

FOSSIL FUEL AND TOBACCO INDUSTRIES: A DISTURBING RESEMBLANCE

Two industries relying on the same strategies to achieve the same goal: securing their long-term profits at the expense of public health and the environment.

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TWO DEADLY INDUSTRIES, ONE STRATEGY

The fossil fuel and tobacco industries alone are responsible for more than 16 million deaths worldwide each year, as well as causing considerable damage to the environment¹⁻³.

Yet both industries have long been aware of the dangers posed by their products. The tobacco industry has known since the 1950s that cigarette smoking causes lung cancer⁴, but it did not publicly acknowledge this fact until several decades later. Likewise, the fossil fuel industry has been aware since the 1970s of the central role that fossil fuels play in global warming through greenhouse gas emissions, and of their impact on the climate, with catastrophic effects on both human populations and the environment⁵.

To preserve their profits and protect their business model, both industries have a strong interest in downplaying the risks associated with their products and in delaying regulations that might restrict their activities. To this end, they have developed remarkably similar strategies, sometimes directly inspired by one another, to influence public opinion, sow doubt about scientific evidence, and hinder political action – with considerable success.



MANIPULATE TO MAINTAIN CONTROL

To protect their profits, these two industries must cultivate their public image, retain and expand their customer base, and avoid, delay, or weaken regulations, all while remaining silent about the catastrophic effects of their business on public health and the environment.

Their strategies are based on the following approaches:

- Deny, minimise, or downplay the risks
- When that is no longer possible, create doubt and divert the debate
- Block or delay regulation, or render it ineffective
- Present themselves as part of the solution to the very problem they have created, in order to claim a “seat at the table” in policy discussions

To achieve this, they rely on a range of tactics, including:

- Influencing scientific research and manufacturing doubt about the dangers of their products;
- Framing the debate around economic freedom and individual responsibility;
- Lobbying;
- Promoting false solutions.

INFLUENCING SCIENCE AND SOWING DOUBT

The “Science for Profit” model developed by researchers at the University of Bath⁶ describes five strategies used by industry to manipulate science for their own interests:

- influence the conduct and publication of scientific research to skew results in favour of industry;



- influence the interpretation of scientific evidence to discredit unfavourable findings and present a distorted picture of the current state of scientific knowledge;
- influence the reach of scientific knowledge to enhance the visibility and credibility of industry messages;
- create policy environments favourable to industry by influencing how scientific knowledge is used in policy-making processes;
- manufacture trust among the public, policymakers, and other stakeholders in the industry and in the scientific evidence it produces or funds.

The goal: to weaken policies that could affect the industry's profits, prevent legal action against it, and maximise consumption of its products.

The fossil fuel and tobacco industries have thus relied on academic experts working secretly on their behalf⁷⁻⁹, while at the same time discrediting research that runs counter to their interests.

In the 1990s and 2000s, the tobacco company Philip Morris promoted the concept of “sound science” to challenge research demonstrating the harmful effects of second-hand smoke. The company went so far as to establish a “sound science coalition” with other industries – notably including the fossil fuel industry¹⁰ – that opposed regulation, and launched a public relations campaign to promote its “good epidemiological practices”, designed to redefine the standards by which scientific studies were judged. The aim was to impose methodological requirements so stringent that it became virtually impossible to conclusively establish the dangers of second-hand smoke. Fine particles emitted by combustion engines and greenhouse gas emissions are examples of risks that fit this model: although their effects may be difficult to detect in the short term, they accumulate over time. It is therefore easy to understand why the fossil fuel industry might have found such an approach appealing¹¹.



