

Working for the Power Down

by Robert Newman for the Guardian Green Guide
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It's one thing to live a low-impact personal life, but quite another to do so at work. Most people's biggest carbon emissions come when they are at work, but these are the hardest to cap because here we have less power.

So in my personal life it's fairly simple. I never fly short-haul (i.e. within Europe), don't own a car, only buy stuff second-hand - except underwear, get my electricity through Good Energy, try never to use supermarkets but only local shops, I am a meat-eater but try only to eat grass-fed, my website has a solar-powered web-host, and through ceaseless carping I have converted a dozen very close, but ecologically irresponsible friends into no friends at all.

But it is not so straightforward in the world of work.

It was my intention to make the world's first ever carbon-neutral television programme when I recorded "Robert Newman's History Of Oil" for More4 last year. "Will there be travelogue?" the executive producer asked me.

'No,' I said, 'Apart from all the carbon emissions, what's the point of sending me halfway round the world to stand outside an oil-refinery in Houston just to deliver two paragraphs to camera? Why not fax the script to the Mexican guy who sells burgers outside the refinery gates and have him read out the script while his mate holds a camcorder?'

And that's pretty much what we did. The plan was to have a global network of carbon-neutral correspondents or 'camcordistas'. And they didn't even have to own or know someone who owned a camcorder. There's a website where you can click on CCTV cameras by street corners and parking lots from Detroit to Dhaka. Our carbon neutral correspondents could stand in front of one of these either speaking their lines into a mobile phone, or holding up a card on which they had copied out the next gag. The added advantage of this idea is that unlike a flying-vistor, the local might actually know something about the place, although this may mean ceding authorial control here and there. Our carbon-neutral Iraqi correspondent, for example, travelled by bus (duly noting down that the trip was 14 kilometres and the bus a diesel one) before delivering lines I had written about the strategic importance of oil in 1918 while he stood in the British First World War Cemetery. This done he then extemporized: "Of course, the real reason Mr Newman does not want to come to Baghdad has nothing to do with flying but is all because he is shitting in his pants."

An expression of autonomy perhaps. But I felt it detracted from my central thesis. And so his observation did not make the final cut. Upon investigation I found that by the time I watched the reel, the production company had already sent him payment to Iraq, which seems to me to have been a little previous given the show's budgetary pressures.

We e-mailed bits of script to Baghdad, Athens, Wall Street, Caracas, the Niger Delta, but it so turned out we didn't use any of our network of carbon-neutral correspondents in the final broadcast. The idea didn't work (but it will work next time) because the global network of "camcordistas" didn't have a identity, and so they footage they sent back looked like an location-piece from most any news show or documentary. What I should have done is posted each a costume that would always be the same whoever the "camcordista" and whatever the continent. Or they should have all been catching a carrier pigeon or sitting astride a zebra, or in some visual way integrated into one show.

Filmed in the Hoxton Music Hall, the stand-up part of "History Of Oil" was a chance to implement another carbon-neutral strategy. Some of the stage-lighting was powered by two cyclists in the style of Rinky Dink's famous pedal-powered sound systems.

When the cyclists tired, members of the audience took over. For the audience, this meant a sense of involvement in the show. For me, watching them work up a sweat assuaged my resentment that they had all got in for free. I even took a turn myself.

The drawback was that the whirring sound of the fixed-wheel against the dynamo powering the micro-generator was quite loud. Next time, with the simple expedient of a longer cable, however, the cyclists could be in the next room and the noise won't be a problem. (I'm the pioneer, I'm Johnny Appleseed. Learn from me, follow me.)

The other carbon-tastic part of my work is touring. Some artists like the Rolling Stones and KT Tunstall have employed the Carbon Neutral Company (formerly Future Forests) to make their tours and albums "carbon-neutral". But this leaves me with many doubts and many questions. How tough and Elliot Ness are the Carbon Neutral Company around the Stones and the Tunstall? Do they swoop unannounced? Do they shake them down? And who's doing the sums? Who says it's carbon neutral? Where's the sanctions, where's the fines? Does carbon neutral include all the merchandise, all the stadium's electricity, all the paper cups, all the people driving cars to the gigs, all the millions of CDs and DVDs pressed and freighted from Zhengzhou Province or Beleuchistan or Solihull to all the brightly-burning high street megastores?

And besides, offset forests are very like those which Amazonian U'wa Indians call 'Devil's Orchards': single-species stands of trees with no understorey or biodiversity. Not somewhere you'd want to go.

In 2004 I did a 26-city tour of the United States and Canada. I travelled mostly by train, including one non-stop 36 hour train ride from Minneapolis to Portland, Oregon. (Knowing I would have to do that ride led to my giving up smoking before the US trip - a hidden bonus). I was able to tour very cheaply because I had an Amtrak one-month pass which let me go on any train for about \$400 all in. It made the journey more of a journey than a plane trip is, and I actually met some people who weren't business executives. Most of them members of the Rolling Stones, as it turned out.

"Truly this is the Anthropocene era," Ronnie Wood told me when our train pulled out of Kalamazoo, "for each

year humans burn about 1 million years' worth of long-past

plant growth in the form of fossil fuels.'

'You're having a laugh', said Mick.

'Straight up,' said Ronnie.

But, climate-criminal that I am, I did fly a couple of times rather than spend five hours overnight in a Mid-West bus stop or take 3 days to get to New Orleans, although luckily that doesn't seem to have had any effect on the place. Even so I decided not to avail myself of British Airways' hook-up with Climate Care, which has created a scheme where the passenger pays money to offset the flight's carbon emissions. First of all, what you are paying for is not to offset emissions but to offset the danger of regulation and full-cost accounting being imposed on BA. Secondly, there is not enough money in the world to offset emissions from flying. Combine all the treasuries and gold reserves and assets and gilt-edged security bonds of every country in the world into one big lump sum and you are still not even close. How much, for example, will it cost to put Bangladesh on stilts? What day-rate were you thinking of paying workers to carry ice and snow to the top of Kilimanjaro? How many laboratories with how many tenured research fellows before we fine-tune the gamma-ray that's going to zap the ice-crystal clouds in the upper troposphere caused by vapour trails?

Fossil fuels have to stay in the ground. Carbon offset schemes flatter the fallacy that we can continue pretty much as we are. That we cannot is the central fact that I hope audiences will take from my shows when I finally get to the venue.

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