

When Telling “Both Sides” Of a Story Only Legitimizes the Bad Actors

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I've been thinking a lot about Burn Wild recently, a podcast. I know I usually write about technology but I can't stop thinking about this podcast. Not because I loved it, but I found it so infuriating.

I wanted to love this podcast, I really did. I love most podcasts by the BBC, especially their short 1 season long podcasts that do a deep dive into various topics. Their podcast on One Taste? Phenomenal. Missing Cryptoqueen (which is now into a second season but you should really think of it as one podcast)- extremely addictive.

Burn Wild had all of the makings of a great podcast and to some, it is. It's getting pretty good reviews that point out the creator, Leah Sottile, has tracked the far right before, so her covering the "far left" makes sense.

The goal of Burn Wild is to dig into the E.L.F or the Earth Liberation Front movement, the "Green Scare" and different members of ELF who went on the run, who were jailed and one, Joseph Dibee, who was eventually caught. The podcast focuses a great deal on Dibee, his life, his escape from the US, his eventual capture, and in the final episode, how an Oregon judge gave him a lighter sentence and allowed for time served- meaning, he wouldn't go back to jail. Dibee had been caught in 2018 in Cuba and held in custody, prison or under house arrest from then until his trial in 2022.

The podcast, as Vulture highlights, aims to point out "in the face of the global climate crisis, which actions go too far — and which are rational endpoints?" But all it ends up doing is creating a false dichotomy between environmental activism and terrorism, without deeply exploring enough why that's a false and wrong dichotomy.

Some Quick Background

So the majority of this story should be centered around what's known as the "Green Scare" and how the FBI labeled environmental activists as domestic terrorists in the late 1990s and early 2000s, which dramatically shutdown the burgeoning environmental activism space in the U.S. Carrying a 'terrorism' charge changes how a person is prosecuted— and as the podcast explores, while ELF did engage in massive amounts of damage and arson, no person or animal was ever harmed or killed. Subsequently, different ELF members, like Daniel McGowan, were investigated, intimidated and eventually sentenced to prison. McGowan was sentenced in 2005 with "15 counts of arson, property destruction and conspiracy, all related to two actions in Oregon in 2000, claimed by the Earth Liberation Front (ELF). On June 4, 2007, McGowan was sentenced to seven years in federal prison and ordered to pay \$1.9 million in restitution. He served part of his time in a super secret prison unit called the Communication Management Unit, or CMU." Other activists, like Chelsea Gerlach were also interviewed by Burn Wild; she was sentenced to nine years in prison.

The FBI's Role in Environmental Terrorism

The podcast doesn't really do what it sets out to do, which is to create a compelling argument around how far (or not far) activism should go, and relatedly, look at the very real structures around how and why certain crimes are prosecuted, perused and given tougher sentences than others. The majority of the podcast is spent giving some background on the people involved with ELF and an inordinate amount of air time

on the FBI. To be fair, part of Burn Wild does attempt to interrogate this decision by the FBI as to why environmentalists were labeled ‘domestic terrorists’ but white supremacists are not — but little pushback is offered by Sottile in her recorded conversations with the FBI. Often, she leaves rhetorical questions hanging in the air, by restating this fact: ELF never killed anyone, so why are they charged as terrorists?

And the answer is simply: property damage.

But this answer could have been much more richly explored but Sottile falls short— by repeatedly exploring ‘can activism go too far’ but not exploring enough— can law enforcement go too far, and what are all of the harms of over-policing in this space?

In the first episode, it’s emphasized a few times by Sottile herself, and then her interviewees, why she is the best person (in one interviewee’s words) to do this podcast. She has been reporting on the far right and extremists for quite a few years. If anything, she should have the expertise to tell this story fairly. Again, this point is made repeatedly in the first episode. The entire run of the podcast clocks in at 9 episodes, which they call 8 and half, as the last episode (episode 8.5 by the BBC, episode 9 to me) is more of an epilogue on Dabee’s hearing, which ties up all the podcast’s poetic loose strings so it’s doubtful there will be a second season.