Steven Milloy: A Lawyer in the Service of the Tobacco and Fossil Fuel Industries

Steven Milloy personifies the continuity between the disinformation strategies developed by the tobacco industry and those later adopted by the fossil fuel industry. A lawyer, lobbyist, and founder of the website *JunkScience.com*, he rose to prominence in the 1990s by challenging studies demonstrating the harmful effects of second-hand smoke. In particular, he played a key role within the Advancement of Sound Science Coalition (TASSC), an organisation established with the support of Philip Morris to discredit scientific research that could justify new public health regulations. Internal company documents show that Milloy was paid by Philip Morris for several years: the tobacco company's 2001 budget records a payment of \$90,000 to him, while its parent company, Altria, acknowledged that he remained under contract with the group at least until the end of 2005.

Milloy later applied the same methods to the climate debate. Through his website, *JunkScience.com*, and his lobbying activities, he sought to challenge the scientific consensus on climate change and to defend the interests of the coal and fossil fuel industries. Closely associated with American conservative circles, he served on Donald Trump's team during his first presidential term and supported the dismantling of numerous climate policies, notably contributing to United States' withdrawal from the Paris Agreement. Since 2020, he has also served on the board of directors of the Heartland Institute, an influential climate-sceptic think tank discussed later in this report.

MISLEADING RHETORIC

To preserve their image and protect their interests, the tobacco and fossil fuel industries employ a wide range of rhetorical strategies. These arguments are often echoed by their political and economic allies, whom they willingly allow to take centre stage. Their discourse relies heavily on notions of individual responsibility, entrepreneurial freedom, and free trade, while framing stricter regulation as a direct threat to economic stability. Table 1 presents a few



examples of arguments regularly used by the industries concerned

Table 1.

Table 1 – Examples of arguments used by the tobacco and fossil fuel industries regarding individual responsibility, freedom of choice, and the economic risks associated with regulation.

Argument	Tobacco and Nicotine Industry	Fossil Fuel Industry
Individual Responsibility	“[Our members are] aware of the problem of littering [and they are] continually stepping up their efforts to encourage smokers not to discard their cigarette butts in public spaces, but to dispose of them responsibly and properly.”¹²	“We must now, as responsible citizens, promote the rational management of all non-renewable energy resources, oil, gas, coal, and uranium.”¹³
Risks to the Economy	“A strict smoking ban causes a massive drop in turnover for the hospitality industry. [...] But a total smoking ban would also have serious consequences for other sectors: in addition to hospitality, all suppliers (the food and beverage sector), the retail sector, and the advertising and communications industry would suffer.”¹⁴	“We opposed the Energy Act because we viewed it as the first step toward an energy and climate policy that could harm our economy and our industry.”¹⁵
Freedom of Choice	“Any censorship of this commercial free speech would deprive consumers of their freedom to choose from an array of different products, brands and services. Such a system is usually the hallmark of a totalitarian or communist state, not a free economy society.”¹⁶	“Among the proposals put forward in the current climate debates, many amount to strengthening the role of the state and discriminating against petroleum products: the aim is to steer consumers onto the path dictated by the state through incentives, information, and, if necessary, coercion.”¹⁷

Quote in original language:
« [Nos membres sont] conscients de la problématique du littering [et ils intensifient] continuellement leurs mesures, pour encourager les fumeurs à ne pas jeter leurs mégots dans l'espace public, à les éliminer de manière responsable et correctement. »

Quote in original language:
« Nous devons maintenant, en tant que citoyens responsables, promouvoir la gestion rationnelle de toutes les ressources d'énergies non renouvelables, pétrole, gaz, charbon et uranium. »

Quote in original language:
« Une interdiction stricte de fumer provoque une baisse massive du chiffre d'affaires de la gastronomie. [...] Mais une interdiction absolue de fumer aurait aussi des conséquences graves pour d'autres branches : à côté de la gastronomie, tous les fournisseurs (branche alimentaire et des boissons), le commerce de détail ainsi que la branche de la publicité et de la communication en pâtiraient. »

Quote in original language:
« Nous nous sommes opposés à la loi sur l'énergie, car nous la considérons comme la première étape d'une politique énergétique et climatique susceptible de nuire à notre économie et à notre branche. »

