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## THE AMAZON'S "10W40" GENERATIONS: ILL-FATED BENEFICIARIES OF TEXACO'S "GLORIOUS GAMBLE"

MARILYN J. MATELSKI

COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT, BOSTON COLLEGE

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### Abstract

Almost fifty years have passed since Texaco proclaimed its “glorious gamble” to extract oil from the Amazon. And while more than two decades have elapsed since the drilling finally ceased, at least four generations (referred to here as “Generations 10W40,” by the author) have suffered many deleterious effects, resulting from countless acts of irresponsible, pollution-generating corporate/governmental behavior. Lawsuits have abounded in both the United States and Ecuador over this calamity, and attorneys continue to fight over which accused party is most culpable—Texaco (now Chevron Texaco), Petro Ecuador and/or the Ecuadorian government. Regardless of who is most responsible, however, the fact remains that innocent people continue to be victimized. Another undeniable fact is the long history of Chevron Texaco’s expensive, forceful and unrelenting publicity campaign to win popular support outside the courtroom through propagandistic mass media appeals. This essay analyzes this long-term “crusade” within a framework of seven specific devices—name-calling, bandwagon, glittering generalities, transfer, testimonial, plain folks and card stacking—applied to the company’s corporate communication strategy, and occurring throughout its preliminary oil exploration, the oil drilling years and the toxic aftermath of the venture.

### Keywords

Chevron Texaco, Amazon Defense Front, propaganda, corporate social responsibility

### Corresponding author:

Marilyn J. Matelski, Email: [matelski@bc.edu](mailto:matelski@bc.edu)

The Kolvenbach grants program at Boston College provided partial funding for the author to do field research in the Amazon Basin in January 2014.

In October 2010, Chevron launched a new global advertising campaign, “We Agree,” in the wake of the Maconda oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. While appearing to address the potential of renewable energy initiatives, people like Rainforest Action Network’s campaign director Maria Ramos remained unimpressed. In a *Wall Street Journal* article, she questioned the company’s true commitment to corporate social responsibility, saying: “Chevron’s rhetoric and the public image that they put forward is very different from how they’re actually operating” (Casselman, 2012). Ramos was not alone in her criticism. For more than twenty years, Chevron has been embroiled in its own ecological “Chernobyl” in the Amazon Basin — a disaster that has been described by Ecuador’s President Rafael Correa as “damage to be far greater than either the Exxon Valdez Alaska oil spill or the Mexican Gulf BP spill” (Ecuador’s Campaign: “The Dirty Hand of Chevron”, 2013).

From 1964 to 1990, Texaco (later merged to form Chevron Texaco in 2001) conducted an intensely aggressive drilling operation in Ecuador’s *Oriente* region, encompassing more than a million acres of rainforest, and resulting in more than 900 contaminated oil pits after the company moved out of the country (“Texaco Pollution Killed At Least 1,041 People in Ecuador’s Amazon,” 2013). The toxic consequences of what Texaco termed “a glorious gamble” (Berlinger, 2010) have been both profuse and profound, with tainted water, dead livestock and fish (San Sebastian & Hurtig, 2004), and widespread documented diagnoses of respiratory and gastrointestinal illnesses, various forms of cancer, birth defects, and miscarriages (Hurtig & San Sebastian, 2002; Pan, Erlen, & Bilsborrow, 2010),<sup>1</sup> as well as the near extinction of culture for eight indigenous tribes—the Quichua, Shuar Achuar, Cofan, Huaorani, Shiwiar, Secoya, and Siona (Castillo, 1999, p 4).

In May 1992, representatives from these eight tribes (known as CONIAE)<sup>2</sup> organized the first peaceful march in Ecuadorian history from the Amazon to Quito, the capital of Ecuador. After 40 days of walking, they ultimately managed to recover a part of their ancestral territories. A year later, CONIAE aligned with other groups to launch a class-action suit against Texaco, alleging that the company had “dump(ed) an estimated 18 billion gallons of toxic wastewater into (Ecuadorian) rivers and streams and spill(ed) roughly 17 million gallons of crude oil into the ancestral territory of six indigenous tribes” (Anderson, 2011).

