When collaboration becomes co-optation: Citizen Science as Public Relations

Citizen science and its counterpart citizen social science are becoming increasingly established as research tools to address global and societal challenges. However, increased interaction between research and society also presents questions related to justice, power, and inequality. Based on their recent research into the commercial application of citizen science **Sarah Blacker**, **Aya Hirata Kimura**, *and* **Abby Kinchy** *discuss how citizen science can become entangled with commercial interests that often run counter to the aims of research.*

In 2019, Airbnb announced that it would be sending five ordinary people to Antarctica to engage in "citizen science" (CS). The travelers would collect snow samples, which a PhD student at the University of Exeter would analyse for the presence of microplastics.

The Airbnb project is an example of *public relations citizen science* (PRCS). PRCS is a type of citizen science: projects involving ordinary people, and not only trained scientists, in scientific investigation. PRCS often appears as an educational initiative that encourages the curiosity of regular citizens. It seemingly provides an opportunity for the public to gain agency as active participants in scientific research.

But PRCS primarily benefits capitalist firms, by improving their public image and deflecting accusations of causing harm. Public relations citizen science uses public participation–and collaborations with credible scientists–to defend companies against legitimate environmental critiques.

We see public relations citizen science projects underway in several places, including the petroleum and biotechnology industries. The case of Antarctic tourism reveals the ambiguous social implications of these practices. For the cruise industry, the value of PRCS is not simply good advertising, nor to gather data to directly contradict environmental criticism. Working to counter growing criticism of the environmental impacts of tourism, the cruise industry transforms tourism into an activity that is framed as helping scientists preserve the fragile ecosystem of the Antarctic. Professional scientists and research institutions benefit from these partnerships, at a time when other sources of support for research are scarce.

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Antarctic cruise companies have been facing growing criticism of the environmental harm they cause, so they have an interest in presenting themselves as not only environmentally responsible, but also actively promoting environmental science and conservation. Solid waste, waste water discharge, air pollution, the introduction of non-native species, and oil spills are among the problems caused by these cruise ships—causing harm to native species such as penguins.

In citizen science projects run by the cruise industry, wealthy tourists are constructed as "ambassadors" for nature rather than consumers of environmentally destructive tours. One cruise company, for example, markets itself as a sustainable cruise line and uses citizen science as part of their branding. The Hurtigruten catalogue features "Science Centers" along with other amenities such as "three restaurants and a gym, pool, and hot tub." They call on potential citizen scientists to: "Join us as we glide into pristine wilderness on ships that will set a new standard for green expedition cruising." Citizen scientists collect data on plankton, whales, or seabirds.