Quote in original language:
« Parmi les propositions faites dans le cadre des débats actuels sur le climat, beaucoup reviennent à renforcer le rôle de l'État et à discriminer les produits pétroliers : on veut mettre les consommateurs dans le droit chemin imposé par l'État au moyen d'incitations, d'informations et, si nécessaire, par la contrainte. »



INFLUENCING POLICY

In Switzerland, lobbying activities remain largely opaque, and interest groups exert considerable influence over Parliament. The case of tobacco is particularly revealing: Switzerland ranks second-to-last in the Global Tobacco Industry Interference Index¹⁸, a ranking that highlights the tobacco lobby's persistent grip on the country's decision-making processes and public policies.

Parliamentarians as lobbyists

In Switzerland, a distinctive feature of lobbying is that many parliamentarians are themselves connected to interest groups and act as their representatives within the Federal Assembly. One of the most striking examples is that of Albert Röstli, a Federal Councillor heading the Federal Department of the Environment, Transport, Energy and Communications (DETEC), but also a former president of Swissoil and auto-suisse, the oil and automotive industry lobby groups.

Swissoil is the national organisation of fuel traders.

In the tobacco sector, political representatives of the industry's interests are very often parliamentarians from right-wing parties (the Swiss People's Party, SVP/UDC, and FDP.The Liberals, FDP/PLR). A notable example is Gregor Rutz, an SVP National Council member who is also president of the Swiss Tobacco Trade Association (Swiss Tobacco) and president of IG Freiheit, the neoliberal parliamentary *think tank*.

Two accreditations per elected official

In addition to any existing links with interest groups, each federal parliamentarian may grant accreditation to two lobbyists, who then receive privileged access to the Federal Palace. According to Lobbywatch, Philippe Nantermod, an FDP/PLR National Council member, for example, has granted his Federal Palace access cards to Martin Kuonen (secretary general of SwissCigarette, the umbrella organisation for the tobacco industry in Switzerland) and Olivier Fantino (director of Avenergy from July 2026)²⁰.

Avenergy is a Swiss trade association representing oil importers such as Shell, BP, Esso and TotalEnergies, all of which have engaged in climate obstructionist practices¹⁹.

Funding of right-wing parties

The fossil fuel and tobacco industries also influence politics by directly funding political parties. In Switzerland, the SVP/UDC and the FDP/PLR each received a contribution of CHF 35,000 from Philip Morris for their respective 2023 federal election campaigns²¹. In 2023, Avenergy also donated CHF 5,000 to each SVP/UDC and



FDP/PLR candidate for the Fribourg Council of States²². Similar support may have been provided in other cantons, but the lack of transparency makes this impossible to determine²³.

The fossil fuel industry also frequently supports conservative or right-wing parties and candidates. In the United States, this proximity is particularly evident in the relationship between the oil industry and the Republican Party. President Donald Trump, for example, has adopted positions favourable to fossil fuels and opposed several measures aimed at protecting the environment and public health. During the 2024 presidential campaign, the oil industry contributed \$219 million to his campaign²⁴. The tobacco industry, meanwhile, has contributed more than \$20 million to  MAGA Inc. since 2023. In addition, the US president holds 1.6 million shares in the tobacco industry²⁵.

 MAGA Inc. is a committee that raises unlimited funds for Donald Trump's election campaigns.

Use of political intermediaries

Industries also influence policy by using intermediaries. In Switzerland, this notably includes the Swiss Union of Arts and Crafts (usam), the largest umbrella organisation representing businesses, and economiesuisse, the Swiss Business Federation. These organisations, which include the fossil fuel, tobacco, and nicotine industry lobby groups, relay their messages and promote economic liberalism, often at the expense of environmental protection and public health²⁶.