More than twenty years later, the case is still unresolved, although in 2011, Ecuadorian judges awarded \$19 billion to the plaintiffs. Since then, even though the penalty has been reduced, Chevron Texaco has repeatedly refused to accept the court’s decision, appealing to several U.S. federal courts as well as international arbitration in The Hague (*Business & Human Rights Centre*, 2014). Among its many counterclaims, the company insists that Ecuador’s federal government as well as its national oil company, Petro Ecuador, should shoulder most, if not all, of the blame in this litigation, having served as majority partners in the oil consortium during the time of the Texaco contract, and continuing to be sole owners of the consortium after Texaco left in 1992 (*The Amazon Post*, 2009). In the meantime, every day in the Amazon Basin, more and more people are losing their health as well as their formerly bio-diverse landscape, now unrecognizably barren

1 While Pan et al. make strong inferences about the correlation between Amazonian drilling and the alleged morbidity and mortality associated with it, they also acknowledge some limitations to their study, including: 1) other land use changes (such as deforestation to build roads or create farms); 2) non-standardized recall periods (possibly leading to faulty memories of exact numbers and circumstances); and 3) the inability to report illness if household members are living and working away from their home).

2 CONIAE--The Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities--was founded in 1986 as an amalgamation of two previously existing organizations: 1) CONFENAIIE (The Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of the Ecuadorian Amazon), founded in 1980; and 2) ECUARUNARI (Movement of the Indigenous People of Ecuador), established in 1972.

and toxic. They have become, to this author, the “10W40” generations of the *Oriente* — those families whose lives have been permanently damaged by the “oil drilling rush” of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

Admittedly, the legal complexities of this landmark case are too numerous (and detailed) to discuss in this essay. However, Chevron Texaco’s strategies to divert, deflect and delay the proceedings have been well documented.<sup>3</sup> So too, are the corporation’s flagrant attempts to manipulate public opinion through mass media during the last twenty years. This essay explores the latter through the lens of propaganda theory and practice; and more specifically, through seven common propaganda techniques: “name-calling”, “bandwagon”, “glittering generalities”, “transfer”, “testimonial”, “plain folks”, and “card stacking”.

### **Propaganda and Corporate Communication Policy**

The term “propaganda” has undergone several iterations since its origin. Derived from the Latin word, *propagare* (“to sow”), it was known for centuries as an agricultural term for spreading and multiplying crops. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the word shifted from a neutral connotation to one associated with missions and ministry in the Roman Catholic Church—*Propaganda Fide*, or “Propagation of the Faith” (Levy, 2004, p. 56). Author David Welch explains:

The first propagandist institute was therefore simply a body charged with improving the dissemination of religious dogma. But the word “propaganda” soon came to be applied to any organization set up for the purpose of spreading a doctrine. Subsequently, it was applied to the doctrine itself, and lastly to the methods employed in undertaking its dissemination (Welch, 2013, p. 9).

For three centuries, popular impressions of propaganda were still associated with the Church, carrying with them a positive connotation of the word, despite the fact that the strategies were utilized in a more militaristic manner, to further secular causes such as the English Civil Wars and the American and French Revolutions (pp. 9-10).

During the First World War, however, *propaganda fide* gave way to a new public understanding of propaganda as laced with misinformation, half-truths, and manipulation. Governments on both sides of the war unabashedly used all means possible to win the “hearts and minds” of their peoples. One of the outcomes, as scholar Mark Crispin Miller notes, was a core redefinition of international diplomacy and corporate behavior:

The Anglo-American drive to demonize “the Hun,” and to cast the war as a transcendent class between Atlantic “civilization” and Prussian “barbarism,” made so powerful an impression on so many that the worlds of government and business were forever changed (Bernays, 2005, p. 12).

As documented in many books, articles, films and TV documentaries, World War II propaganda both replicated and accelerated the trajectory of that used in the previous international conflict. By the early 1950s, this newly reformulated version of “information dissemination”

3 To read more about this long litigation process, please consult the following sources: <http://amazonwatch.org>; <https://chevrontoxico.com/>; <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tag/chevron-ecuador>; and <http://www.business-humanrights.org/Categories/Lawlawsuits/Lawsuitsregulatoryaction/LawsuitsSelectedcases/TexacoChevronlawsuitsreEcuador>.

became the blueprint for successful businesspeople and government officials all over the world, and especially in the United States. The new moniker for propaganda became “public relations” in the corporate sector — utilizing the same strategies, but smoother, more streamlined and more subliminal. Further, as Crispin Miller asserts:

Formerly, the lords of industry and commerce had often seen the advertising agent as a charlatan, associated with the tawdry bunkum used to peddle patent medicines and cigarettes, and trying to sell a service that any boss with half a brain could surely manage on his own. The nascent field of public relations also had been disesteemed by those atop the social pyramid, who saw that sort of work as necessary only on the vaudeville circuit and on Broadway. The great Allied campaign to celebrate (or sell) Democracy, etc., was a venture so successful, and, it seemed, so noble, that it suddenly legitimized such propagandists, who, once the war had ended, went right to work massaging or exciting various publics on behalf of entities like General Motors, Procter & Gamble, John D. Rockefeller, and General Electric (p. 12).