However, it’s finally in episode 6 that they finally mention the Dakota Pipeline, and we get this more radical, and honest argument. So much of this podcast was framed that ELF didn’t kill anyone, but didn’t take the time to frame the other side’s harm, which is that Indigenous people who are protecting their lands are killed by police and those in power. With so much airtime hand-wringing about the supposed harms of the ELF, why wasn’t similar and subsequent airtime given to covering the intimidation by the FBI, the death of Indigenous peoples over countless decades and centuries who have been striving to protect their land from pollution, deforestation and destruction? This is part of the crux of the podcast’s main argument, or so it feels, so why wait until episode six to say that? A line from this episode is actually used repeatedly in the trailer, making it’s delay all the more upsetting. Subsequently, episode 7 is structured around Gerlach meeting the FBI agent who investigated her, and that agent ends up admitting that perhaps the pursuit of ELF and Gerlach was political and Gerlach’s sentence was too long, that ELF should not be terrorists. Why is this point made in the second to last episode? It felt like the reporters want for us, the audience, to deeply reflect on why ELF was called terrorists- and that they shouldn’t have, but it comes too too late in the series to make that point.

Instead, this podcast feels very pre 2016 with its repeated focus on ‘both sides’ storytelling, by featuring specific FBI agents involved with the cases and ELF members. Gerlach even meets the FBI agent who investigated her, and forgives her on air, with that conversation narrated by Sottile, heavily featuring the phrases of communication breakdown, and why can’t people, across the political spectrum, talk anymore?

The podcast episodes repeatedly talk about polarization that is framed in a “why can’t we get a long way” which feels designed to trigger this false neoliberal belief of with enough communication and understanding that we could all get along. Most of

this is framed as though we are not talking about life or death urgencies, but as though we can't agree on dinner, which only adds to the very '2016' vibe of the podcast.

Given how long the podcast waited to share necessarily salient points so late in the episodes doesn't feel responsible nor does it do anything to further their repeated point → "in the face of the global climate crisis, which actions go too far — and which are rational endpoints?" This only heightens the feeling that this podcast was made in an era of politics that doesn't exist anymore. It's not 2016, it's 2022, and the activists and community behind the Dakota Pipeline are nowhere close to the Kyle Rittenhouses of the world, and to frame 8 and half (9! It's 9 episodes BBC!) is so deeply irresponsible, it was shocking to have had the question of "are the ELF terrorists or not" keep being asked. Activism isn't a horseshoe pendulum and the "extreme" left isn't the same as the extreme right because we can't compare the ELF to January 6 or the Proud Boys. Engaging in actions like burning down a building where no one was killed to protest climate change (the left) is very different from storming the capital to overturn the democratic ousting of a would-be autocrat or driving a car into a crowd that kills people (the right). And to view both of these actions under the lens solely of is it legal or not is a further disingenuous argument that purposely links these very different groups and their actions to each other. One side is fighting for the preservation of the environment, and the other is fighting for white supremacy. We cannot compare them as related at all.

If I were to give this a generous read, I would say this should have been a three episode podcast, then those rhetorical framings, and Sottile's soft questioning of the FBI would have come across more as of the "challenges" the podcast clearly thinks they are. But with so much airtime filled with filler dressed up as an 'across the aisle' meeting of the minds, it weakens the podcast significantly. If anything, the final 'half episode' is the best, but it's one that feels least editorialized, and much more about what's at stake. The judge in the last episode says that as much- that the activists were mistreated, and that with what Dibebe was concerned with of environmental preservation, so is much of the world now. We are on a pathway we can't completely turn away from- and the world is burning around us. Any actions that can help mitigate the harms of climate change must be seen for what they are- current, necessary urgencies. It's a shame this podcast couldn't make that simple point.

The Ted K Archive

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