



A guide for the malevolent: a review of Jennifer Jacquet, the playbook: how to deny science, sell lies, and make a killing in the corporate world

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This is a much easier book to ‘blurb’ than to review. In a line, it’s magnificent! It’s an intellectual tour de force! It’s witty and ironic and oh-so-readable. It shows an how an on-going and very successful strategy can undermine scientific evidence and how this is used by corporations to continue doing things that cause a variety of harms to humanity. Understanding the playbook is essential to avoid a ‘ghastly future’ (Bradshaw et al., 2021).

Jacquet is an Associate Professor at New York University in the Department of Environmental Studies and she directs their interdisciplinary program in Experimental Humanities and Social Engagement. Her interdisciplinary research has focused broadly on animals and the environment and her previous book *Is Shame Necessary?* (Jacquet, 2015) focused on the role of shame on driving large-scale, social change.

While Oreskes & Conway (2010) wonderfully showed in *Merchants of Doubt* how some high profile, conservative, free-market scientists were used to undermine the scientific evidence against a number of public health and environmental problems, Jacquet goes much further in unpacking the set of tools that are actually used to undermine science more broadly. Her examples show how these tools and techniques cast doubt and discredit credible sources.

Written in an epistolary style—the book serves as a manual for corporations with malevolent aims—those that desire to maximize profits at the expense of animal, human and planetary health. After all “fiduciary duty obligates the Corporation to dispute scientific knowledge that threatens operations” (p. 7). Her graphically organized ‘Detailed Contents’ tell it all. In ten remarkably interdisciplinary, clearly written, and witty chapters (Denial: A fiduciary duty; The arsenal, Recruiting university

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experts, Strategic communication, Challenge the problem, Challenge causation, Challenge the messenger, Challenge the policy, Outside opportunities, and Near-term threats), Jacquet lays out what's needed for industry to win at the expense of humanity. Indeed, it's exactly what industries have been doing at least since the field of public relations was invented in the 1950s.

Many of her examples are preposterous when taken out of context but it's exactly that which makes them so brilliant. While giving an example of how to say there are bigger causes of a given problem, she writes (p. 114) "Fish farmers say that household pets, not farmed fish, are responsible for the demand for fishmeal (which leads to the overexploitation of farmed fish)." Of course, the rulebook is to blame the consumer (not the corporation) for the problem. But digging down more, fish farming was meant to be a solution to feed people, but farming carnivorous fish creates new problems.

As an academic I found a number of discussions very relevant. Jacquet gives several examples of how policy-averse academics will slow movement and how corporations can support conservative academic groups in locations and in fields where conservatives are under-represented in academia to slow change and slow the acceptance of scientific knowledge.

And, she has numerous examples of strategies that are used on a daily basis. Many were interesting and insightful. An example, she says, is to "Change the scale of the analysis to minimize or eliminate causation" (p. 113) which she illustrates with animal agriculture. She notes that 18% of global greenhouse gas emissions come from livestock, but an industry-funded study focusing on only California and on direct livestock emissions were substantially less. She goes on to show that by doing this and by then changing the topic to carbon dioxide rather than methane, the animal agriculture industry can be seen as addressing the problem while in fact they continue to contribute to it by producing methane—a very potent greenhouse gas.

Jacquet's expertise in fisheries, climate change, and animal agriculture shine through with excellent examples about overfishing and fisheries. Yet the very nature of the book is interdisciplinary and she does a magnificent job talking about smoking, pesticides, and other areas outside her precise expertise. It's therefore notable that she 'tutors' corporations to get established academics to be quoted on topics potentially outside their expertise if they have the 'right' message. I got the sense she was admonishing academics to not stray too far from their expertise.

In some instances Jacquet adopts an inflexible position. For instance, it's clear that her position is that all DDT use is bad (e.g., pp 95ff) without pausing to consider there may be a role for its limited and controlled use to help manage malaria—which kills some half a billion people (mostly children) per year. There is a valid policy debate about the cost/benefit of limited and focused DDT use (for example on bed nets—I acknowledge there is also a debate about the need for insecticide treated bed nets—e.g., Okumo, 2020).

Many environmental issues are not so cut-and-dried, despite the clear-cut and devastating impact that overusing DDT in the years following WWII had on avian populations. GMOs offer another opportunity for a valid debate about benefits to humanity versus a variety of potential costs given the need to create varieties that can prosper in a hotter and drier world. Indeed some research has shown that agricultural

associated greenhouse gas emissions can be reduced by developing new crops (e.g., Kovak et al., 2022). While the lessons from the playbook are clear, there are often valid policy debates that should not be lost, and these debates are best when informed by quality science.

Despite these minor quibbles, I encourage all scientists interested in translating science to action, and those frustrated with why scientific evidence is not the gold standard in policy, to read this highly engaging and compelling book. I certainly recognize that scientific evidence is only one factor in making good policy, but by understanding the playbook used to undermine science, one can better address malevolent actors and hopefully keep scientific evidence as an important tool in developing good public health and environmental policy.

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