“Propaganda” in peacetime thus became what Walter Lippmann referred to as the “manufacture of consent,” and became a thriving area for exploration in most government, business and academic sectors. The link between propaganda and public relations becomes clearer when framed within social constructionist theory, which assumes that truth is not absolute, but rather the creation of reality within a group of participants. British strategic communications consultant Nancy W. Mendoza explains:

PR is an activity that is situated in society and is concerned with the relationships an individual, group, or organization makes with the other actors in a social context, it is justifiable then to take a social constructionist or a critical theory perspective. From a critical theory point of view, ‘truth’ is socially constructed. In this sense, PR and propaganda both look to construct a particular truth, and this is consistent with a Foucauldian point of view where public relations is seeking to establish and reinforce discrete messages that contain within them truths, rather than having a total detachment from truth (Nancy W. Mendoza Communications).

Of particular interest for this essay are theories derived from propaganda scholar Jacques Ellul, a technological determinist, who emphasized the “indissoluble link” (Ellul, 1973) between media and message, as well as the necessary assumption that the individual is always a part of, and responsible to, the group to which s/he belongs

[...] because in that way his psychic defenses are weakened, his reactions are easier to provoke, and the propagandist profits from the process of diffusion of emotions through the mass, and, at the same time, from the pressures felt by an individual when in a group (p. 7).

Ellul combined this notion with his insistence that mass media was integral to shaping public opinion; and that each form of media “spoke” to a particular audience segment and psyche:

Propaganda must be total. The propagandist must utilize all of the technical means at his disposal — the press, radio, TV, movies, posters, meetings, door-to-door canvassing [...]. Each usable medium has its own particular way of penetration — specific, but at the same time localized and limited by itself, it cannot attack the individual, break down his resistance, make his decisions for him [...]. The very fact that the effectiveness of each medium is limited to one particular area clearly shows the necessity of complementing it with other media [...]. To draw the individual into the net of propaganda, each technique must be utilized in its own specific way, directed inward producing the effect it can best produce, and fused with all the other media, each of them reaching the individual in a specific fashion and making him react anew to the same theme — in the same direction, but *differently* [...]. The propagandist uses a keyboard and composes a symphony (pp. 9-10).

Most importantly, Ellul emphasized that propaganda should be ongoing and ever-present, never giving an individual time to reflect or question the content or motivation. To him, creating a pattern more difficult to break than the person's belief system was key to attaining the propagandist's desired results (p. 18).

The assumption behind Jacques Ellul's analysis is the need to invest in massive creative and financial resources, as well as media control, for the crusade. As such, mega-corporations like Chevron Texaco have undue advantage over populist social action groups in their ability to provide total and unrelenting propaganda for their cause.

In addition to the control and dominance of media channels, these companies have the means and creative support to provide unrelenting material to “manufacture consent”. In 1938, the Institute for Propaganda Analysis (IPA), an American-based consortium of social scientists, opinion leaders, historians, educators, and journalists identified seven main propaganda techniques.<sup>4</sup> These seven techniques served as the foundation for much of the corporate communication research evolving decades later. Ironically, however, while the original list has since been augmented, refined and reconstituted, these seven strategies continue to power many propaganda campaigns today, as exemplified in the example of the ongoing duel in media campaigns between Chevron Texaco and the Amazon Defense Front — a social protest coalition of injured parties who have suffered deep losses from decades of oil exploration, extraction and excess in the *Oriente*. Each party has utilized the “old school” tactics in “new media” (as well as in traditional mass communication) to “manufacture consent” (both inside and outside the courtroom).

These seven techniques include the following:

### ***Name-Calling***

Name-Calling involves both stereotyping and substitution. Stereotyping is generally used to categorize specific entities, behaviors or environments into groupings for reference. This allows individuals to simplify the typical thought process route. However, this activity also tends to separate — and de-humanize — those communities considered. Skilled propagandists use this to their advantage by inviting their publics to see nothing beyond the “labels” of the intended targets. Moreover, once having distanced individuals from their labels, descriptive language — either positive or negative, depending on the desired result — is substituted to “tilt” the image accordingly.

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4 These seven techniques have been detailed in many books, articles and papers for several decades. The information used for this essay was retrieved from “Propaganda Techniques,” *Oracle ThinkQuest Educational Foundation*.

### ***Bandwagon***

The “bandwagon effect”—convincing individuals to be part of the “in group” — was perfected by both the Allied and Axis powers in World War II. This appeal fuels the human need to belong to the winning side of a contest or dispute (*Wikipedia*). Moreover, it carries with it the implied threat that those not on that side will risk dire consequences in the end. Often, these “consequences” are more imagined than real, but the emotional fear of reprisal can overcome the rational process of evaluating the facts.

