



Smoke and Mirrors

The Promotion of Corporate Environmental Legitimacy as
Climate Obstruction

av

Hanna Hallin

Akademisk avhandling

Avhandling för filosofie doktorsexamen i medie- och
kommunikationsvetenskap,
som kommer att försvaras offentligt
fredagen den 24 april 2026 kl. 13.15,
Hörsal F, Örebro universitet

Opponent: professor Andreas Ytterstad
Oslo Metropolitan University
Oslo, Norge

Örebro universitet
Institutionen för humaniora, utbildnings- och
samhällsvetenskap
701 82 ÖREBRO

Abstract

The interconnected crises of climate change, biodiversity loss and chemical pollution constitute nothing less than an existential threat to humanity. Yet the global community's response is manifestly inadequate. Against this backdrop, this dissertation analyses climate obstruction through the notion of corporate environmental legitimization – a relational process that cultivates and maintains the perception that corporations are suitable, willing and capable environmental stewards, even within a structurally unsustainable economic system. Empirically, the dissertation presents a multi-method case study of the Ellen MacArthur Foundation (EMF), a leading advocacy organisation promoting the concept of a circular economy. Combining critical political economy and critical discourse analyses, it examines EMF's funding, networks, governance, policy engagement, promotional practices, discourse and relations to EU circular economy policy. The findings shows that EMF plays a central role in promoting a version of the circular economy that reinforces corporate environmental legitimacy, and that this largely overlaps with the EU's version. Corporate initiatives are framed as meaningful progress within content circulated through EMF's promotional system, where different legitimization strategies interact to reinforce this message. Furthermore, the analysis shows that EMF mobilises the circular economy as a brand, directing public enthusiasm towards corporate “circular” initiatives. The dissertation argues that this constitutes an important mode of climate obstruction: messages that create the impression that adequate solutions are underway function as smoke and mirrors. They foster hope in incremental improvements while potentially crowding out attention to the urgent systemic transformations required to return humanity to a safe operating space.

Keywords: Corporate Environmentalism, Climate Obstruction, Discursive Legitimation, Branded Content, Circular Economy, EU environmental policy