

BP's Big Screen in Trafalgar Square, jaimelondonboy via Flickr

Lessons from the campaign to end big oil sponsorship of culture

In an edited version of **Jess Worth's** presentation to SGR's Responsible Science conference, she reflects on the successes of, and obstacles to, the campaign to end fossil fuel sponsorship of art organisations and museums.

We need to transition rapidly away from fossil fuels, because climate science tells us that even just burning the remaining oil and gas reserves will take the world well beyond a dangerous 1.5°C temperature rise. However, oil and gas corporations have very effectively cultivated a 'social licence' that allows them to operate, to continue to drive up carbon emissions, and to lobby against effective emission control measures. That's why we've seen campaigns like fossil fuel divestment.

The aim of the Culture Unstained campaign is to work alongside the divestment campaigns, by challenging sponsorship by the oil companies of cultural activities – which are another way in which they boost their social licence. Recent sponsorship deals have included:

- BP Big Screens, part of the Royal Opera House's activities;
- BP-sponsored 'blockbuster exhibitions' at the British Museum;
- The BP Portrait Awards, which has been running for over 30 years;
- Wonderlab, an interactive gallery for children at the Science Museum, sponsored by Equinor (formerly Statoil);

Most recently – in May 2021 – the Science Museum opened 'Our Future Planet', a new exhibition sponsored by Shell on technologies and other measures to remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere.

But the campaign is really having an impact. The biggest recent success was the Royal Shakespeare Company ending its sponsorship with BP halfway through the contract, and actually giving the money back. Ever since 2016, when the Tate didn't

renew its contract with BP, we've seen a lot of different cultural institutions end their relationships with oil and gas companies. The Edinburgh Science Festival was the first organisation that actually cited climate change and their responsibility as a scientific and educational organisation as the reasons to no longer accept money from Exxon and similar corporations.

The secrets of campaign success

Creativity and storytelling are powerful tools in the success of these campaigns. Activist theatre group 'BP or not BP', of which I am also part, performs in cultural spaces without permission and without warning. We take the space and we use it to talk about climate change and what oil companies are really doing, in order to catalyse conversation. We see our role as bringing debate on the actions society needs to take to prevent climate breakdown out of the science and policy spheres and into the cultural sphere – by meeting the public where they are, in cultural spaces and institutions.

We try to find campaign actions that are attention grabbing and innovative. For example, we used umbrellas to spell out the word 'NO' in the British Museum's Great Court. We try to use ways of communicating that aren't dry, but also aren't terrifying – that engage and have humour. For example, we smuggled the constituent parts of a 'BP Kraken' into the British Museum, along with some BP Pirates, when the company sponsored the Sunken Cities exhibition.

We also highlight connections to wider social justice issues, such as decolonisation and Black Lives Matter, tapping into debate within the museum sector on grappling with our colonial legacy.

Another lesson is to build coalitions beyond traditional campaigns. Oscar-winning actor Mark Rylance resigned as an Associate Artist with the Royal Shakespeare Company



» (RSC) with an impassioned article in *The Guardian*, receiving a huge amount of coverage at the time. This helped catalyse the decision by the RSC to move away from BP. Artist Gary Hume decided to speak out against BP sponsorship of the Portrait Awards on the day the awards were announced, even though he was one of the judges. He had had a moment of clarity having seen Extinction Rebellion protests, and realised he had a responsibility to talk about his concerns. He was then joined by a lot of prominent portrait painters and Turner Prize winners, as the artist community mobilised around him.

Egyptian author Ahdaf Soueif resigned as a British Museum trustee in 2019 with a heartfelt article in the *London Review of Books*, citing the museum's intransigency on BP sponsorship, but also their treatment of workers and the lack of engagement with their colonial legacy. Making links between all of these issues sent shockwaves through the museum sector, and Soueif's resignation was also supported by the British Museum branch of the PCS trade union. We then staged a 'BP Must Fall' protest, bringing a Trojan horse into the Museum forecourt, and the union branch put out a public statement supporting that too.

The link between external activism and internal advocacy has been a crucial dynamic, because activists can catalyse an internal or sector-wide conversation that might not have otherwise happened. It can make it possible for employees to have the internal conversations they want to have, but feel under a lot of pressure not to have. We work with people inside the sector to ensure that our framing of campaigns is helpful and not counter-productive.

Entrenched institutions

However, some of these institutions are still deeply entrenched with oil and gas corporations – not least, The Science Museum Group. It has had financial relationships with three large oil companies over the years, some stretching a long way back. As mentioned, Equinor sponsors Wonderlab, while Shell's current deal is the latest of several involving climate and environment exhibitions. The museum also partners with BP on STEM training for science teachers.

At Culture Unstained, we decided that we would put together a formal complaint to the Science Museum, focusing not just on these three companies' huge emissions but also their histories of disinformation on climate issues. We concluded that The Science Museum Group was breaking its own ethics policy through a lack of due diligence. The complaint was supported by an impressive list of nearly 50 scientists, including several from Scientists for Global Responsibility.¹

How did the Science Museum respond? They completely brushed it off, and refused to engage. They didn't even give us the courtesy of a formal response, or engage with the substance of our complaint on any level. Even more than that, Ian Blatchford, the Director of The Science Museum Group, came out fighting, saying that even if the museum was lavishly publicly funded, he would still want to have sponsorship from oil companies. He wrote a letter to all staff responding to the controversy explaining that big oil and gas companies "have the capital, geography, people and logistics to find solutions [to climate change] and demonising them is seriously unproductive".²

This is a good example of some of the barriers to action on this issue. There are very entrenched corporate financial interests at the top of a lot of institutions that are often strongly out of step with the staff and the rest of the sector. But they hold the purse strings and the power.



We know there is a lot of discomfort among museum staff concerning oil industry sponsorship, but Blatchford's response to them was extremely forceful. He mentioned junior colleagues in his letter, ostensibly to reassure them, but I think this has left employees with very real concerns about job security if they speak out.

What needs to happen is for the scientific community to become collectively more outspoken, supporting staff who are under pressure to not rock the boat, but nevertheless are strongly opposed to the current situation.

The oil industry is in an existential crisis, at the beginnings of a death spiral. Corporations like BP, Shell and Equinor are desperately trying to rebrand themselves as leaders of the energy transition, so we have a really important role to play in debunking their spin, especially when it relates to geoengineering and carbon capture and storage. Their net zero rhetoric is breath-taking, and designed to obscure the fact that they are all still actively expanding oil and gas exploration and production – and planning to continue over the next few decades.

At the same time, the cultural sector is in an existential crisis due to the pandemic, which is heart-breaking. But big institutions shouldn't be trying to solve one problem, the problem of their financial instability, by fuelling another one, climate breakdown.

ACTION

The UK Climate Student Network and 350.org have called on people to boycott the Science Museum's 'Our Future Planet' exhibition over its sponsorship by Shell. To pledge your support, go to:

<https://act.350.org/signup/boycott-science-museums-new-exhibition/>

Jess Worth is a Co-director of Culture Unstained. For more information on their campaigns, see: <https://cultureunstained.org/>

For more details of the SGR conference, including web-links to the videos and slide presentations, see p.40.

References

- 1 Culture Unstained (2018). <https://cultureunstained.org/2018/07/05/scientists-call-out-science-museum-over-ties-to-big-oil/>
- 2 FT (2019). <https://www.ft.com/content/9aa5197c-b46c-11e9-bec9-fdcab53d6959>