### ***Glittering Generalities***

Glittering generalities utilize the use of archetypes to stimulate Carl Jung’s notion of “the collective unconscious”. It is especially powerful because, according to scholar Joseph Campbell:

[It] stirs us because it summons up a voice that is stronger than our own. Whoever speaks in primordial images speaks with a thousand voices; he enralls and overpowers, while at the same time he lifts the idea he is seeking to express out of the occasional and the transitory into the realm of the ever-enduring. He transmutes our personal destiny into the destiny of mankind, and evokes in us all those beneficent forces that ever and anon have enabled humanity to find a refuge from every peril and to outlive the longest night (Campbell, 1971, p. 321).

Thus, when words like “freedom” or “justice” are used, they evoke images that go far beyond their denotative meaning, and can be manipulated to “sell” an idea that might otherwise be ignored or rejected.

### ***Transfer***

The primary function of transference is to connect one idea (usually unfamiliar or potentially distasteful) to another, more accepted concept, thereby persuading a previously uncertain or negative public to believe it. This technique can be used both negatively and positively, and often ties together culturally accepted beliefs, attitudes and values to make the link. Another popular application of transference is to ascribe the controversial notion to a particular individual or organization, such as an unpopular political leader or social protest group.

### ***Testimonial***

Testimonials, or endorsements rely on source credibility to convince otherwise undecided and/or negative publics to join the “cause”. Early on, propaganda analysts presumed that famous (or noted) people were most effective in promoting a particular idea or action; but in fact, successful testimonials often come from common people with whom the targeted groups clearly identify. This technique is often intertwined with “transferring” as well as with “plain folks”, depending on the specific cause or campaign.

### ***Plain Folks***

The effectiveness of the “plain folks” technique lies in its appeal to the “common man”, both in content and delivery. The propagandist wants to underscore values presumably shared by all segments of society, especially the humbler working classes. The goal is to appear self-effacing and semi-flawed, which is sometimes reinforced by colloquial language used in the message as

well as an “inadvertent” slip of the tongue (e.g., stutter, word mispronunciation, etc.) by a speaker to reflect vulnerability.

### ***Card Stacking***

Card stacking, or “selectivity”, is the practice of choosing only facts that support a one-sided argument. In some cases, people can find opposing viewpoints if they look hard enough; but in a controlled information system, this process can become difficult, if not impossible. Many times, “card stacking” is associated with authoritarian or totalitarian government censorship. However, a subtler version of the same technique is found in democratic societies as well, where capitalistic media organizations and corporations are owned and/or dominated by just a few. This power occurs not only in communication dissemination, but also through lobbying in political sectors for favorable legislation.

Noting Jacques Ellul’s notion of “total propaganda”, the process of controlling public opinion is not only ongoing but it is integrated — not only in the diversity and amalgamation of media and government channels, but also in the blending of the distinct techniques described above. In fact, the most successful propaganda campaigns fuse one or more of these techniques together in every promotional campaign. Along with a complex media dissemination plan, the results can be significant, especially when the campaign is ubiquitous, unrelenting, and used on a continual basis. The Chevron Texaco Corporation is but one of many companies well versed in this practice. And the decades-old Amazon Basin dispute reflects the total costs incurred by both the corporation and affected public when global ventures become avaricious, irresponsible and mismanaged. It also raises questions at a deeper level of moral values that address seminal beliefs about a “just world” versus those in an “unjust world”.

The “just world” phenomenon was first introduced by social psychologist Melvin J. Lerner, who developed his justice motive theory in the 1960s and 1970s (Montada & Lerner, 1998, p. 41). Those who believe in a “just world”, posits Lerner, blame people for their misfortunes, rather than the social system they live in. In short, “everybody deserves what happens to him or her” (p. 41). Examples of this perspective include the victims of date rape or pyramid investments.

On the other hand, those who view the world as “unjust” feel that innocent victims in a flawed system deserve support and/or compensation to make them “whole” (p. 41). Recent U.S. debates over reparations to the ancestors of slaves as well as ongoing discussions about the flagrant disrespect for rights of Native Americans (past and present) illustrate this perspective quite clearly.

When opposing core beliefs (i.e., cultural perception) and rigid social hierarchies create a strong power distance between classes (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010), the possibility of compromise becomes less attainable, and even more distant with time. Such is the case in the Amazon Basin, where “might” seems to triumph over “right”. The plight of today’s Amazonian tribes mirrors that of many indigenous peoples, who were denied basic human rights for centuries by their colonizers (Coates, 2004; Grandin, 2014; Sissons, 2005; Spear & Waller, 1993). The complex history of these distorted couplings has been propagandized, distorted, and/or virtually ignored in popular history until the late-20<sup>th</sup>/early-21<sup>st</sup> century.