Effective lobbying

Thanks to their close ties with policymakers, the industries concerned wield significant influence over the legislative process. They can therefore help delay, weaken, or block proposed legislation that might restrict their activities or reduce their profits. The opposition by fossil fuel lobbies to the revision of Switzerland's CO₂ Act is a prime example of this influence. The Federal Act on the Reduction of CO₂ Emissions, adopted in 1999, is Switzerland's primary instrument for combating climate change. It has undergone several revisions aimed at strengthening emission reduction measures. However, organisations representing the interests of the oil industry mounted a strong campaign against the 2021 revision, which they considered contrary to the sector's interests. Supported in particular by Avenergy Suisse and Swissoil, the referendum campaign led to the law's rejection in a popular vote, thereby delaying the strengthening of Switzerland's climate policy²³.



As for the tobacco industry, in 2022 the Swiss people approved the popular initiative “Children Without Tobacco”, which aimed to prevent tobacco advertising from reaching minors. This initiative was considered essential because the then-current Tobacco Products Act (LPTab) was particularly permissive and reflected the influence exerted by lawmakers aligned with the tobacco industry’s interests. However, during the initiative’s implementation, several exceptions were introduced at the urging of right-wing parties, thereby weakening the scope of the legislation. These exemptions include, in particular, the continued allowance of certain forms of promotion for cigars and cigarillos, as well as tobacco advertising in newspapers and magazines whose readership consists of at least 98% adults.

The Heartland Institute: A US-Based Ally of the Tobacco and Fossil Fuel Industries

The Heartland Institute, a conservative American *think tank*, has a long history of challenging climate science a stance it maintains today. In particular, the institute organised the *America First Energy Conference*, which sought to influence the Trump administration’s policies in favour of fossil fuel development. This event aimed to promote the granting of new drilling permits and the expansion of oil, gas, and coal extraction, while challenging the scientific consensus on the causes and consequences of climate change²⁷.

In addition to its efforts to cast doubt on climate science, the Heartland Institute also maintains longstanding ties to the tobacco industry. Funding of the institute by tobacco companies dates back at least to the 1990s. In 1999, its president, Joseph Bast, sent a letter to Philip Morris International requesting an increase in the company’s financial support. In the letter, he highlighted the role played by the Heartland Institute in defending the interests of the tobacco industry:

“Heartland has devoted considerable attention to defending tobacco (and other industries) from what I view as being an unjust campaign of public demonization and legal harassment. We’re an important voice defending smokers and their freedom to use a still-legal product.”²⁸



PROMOTING FALSE SOLUTIONS

To delay or prevent the adoption of regulations that might limit their activities, the fossil fuel and tobacco industries regularly promote various solutions presented as alternatives to government intervention. Often ineffective or insufficient given the scale of the problems at hand, if not outright counterproductive^{29,30}, these initiatives nevertheless aim to create the impression that these industries take the situation seriously and are actively contributing to resolving it.

This strategy is particularly evident in the use of “technosolutionism.” According to this logic, there is no need to regulate industrial activities since technological innovations alone will be able to solve environmental or public health problems. Technosolutionism thus shifts the focus of the debate while preserving the economic models that are at the root of these problems.

Solutions proposed by the fossil fuel industry to address the climate crisis

Solutions such as biofuels³¹ or carbon capture³² are regularly touted by the fossil fuel industry as a way to divert attention from genuinely effective solutions for reducing CO₂ emissions. However, the fossil fuel industry is regularly accused of misleading the public about the “solutions” it promotes³³.

In 2017, the  Swiss Petroleum Association rejected proposals aimed at reducing dependence on cars:

 In 2019, the Swiss Petroleum Association was renamed “Avenergy Suisse”.

 ***“Radical political restrictions on mobility receive almost no support whatsoever. The greatest opportunity for further reductions in CO₂ emissions from traffic therefore lies in new technologies for internal combustion engines, as well as in biofuels, hybrid, electric, and hydrogen-powered systems. And perhaps in digitalisation.”³⁴***

 Quote in original language: « Les limitations politiques radicales de la mobilité n'obtiennent en tout cas presque aucun soutien. La plus grande chance pour une réduction supplémentaire des émissions de CO₂ émises par le trafic réside, de ce fait, dans de nouvelles technologies pour les moteurs thermiques, mais aussi dans les biocarburants, les systèmes hybrides, électriques ou alimentés à l'hydrogène. Et peut-être dans la numérisation. »

These solutions are generally ineffective and primarily serve to divert attention from the main problem³⁵. Regarding carbon capture, for example, even if the technology worked perfectly and was deployed on a large scale, it could account, at best, for only a little more than 2% of global carbon emissions reductions by 2030³³.