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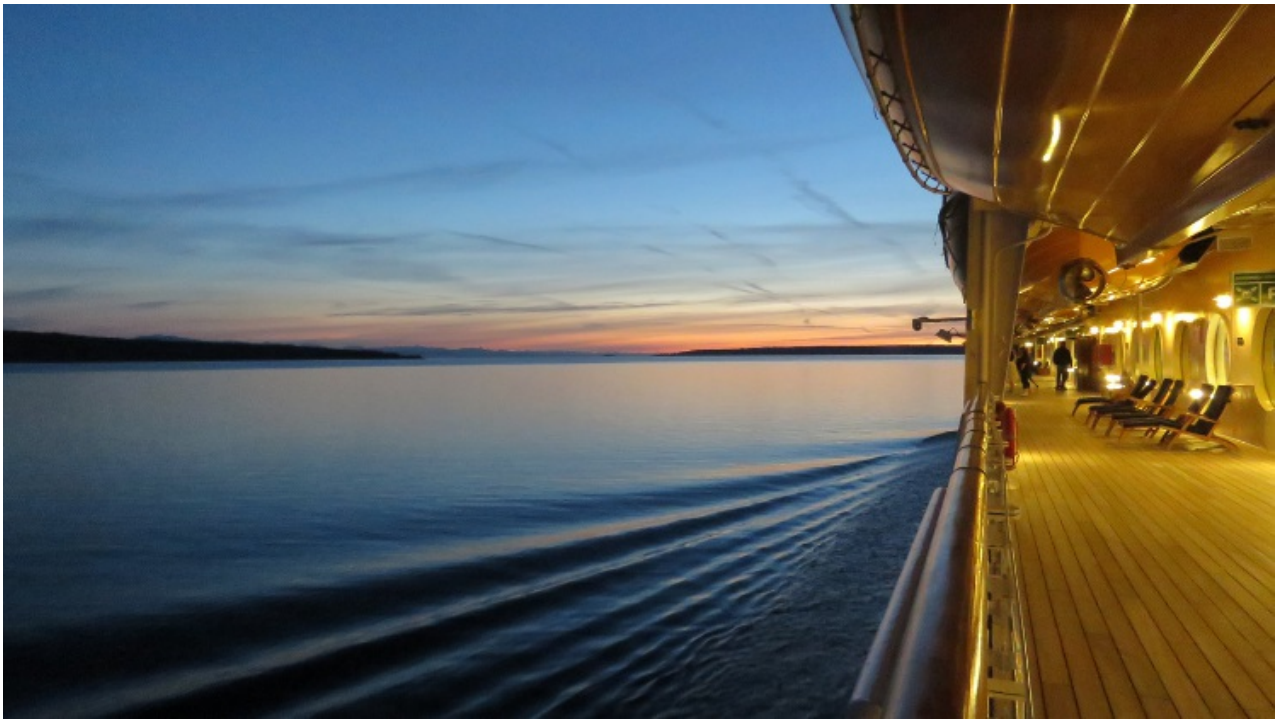

Companies wishing to demonstrate corporate social responsibility often co-opt the discourse of their critics. In the mining industry, for example, companies have been known to use participatory monitoring programs to defuse protests. The companies can point to the monitoring programs as a way to claim that they are being responsible. At the same time, the design of these monitoring projects can steer the volunteer monitors to look at pollution issues with particular tools and viewpoints that end up favouring the polluting companies.

However, in the case of Antarctic cruises, we did not find evidence that cruise passengers were tasked with monitoring the pollution caused by the cruise itself. Instead, they were positioned as helpers to professional scientists employed by universities and research institutes who conduct research during the cruise. Couched as "responsible tourism," cruise passengers can feel as though their luxury vacation is contributing to vital research for the protection of the environment that they are exploring.

There are a number of different reasons why academic scientists might choose to participate in PRCS. In a context of scarce public funding for environmental science, PRCS projects can help scientists gain access to remote research sites and data that is labor-intensive to collect. Furthermore, some environmental scientists believe that citizen science—even when serving corporate interests—is a viable way to motivate public action to protect the environment. They argue that CS projects can produce powerful advocates for the environmental issues they care about. Another likely benefit is the scientists' ability to claim "broader impacts" on grant proposals, which is now a regular requirement of funding agencies, particularly if CS is conceived as public outreach. Such projects can also attract media coverage and create a positive image of the scientific research team.

The fact that public relations citizen science produces value for the cruise industry *and* for academic scientists—for entirely different reasons—makes the analysis of PRCS quite complex. We expect to see more PRCS projects in the future as citizen science gains greater visibility and support among scientists and policymakers. Because the PR effects of citizen science are not as overt as many other examples of green marketing—and because the idea of citizen science has a lot of public appeal—it is especially important that these emerging practices receive critical scrutiny and a nuanced response.

Participatory science has a track record of addressing not only data gaps but also environmental injustice by amplifying the voices of people affected by environmental contamination. It can also help to advance scientific research with broad public benefit. But without critical analysis, PRCS risks fostering cynical attitudes to the whole genre of participatory science.

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To avoid this fate, we suggest several questions to ask about corporate-sponsored citizen science projects: Does the project acknowledge the stakes of the environmental problem? Does the project originate from or at least work with the people whose lives are most impacted by the environmental problem? Does the project address the fundamental sources of the environmental problem? Does the project contextualise the data within the political and economic drivers for the environmental problem? Public participation in science can have profound social benefits, and we must not allow it to be co-opted by the world's polluters.

This post draws on the authors' co-authored article, "When Citizen Science is Public Relations," published in Social Studies of Science.

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