## The Amazon Defense Front Vs. Chevron Texaco—David Wrestles with Goliath

The 1993 lawsuit filed by CONAIE and its supporters against Texaco (which merged with Chevron in 2001) wasn't expected to last many months, much less more than two decades. The Ecuadorian plaintiffs claimed to be betrayed by their own government as well as duped by a foreign corporation, which first seduced them with lies and false promises, and later assaulted them at all levels of their existence to turn their previously fertile rainforest into a veritable wasteland — both literally and figuratively — thus affecting their cultural survival (Chevron Toxico, 1993). Judges from both European and American continents<sup>5</sup> continue to rule on seemingly endless claims and counter-claims. However, outside the courtroom, the propaganda war between Chevron Texaco and the Amazon Defense Front has been even more adversarial and overreaching. Framed within the IPA's seven techniques, Chevron's propaganda campaign rivals some of the most disingenuous corporate communication strategies in today's world (e.g., J.P. Morgan's alleged sales of fraudulent mortgage-backed securities in 2008; the roles of B.P. Halliburton and Transocean in the 2010 Deepwater Horizon disaster in the Gulf of Mexico; and the ongoing scandal over massive General Motors recalls in 2014). And, while the Amazon Defense Front has often retaliated in kind, its limited resources have mirrored more of a David versus Goliath battle than a war between equals.

In its earliest stages of oil exploration during the mid-1960s, Texaco's most effective propaganda device was Card Stacking. Given the nature of their population (comprised mostly of indigenous tribes), it was easily to both manage information flow as well as provide a one-sided argument for drilling. At that time, most "knowledge" about petroleum extraction in Ecuador was sourced outside the country... and specifically from Texaco in the Amazon Basin town of Lago Agrio.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, sometimes-irresponsible employees brought egregious harm to unsuspecting natives by making outrageous claims. *New Yorker* journalist Patrick Radden Keefe describes one of the most damaging pieces of "medical advice" that circulated throughout the area:

In Quito, I met a woman named Margarita Yépez, who spent eighteen years as a social worker for Texaco. In the early days, she said, gringo oilmen told Lago Agrio locals, in jest, that oil was good for one's health; a coffee can full of crude could cure arthritis or male-pattern baldness — just rub some on the affected area. "They were the authority, so we trusted them", she said. "We were dumb" (*New Yorker*, 2012).

By the early 1990s, oil extraction had increased incrementally — from 70 to 300,000 barrels each day — but so had health and safety complaints. According to reporter Adam McCauley:

Cancer rates in [Lago Agrio's] surrounding villages were two to three times higher than average, livestock and domestic animals would often die after drinking river water and cattle used for food and milk suffered miscarriages due to the land's toxicity. Some cattle simply stopped eating and died, they stomachs often eaten away by the now-corrosive grass they'd grazed on. Traditional crops like rice were stunted and often discolored. The summer's dry winds would kick up poison particles, which were then inhaled by villagers

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5 For purposes of this article, this author assumes a six-continent model, which includes both North America and South America as one continent.

6 Spanish for "Sour Lake," the name of the East Texas town where Texaco was originally based.

(McCauley, 2012).

To counter growing complaints of respiratory illnesses, skin rashes, lesions and sores that would not heal, Texaco joined forces with several missionary groups to placate the local population (Card Stacking and Transfer), promising them, in turn, more support in their religious endeavors (McCauley, 2012).

Card Stacking continued throughout the lawsuit against Texaco in 1993 (and re-filed against Chevron Texaco in 2003, after being dismissed in US court for improper venue in 2001). Patrick Radden Keefe reports:

Chevron categorically denie[d] the charges made in the lawsuit, insisting that it [bore] no responsibility for pollution in the Amazon and that Texaco's operations were "completely in line with the standards of the day". A Chevron spokesman told me that "there is no corroborating evidence" of adverse health effects related to oil development in the Oriente, and blamed "trial lawyers" for "perpetuating false information" (*New Yorker*, 2012).

Outside the courtroom, one of Chevron Texaco's defense maneuvers was to reinforce previously established stereotypes of indigenous naïveté (Name-Calling) in various media, including a now-famous comment by Global Issues & Policy Manager Silvia Carrigo in a May 2009 *Sixty Minutes* segment, "I have makeup on, and there's naturally occurring oil on my face. Doesn't mean that I'm going to get sick from it" (Amazon Crude, 2009). This comment only reinforced Chevron Texaco's initial stereotypes of Lago Agrio residents (Name-Calling); it supported the corporation's one-sided, card-stacked argument. Unfortunately, Ms. Carrigo's statement reflected more negatively on the corporation than its intended targets.

