co.¹⁵⁴ In 1971, Phillips Petroleum Company, Standard Oil Company of California, and Shell Oil Company each individually produced booklets claiming to tell the “Story of Oil and Gas,” “The Story of Oil,” and “The Story of Petroleum,” respectively.¹⁵⁵ The booklet provided by Phillips, for example, presented the narrative as an “adventure tale” and positioned oil as having an inextricable role in American

¹⁴⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹For this essay, I have reviewed editions of *Educators Grade Guide to Free Teaching Aids* from 1969–1978 (editions 15–24), which are held by the Library of Congress Periodicals Collection.

¹⁵⁰Suttles, ed., *Educators Grade Guide to Free Teaching Materials*, 16th ed. (Randolph, WI, July 1970), 39–46.

¹⁵¹*Ibid.*

¹⁵²Fones-Wolf, *Selling Free Enterprise*, 207–10.

¹⁵³Patricia H. Suttles, ed., *Educators Grade Guide to Free Teaching Materials*, 17th ed. (Randolph, WI, July 1971), 44–5, 127, 131; Suttles, ed., *Educators Grade Guide to Free Teaching Materials*, 21st ed. (Randolph, WI, July 1975), 135–6.

¹⁵⁴Patricia H. Suttles and Kathleen Suttles Nehmer, eds., *Educators Grade Guide to Free Teaching Materials*, 23rd ed. (Randolph, WI, July 1977), 46, 142.

¹⁵⁵Suttles, ed., *Educators Grade Guide to Free Teaching Materials*, 17th ed. (Randolph, WI, July 1971), 153–4.

progress; as the promotional copy notes, “We should be glad that people went on this adventure, for both oil and gas have helped so much to give us our wonderful way of life.”¹⁵⁶ Such materials celebrated the oil industry’s essentially positive and seemingly fixed role in American life, contributing to a larger fossil fuel commonsense while making it relevant to young students.

As Americans experienced the second oil crisis of the decade, a renewed emphasis on “energy education” offered the fossil fuel industry a foothold in classrooms nationwide.¹⁵⁷ Amid the 1979 oil crisis, teachers were encouraged to prepare themselves to teach the new field of energy education. *The New York Times* reported in November 1979 that “more than 1.5 million energy-related booklets were distributed to teachers by the Department of Energy in the last 12 months,” as part of a “multimillion-dollar national effort.” According to Dr. Helenmarie Hofman, associate director of the Project for an Energy-Enriched Curriculum at the National Science Teachers Association, energy education was intended to “infuse” all areas of the existing curriculum. Hofman suggested that, despite existing demands on teachers, there remained interest in teaching the subject: “Teachers who’ve had to cope with Career Ed, Drug Ed and Sex Ed don’t need Energy Ed, too, but they do want to teach it.”¹⁵⁸ Another educator, assistant superintendent for instruction in a public school system, noted that in addition to this practical interest, the new emphasis on energy education was due in part to pressure from state-level Departments of Education and the Federal Department of Energy. In some cases, educational programs focused on reduction of school energy use, home conservation education, and renewable, and especially solar, energy projects. Others sought to empower students to learn about the legislative process in social studies classes, where lessons including “How an Energy Bill Becomes Law” enabled students to learn about the relationship of energy systems to democratic power.¹⁵⁹

Yet in other cases, the emergent field of energy education was shaped by oil industry interests and counter-environmental values. In 1980, a Joint Congressional Resolution initiated the founding of The National Energy Education Development Project, a fossil fuel industry-backed organization which, beginning in 1980, began providing free lesson plans and curricular materials. Alongside this initiative, Jimmy Carter designated March 21, 1980 as National Energy Education Day (NEED).¹⁶⁰ Among others, initial corporate underwriters included utility, petrochemical, and oil companies including Mobil Oil.¹⁶¹ Upon its founding, NEED offered schools annual memberships for \$25 per year that enabled access to a catalog of educational materials, focusing on classroom activity guides for teachers.¹⁶² As part of the industry’s ongoing intervention in the education system, the initiative was intended not only to reach young students as future workers, but also to promote particular ideas about American economic and energy futures.¹⁶³ Oil industry interventions into public education such as these promoted the

¹⁵⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷Jimmy Carter, “Proclamation 4738—National Energy Education Day,” Mar. 20, 1980, *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/250146> (accessed Mar. 11, 2025).

