

## Arms and fossil fuels industries in schools: Undermining the next generation?

**The arms and fossil fuels industries are putting a lot of resources into science and engineering educational material for British school children. We should be very concerned, argues Philip Wood, SGR.**

In 2007 the head of the Army's recruitment strategy stated, "Our new model is about raising awareness, and that takes a ten-year span. It starts with a seven-year-old boy seeing a parachutist at an air show and thinking, 'That looks great.' From then the Army is trying to build interest by drip, drip, drip." Industries, crucially the arms and fossil fuels industries, are attempting to do exactly the same thing. They are using the notion of a skills shortage in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) to provide STEM 'enrichment activities' as a way of getting in front of and influencing a captive audience of impressionable children.

### Tackling the public image problem

Research indicates that the fossil fuels and arms industries suffer from public image problems affecting younger generations (those born since the mid-1980s).<sup>1</sup> The chief executive of BP Group recently admitted "the millennial generation [born between 1980s to mid-1990s] don't just want career growth; they also expect to make a positive contribution to society".<sup>2</sup>

These generational issues may give some understanding to the motives of the fossil fuels and arms industries' interaction with young people. Shell, for example, currently has a massive public relations campaign called #makethefuture, which talks a lot about innovation and emphasises their social enterprise projects.<sup>3</sup> In a leaked public relations (PR) document, Shell stated that due to the motivations of the younger generations, its aim was to "build Shell's reputation as an innovative, competitive and forward-thinking energy company of the future" and to "support Shell being positioned as a thought leader, actively looking ahead at what it will take to move society towards a prosperous, low-carbon future".<sup>4</sup> This campaign has been a response to widespread criticism, even from leading environmentalists that had previously thought engaging with oil industry was the way forward, but were now dismissing it as "futile".<sup>5</sup>

### STEM education as public relations

Along with more traditional marketing on Facebook, YouTube and TV, corporations are using the narrative

of a STEM skills shortage as a way of entering schools to extend their PR campaigns. When thinking critically about the reasoning behind the industry engagement in schools, especially in the context of their public image problems, the logical conclusion is that the agenda must be about protecting the future of the corporations though PR and shaping the minds of young people. This is given further credence by the PR company behind many industry school programmes, which advertises that its initiatives will "both support pupil learning, while at the same time clearly convey[ing] your organisation's marketing, PR or CSR [corporate social responsibility] message".<sup>6</sup> Shell's 'Bright Ideas Challenge', one of their school programmes, is arguably a good example of this.<sup>7</sup> It focuses on innovation and future ideas for clean affordable energy – but seemingly fails to mention the large-scale impact of their core business on climate change. Hence their programme will create the perception and association of being a forward looking, progressive, thought leader – the aims set out in their PR document.

The reach of these industry-school engagement programmes can be massive. The UK's largest arms corporation, BAE Systems, runs an 'Education Roadshow' (in conjunction with the RAF and Royal Navy) which they claim has reached over 365,000 young people in over 2,200 schools and was expected to reach over 90,000 children aged between 10 and 13 in 2016 alone.<sup>8</sup> Like other STEM engagement programmes, the materials that are available online present a very sanitised message. While there are numerous images and references to military technologies, there is very little about what they are used for, let alone acknowledgement of the serious ethical issues they raise.

STEM programmes are often carried out by other organisations but are sponsored or funded by industry. For example, the Tomorrow's Engineers programme runs an activity called 'Energy Quest'. The programme is heavily funded by Shell who "invested over £1 million in Tomorrow's Engineers, giving 70,000 school children careers information and hands-on engineering experiences".<sup>9</sup> Yet we can find no mention of this funding on the Tomorrow's Engineers website, with the only reference to Shell being buried in a school case study which mentions the presence of Shell STEM Ambassadors at their event.<sup>10</sup> Like the previous Shell programme, the Energy Quest focuses on "future energy solutions". While the activity teaches children that "we could

need an 'energy mix' in the future", by far the largest element is a 6-8 week project on carbon capture and storage.<sup>11</sup> This is a technology which is particularly favoured by the fossil fuel industry, despite having significant environmental and economic drawbacks.

### Time for reform

It might be argued that those industries which benefit from STEM education in schools should contribute to its provision, and there may be merit to that argument. However, the way that corporations – including those involved in arms and fossil fuels – are allowed to operate can lead to significant biases being introduced. A new system with much stricter regulation needs to be formulated to make sure that industry cannot distort education programmes and use them as an opportunity for corporate PR.

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