To salvage its media case after the *Sixty Minutes*' blunder, journalist Jessie Daniels reported a bold (and expensive) move to save face:

It hired a former CNN journalist, Gene Randall, to produce a similar, but favorable to Chevron, news-magazine-style-story, which the company then posted to YouTube and advertised heavily via Google. The video "report" for Chevron may be unprecedented for how it blurs the line between public relations and journalism. At least one analyst wondered whether this propagandist counter-news-production raises the specter of whether of a surge of newly out-of-work journalists who might be tempted to go "over to the dark side" and further muddy the line between news and corporate advocacy (Daniels, 2011).

"Documentary" production aside, Chevron Texaco also positioned itself with timely interviews in mainstream magazines like *Newsweek* and *Business Week* as well as appearances on major media networks like CNN and CBS to reinforce the company's "social responsibility" defense to the general public. In addition, its social media website — *Amazon Post* — continued to spew endless counterattacks against environmental protest groups (e.g., Amazon Watch), using a logo/banner more likely to be identified as ecological organizations (rather than corporate communicators) by the uninitiated (Transfer). *Amazon Post* still operates today, characterizing its biased fact selection as news and information (Card Stacking).

While smearing their indigenous Ecuadorian plaintiffs as both ignorant and naïve as well as greedy and corrupt (Name-Calling), Chevron also was in the midst of drafting a human rights

clause (Glittering Generality) for their mission statement, officially released in 2008 (Grench, 2009, p. 39):

Our company's foundation is built on our values, which distinguish us and guide our actions. We conduct our business in a socially responsible and ethical manner. We respect the law, support universal human rights, protect the environment and benefit the communities where we work (The Chevron Way).

This was followed by a new, \$15 million Chevron campaign in 2008, "Will You Join Us?" Invoking the image of "human energy", it promoted energy conservation to "power human progress" by doing such things as carpooling and other alternative means to achieve higher energy efficiency (Glittering Generality). Environmental scholars Miriam A. Cherry and Judd F. Sneirson have identified this particular strategy as "greenwashing," providing this context:

American environmentalist Jay Westerveld coined the term "greenwashing" in 1986 in response to a hotel's efforts to encourage guests to help the environment by reusing towels. While the hotel's stated purpose was to reduce water, energy, and detergent use, Westerveld suspected its true motivation was profit. A play on "whitewashing" — using white paint to cover over dirt in a superficial or transparent way — the term "greenwashing" soon came to signify insincere, dubious, inflated, or misleading environmental claims (2012, pp. 140-141).

In 2014, most hotels from Boston to Bangkok still use this strategy.

As with many PR campaigns, Chevron's "human energy" appeal neglected to discuss aspects other than environmental sustainability in its "glittering generality", as observed by a Greenpeace blogger:

Something Chevron doesn't bother to mention in any of its marketing is its use of human exploitation, particularly the native peoples of Nigeria and Ecuador, as well as the environment. It fails to mention a pending law suit, in which the company is being tried for gross human rights violations against villagers who peacefully protested Chevron's environmental abuses" (Chevron's Will You Join Us' Greenwash Campaign, 2008).

In the midst of running its "Will You Join Us?" campaign, Chevron also worked online to discredit the presiding judge, Juan Nuñez, in Ecuador (Transfer). Allegedly, a local businessman named Diego Borja had appealed to the judge and a high-level member of President Rafael Correa's administration for a possible contract to "clean up" Chevron Texaco's mess, after the case was decided. *The New Yorker* chronicled the incident and its aftermath accordingly:

But when Borja met with the judge and a Correa administration official...he was informed that he first needed to pay a million dollars each to Nuñez, to the administration, and to the Lago Agrio plaintiffs. Borja and an associate secretly recorded the discussions, using cameras embedded in a watch and a pen. Charles James, a Chevron executive, declared,

“This information absolutely disqualifies the judge and nullifies anything that he has ever done in this case”.

Judge Nuñez stepped aside. But he insisted that he was innocent. The videos, which Chevron posted online, showed Borja and the official elliptically discussing the possibility of a bribe with Nuñez, but offered no proof that the judge had solicited or accepted one. Nuñez told me that the scandal was a setup, and Donziger has called the incident “a Chevron sting”. It has subsequently emerged that the purported Correa administration official was in fact a Quito car salesman and part-time caterer, whose name does not appear in a party database of registered members. The businessman, Borja, was a former Chevron contractor (Keefe, 2012).