¹⁵⁸James Feron, “Energy Crisis Is Making Impact In Classrooms and Textbooks,” *New York Times*, Nov. 11, 1979, sec. Section EDUC, 1.

¹⁵⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁶⁰Jimmy Carter, “Proclamation 4738—National Energy Education Day,” Mar. 20, 1980, *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/250146> (accessed Mar. 11, 2025).

¹⁶¹Consumer Reports, “Captive Kids: A Report on Commercial Pressures on Kids at Schools,” *ZILLIONS: For Kids From Consumer Reports*, Press Release, part 1, Jan. 1, 1998.

¹⁶²*Ibid.*

¹⁶³Several journalists have cataloged the industry’s recent efforts. See Katie Worth, “Climate Change Skeptic Group Seeks to Influence 200,000 Teachers,” *Frontline*, Mar. 28, 2017, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/climate-change-skeptic-group-seeks-to-influence-200000-teachers/> (accessed Feb. 9, 2023); Jie Jenny Zou, “Inside the Oil Industry’s Not-so-Subtle Push into K-12 Education,” *The Hechinger Report*, June 15, 2017, <http://hechingerreport.org/oils-pipeline-to-americas-schools/> (accessed Feb. 9, 2023); Emily Atkin, “The Fossil Fuel Industry’s

values of the private market, aligning the best interest of future generations to the objectives of capital.

Conclusion

During the 1970s, the oil industry positioned itself as a socially responsible member of society, promoting its investments in social welfare and the public good—emblemized through children and families—in order to resist government regulation and sustain its capacity for profit and growth. Presenting itself as aligned with the interests of “disadvantaged” children, Mobil and the oil industry more broadly participated in privatization and deregulation, thus aiding in ushering in the neoliberal politics of the family which would take hold in this period. The public relations and sponsorship activities undertaken by Mobil in the 1970s signal changes in political economy and its cultures to come in the following decades. In its 1982 report evaluating the efficacy of its public affairs program, Mobil described its intention to “increase our corporate giving in areas where the poor directly benefit, responding to the President’s [Ronald Reagan’s] appeal to business to help in areas where Federal aid has been reduced or eliminated. This will be a very selective process in which we will seek out the effective, the visible, and the imaginative.”¹⁶⁴ While promoting private investment in children’s futures as a replacement for state administered redistribution of wealth, Mobil and its industry counterparts developed three primary venues of address.

In news media, specifically its widely remarked upon advertorial program, Mobil commented on prominent social issues, including education and welfare, advocated for particular policy ends, including environmental and market deregulation, and promoted its investments in children’s economic futures. These ads often specifically instrumentalized images or reference to Black children and families, suggesting Mobil’s commitment to racial equality while undermining its material basis. Through its sponsorship of the Children’s Television Workshop, Mobil gained credibility as a caring corporation, encouraging private investment in public educational television and naturalizing the role of private corporations in public goods. And, finally, Mobil and other oil companies produced sponsored educational materials which became a crucial resource in public education. Geared especially toward energy education, environmental science, and economics, the oil industry benefited from existing frailties in the public education system, wherein sponsored educational materials became a practical tool for under-resourced schools and teachers. In addition to towing the industry line regarding environmental “externalities” and the lack of industry accountability, these resources aimed to influence future generations by shoring up support for free market values.

Together, these petro-pedagogical forms participated in undermining state projects of economic redistribution, obstructing environmental protections, and exacerbating the “disadvantaging” conditions of the very children the industry claimed to protect. Within this equation, the oil industry portrayed its fate as tied to that of future generations while obscuring the extent to which the futures of these same generations would be made more precarious by the very cultures of privatization the industry underwrote.

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Public School Takeover,” Mar. 4, 2020, <https://heated.world/p/the-fossil-fuel-industrys-public> (accessed Feb. 9, 2023).

¹⁶⁴Mobil Oil, “Evolution of Mobil Public Affairs Program.”