Solutions proposed by the tobacco industry to address health problems caused by smoking

For the past two decades, multinational tobacco companies have been promoting a narrative centred on their “transformation”³⁶⁻³⁸ by highlighting so-called “reduced-risk” products. These products primarily include e-cigarettes, heated tobacco products, and nicotine pouches. Their stated goal? To reduce smoking and related diseases by offering smokers “healthier” alternatives.

This narrative helps to obscure other essential approaches in the fight against smoking, particularly reducing demand and reducing supply. It also aims to divide the public health community by creating confusion about the order in which interventions should be prioritised.

The objective of multinational tobacco companies is to maintain and increase the number of consumers of their products, regardless of the product type, in order to create a mass market for tobacco and nicotine addiction. Yet there is a fundamental and irreconcilable conflict between the tobacco industry’s goal (to maximise profits) and the objective of public health policy on tobacco use: to reduce the number of people who smoke or begin to use nicotine and, for those who are unable to quit, to limit the harms associated with consumption.

The University of Zurich at the Service of the Tobacco Industry... and the Automotive Industry

In 2025, the Faculty of Economics at the University of Zurich (UZH) established the Center for the Future of Personal Mobility, funded by the car dealership group Emil Frey. This centre aims to study the future of individual mobility, excluding public transport from the scope of its analysis³⁹.

This partnership echoes an earlier controversial precedent. In 2013, as the tobacco industry sought to prevent the global spread of plain packaging for cigarettes introduced by Australia, UZH signed a research contract with Philip Morris International. The aim was to assess the impact of plain packaging on smoking rates in Australia. Under the direction of Professor



Michael Wolf, two non-peer-reviewed articles concluded that the measure was ineffective.

Despite immediate criticism from the scientific community, the university administration asserted that Philip Morris had exerted no influence beyond providing financial support. However, an appendix to the contract shows that UZH had granted Philip Morris rights incompatible with research independence, seriously compromising academic freedom and scientific integrity. Meanwhile, plain packaging has proven effective and is now in force in 42 countries⁴⁰.



WHAT CAN BE DONE?

The consequences of these manipulation strategies for public health and the environment are considerable. They delay the adoption of effective public policies and contribute to the worsening of health and climate crises. By sowing doubt and spreading misleading information, they also misinform the public and hinder collective responses to the major challenges of our time.

To protect society, it is therefore essential to limit the influence of these industries and reduce their ability to manipulate information and spread disinformation. This requires coordinated action on several levels:

- **Regulate the marketing practices of these industries** ⁴¹⁻⁴⁴.
- **Ensure transparency regarding the actions of lobbyists and parliamentarians** who advocate for the interests of these industries, in order to reduce their influence on policy decisions.
- **End public-private partnerships with these industries**, particularly within universities, where they may create conflicts of interest, and strengthen transparency requirements.
- **Inform the public and policymakers**, counter misinformation, expose the manipulation strategies employed by these industries, and identify and expose the false solutions proposed by these industries.
- **Take legal action** against companies and their executives who have deliberately spread disinformation or concealed essential information of public interest, or who have caused significant harm to health or the environment ⁴⁵⁻⁴⁷.
- **Support research** into influence tactics and the commercial determinants of health.



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Written and reviewed:

Sophie Lonchamp, Hugo Molineaux, Michela Canevascini, Pascal Diethelm, Marthe Solleder, Markus Meury (OxySuisse)

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OxySuisse
Rue Enning 4
CH-1003 Lausanne
info@oxysuisse.ch