This combination of multiple, simultaneous and multifaceted media campaigns is but one instance of Chevron Texaco’s signature propaganda strategy throughout its long battle with the Amazon Defense Front. It has continued to grow in depth and sophistication, as the corporation capitalized upon external events to further its cause.

In 2010, for example, Chevron Texaco launched a new PR campaign, entitled “We Agree,” released shortly after the Deepwater Horizon disaster in the Gulf of Mexico.<sup>7</sup> Still running, it features a series of interactive statements and asks people to respond via Facebook. The “stars” in these photos are common, everyday non-celebrities (Plain Folks), holding cards with statements in bold print/all capital letters, and include slogans such as: Oil Companies Should Support The Communities They’re A Part Of; Big Oil Should Support Local Schools; Aids Is Going To Lose; Shale Gas Needs To Be Good For Everyone; We Need To Start Building Again; Oil Companies Should Support Small Business; It’s Time Oil Companies Get Behind The Development Of Renewable Energy; Oil Companies Should Think More Like Technology Companies; and Protecting The Planet Is Everyone’s Job (Glittering Generalities).

Below each comment is a link to show “what Chevron is doing” to address the particular issue raised. These links contain polished videos, with responses from experts (Testimonials), along with downloadable transcripts. In March 2014, the site’s “worldwide” counter registered more than ½ million responses, (not surprisingly) agreeing with the company (“We Agree—Do You?”).

To be sure, Chevron Texaco’s long-standing propaganda campaign has not been without equally vehement counter-attacks. When observing the strategy used by CONAIE and its allies, it is easy to identify the Institute of Propaganda Analysis’ seven propaganda techniques, including; 1) celebrity TV appearances, newspaper articles and blogs by musicians such as Bianca Jagger and Sting, actors Danny Glover and Daryl Hannah, and human rights activist Kerry Kennedy (Testimonials); 2) organized “toxic tours”, which dramatically expose the sludge and stench of the region through “white glove” demonstrations (Card Stacking, Glittering Generalities, Plain Folks); 3) President Rafael Correa’s 2013 “The Dirty Hand of Chevron” campaign (Bandwagon), urging people from around the world to boycott their products (Burch, 2013); 4) the Yes Men’s<sup>8</sup>

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7 As mentioned in the introduction, some thought the timing of the campaign’s release was somewhat suspicious—to deflect attention away from Chevron’s legal issues in Ecuador. However, this assertion was denied vehemently by its corporate executives.

8 The Yes Men is one of several political activist groups, using satirical entertainment to communicate their message. For more details on this campaign (as well as others, dealing with climate change, corporate corruption, etc.), consult their website, [www.theyesmen.org](http://www.theyesmen.org).

“identity correction” campaign to counter Chevron Texaco’s “We Agree” campaign (Transfer), containing the same graphics as the originals, but changing words to “correct” the message (i.e., instead of the “oil companies need to get real” slogan, the Yes Men have inserted “oil companies should clean up their messes” — a clear reference to the Amazon Basin disaster); 5) uniting support from other governments and solidarity groups in Argentina, Germany, Chile, Korea, Bolivia, the Dominican Republic, the United Kingdom and Spain, who condemn Chevron Texaco’s actions in Ecuador (Name-Calling, Testimonial, Bandwagon) (“Support Ecuador”); 6) publishing reactions to Chevron Texaco’s allegations and “scorched earth legal, PR, and lobbying campaign to crush its victims and their advocates and supporters” (“Retaliation Trial Opens Against Victims of Chevron Oil Contamination in Ecuador”) through its social media channels (Glittering Generalities); and 7) creating multiple documentaries, including 2009’s critically acclaimed *Crude: The Real Price of Oil*, where director Joe Berliner chronicles the decades-old court battle, as well as the damage and destruction it has caused to those living in the Amazon Basin (Name-Calling, Glittering Generalities, Transfer, Plain Folks).

However, with a seemingly endless PR budget — an estimated \$400 million for the Ecuadorian case alone (Kings, 2014), the image of David and Goliath seems fitting. As one of the Amazon Defense Front attorneys Steve Donziger has said: “No matter what I do, they can outmaneuver me with money” (Keefe, 2012). Sadly, Jacques Ellul’s formula for a successful propaganda effort, which includes a shrewd analysis of the situation, the integration of specific technique, and most importantly, a total and continuous message immersion (with unlimited funds), may be unassailable.

### **The Bottom Line**

On February 14, 2011, Chevron Texaco was found guilty of dumping an estimated 18 billion gallons of toxic waste throughout the Amazon Basin (Caselli, 2011). After years of legal power struggles (traversing courts in the US and Ecuador), the company was ordered to pay \$19 billion in damages for its failure to properly drill and restore its wells in the *Oriente* region (Barrett, 2012). Almost immediately afterwards, Chevron filed an appeal, and initiated a new RICO suit (Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act) against lawyers in the Amazon Defense Front, alleging that:

Front leaders, including its lead American attorney and strategist Steve Donziger, won the \$19 billion judgment fraudulently and by breaking U.S. laws against extortion, mail fraud, wire fraud, witness tampering, obstruction of justice, and money laundering (Parloff, 2013).

In March 2014, a federal judge in New York ruled in favor of Chevron Texaco in the RICO case (Krauss, 2014, pp. B1, B4);<sup>9</sup> and the ongoing appeals process for plaintiffs’ damages continues to appear more like a “never-ending story” than a class-action victory. Thus, while environmental theorists discuss the potential harm of carbon footprints and imminent climate change, the “10W40 Generations” spend their daily lives watching their families and friends become fewer

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<sup>9</sup> According to the article, Donziger and his attorneys plan to appeal this decision saying, “This is an appalling decision from a deeply flawed proceeding that overturns a unanimous ruling by Ecuador’s Supreme Court. The decision is full of vitriol, based on paid evidence from a corrupt former judge” (B4).

and more fragile, their natural resources disappearing, and their means of livelihood (handed down through their ancestors) seriously compromised. This, in turn, has led to the desecration of precious native cultures and traditions. Once a center of rich biodiversity, the area has become a maze of rusted drill equipment and massive oil pits with the stench of petroleum in the air.

The Chevron Texaco case underscores one of the greatest issues in big business today — the slippery slope which can occur between corporate social responsibility (CSR) and public relations, perhaps due, in part, to Lerner's dichotomies of "just" and "unjust" worlds. Known as "faux" CSR, this area of corporate communication first became an area for academic study about twenty years ago. More recently, in a 2012 article, legal scholars Cherry and Sneider concentrated specifically on Chevron's "We Agree" campaign. Based on their research, they concluded:

All too often, the statements and promises of CSR have been found to be overblown blandishments, the afterthought of a clever marketing department, or part of a public-relations effort to control damage through greenwashing. That seems to be the case with Chevron's "we agree" campaign, which is particularly unfortunate in that such faux CSR can breed cynicism toward genuine CSR and the firms that actively engage in it. Corporate claims of social responsibility need to be policed, and the Chevron example demonstrates that civil actions by consumers and investors cannot do the job alone. Certifying organizations and watchdog groups can pick up some of this slack, restoring trust with consumers and investors who wish to do business with socially responsible and sustainable businesses (Cherry and Sneider, 2012, p. 153).

And that's the bottom line for best business practices.

## Future Directions

However, social responsibility and sustainability should also extend beyond multinational corporations. Governments, too, are accountable for economic, environmental, social and cultural stability. As globalization continues to evolve, the role of national law and authority becomes ever more important and complex. The Chevron Texaco lawsuit underscores the innumerable intricacies involved when conducting international business within diverse national parameters, which, in turn, blur the lines of accountability, i.e., while Texaco should take responsibility for its decades of drilling in the Amazon Basin, Petro Ecuador and the Ecuadorian government's policy of nationalizing resources must also share in the blame. One direction for future research might be to include these factors when investigating President Rafael Correa's recent decision (2013) to allow oil drilling in roughly ten percent of its most bio-diverse park, Yashuni National Forest (Hance, 2014) — reversing his 2007 rhetoric (Vidal, 2014), and seemingly in conflict with Ecuador's "rights of nature" article in the nation's constitution, which, incidentally, was the first constitution in the world to legally recognize environmental significance (O'Carroll, 2008).

Another interesting area of research is to compare the environmental impact on other international commerce in Ecuador, e.g., bananas, cut flowers and cocoa (some of the country's top exports), especially in the Amazon Basin. After taking a "toxic tour," one can easily imagine the potential for tainted crops in this region.<sup>10</sup> Questions of quality control and international

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<sup>10</sup> This was part of the author's field research, conducted in 2014.

standardization of these products should be raised, due to the residual damage from soil and water contamination over the past several decades.

Finally, the rights of indigenous people around the world — which vary from country to country — should be compared, contrasted and considered. According to Amnesty International:

In every continent in the world, Indigenous peoples are among the most marginalized, impoverished and frequently victimized members of society (Amnesty International Canada).

The Amazon Defense Front's painful legal path to justice only accentuates the plight of many more who struggle daily as victims of human rights abuses, with no apparent means of resolution. As demonstrated in the ongoing Chevron Texaco litigation, it is often problematic to gather hard data from indigenous populations to support their claims. Despite these difficulties, it remains a vital area of research for cultural survival and sustainability, so necessary in all parts of the world.

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