

NPR Stonewalls Inquiries on Corporate Underwriting -
An Account of My Two Year Correspondence with the NPR Ombudsman
by Jim Weiss September, 2013

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As many anti-fracking activists are aware, NPR has accepted underwriting funds from the American Natural Gas Alliance (ANGA) for several years. In exchange, NPR frequently airs 10-second sponsor ads promoting the development of natural gas through benign sounding, misleading messages.

Local NPR affiliate stations have received many complaints from listeners about this arrangement but these stations have little say about the practices of the national organization.

I undertook an inquiry into this matter with the NPR Ombudsman starting in March 2011. Rather than simply criticize NPR for accepting funding from ANGA, I attempted to ascertain by what process NPR selects organizations as sponsors. In other words, I tried to find an answer to the question - Does NPR care where it's money comes from?

To make a long story short, I have concluded that the answer is No. This is not based on information provided to me by NPR but rather their steadfast refusal to divulge anything. The response I received repeatedly (almost mantra-like) was The Firewall - NPR's policy that underwriters have absolutely no influence on news content or reporting - their guarantee of journalistic integrity and objectivity.

Whether NPR's coverage of gas drilling is objective is certainly debatable. But their purported objectivity was irrelevant to my inquiry. No matter how many times I pointed out that The Firewall had nothing to do with the process or criteria they use to choose sponsors, that was their only response.

To be sure, the staff at the NPR Ombudsman office were very accessible and willing to engage my inquiries. After some cordial but fruitless dialogue, they suggested I direct my inquiry to John King, Operations Manager for Corporate Sponsorship. Mr. King never responded to my email inquiries, or a phone message.

My correspondence with NPR went on, intermittently, for almost two years, sometimes with months between exchanges. The person I communicated with most often was Lori Grisham. Finally, in December 2012, I decided to speak by phone with Ms. Grisham in an effort to try to clarify my intent. (Did they really not understand what I was seeking? - hard to believe.) She suggested I write down all my concerns and she would forward them to the appropriate NPR staff.

I set about writing an analysis NPR's underwriting practices, in the course of which I read everything available on the NPR website pertinent to the issue including: NPR Underwriting Guidelines (these are guidelines for sponsors, not NPR staff), NPR Ethics Handbook, NPR Mission Statement, and numerous posts on the Ombudsman's blog about corporate sponsorship and conflict of interest. My analysis turned out to be 8 pages and was divided it into six sections:

1. Does NPR care where its money comes from?
2. Is the firewall relevant to my inquiry?
3. Does NPR have a corporate code of ethics?
4. Is ANGA compatible with the NPR mission?
5. Is NPR using the firewall as a convenient excuse?
6. Conclusion

The original was addressed directly to Ms. Grisham, with whom I had been communicating for over a year, which explains a somewhat less formal tone in references to her or her associates. What follows on the next pages are edited excerpts of the analysis. It might get a little confusing because [quotes from earlier emails \(in purple\)](#) or [quotes from NPR documents \(in red\)](#) were inserted into the December 2012 text as they were relevant to the discussion. In places where I am adding current comment or explanatory notes I am writing them [*in italics*].

(Caution! It's 8 pages long with lots of commentary and supporting references.)

[From the Dec. 2012 analysis sent to Ms. Grisham]

1. Does NPR care where its money comes from?

Here are three hypothetical sponsoring announcements I have made up. In each case I left out the hypothetical underwriter temporarily.

“Support for NPR comes from NPR member stations and.....:

.....?..... working to ensure that American citizens and their families can enjoy personal security in the home, at work, and in the public arena. Find us atorg”

.....?..... supplying domestic energy for today and developing new resources for tomorrow while working to protect the environment. Visit us atcom”

.....?..... who provide minerals, fibers, fertilizers, paper and many other products of modern industry to further the high standard of living Americans enjoy. More atcom”

The above missing “sponsors” are: National Rifle Association; BP; Koch Industries

Clearly, these messages have some “spin” and don’t fully reflect an accurate image of the hypothetical sponsor. But they do seem to fit within your requirements as spelled the NPR Underwriting Guidelines. Accordingly, it seems there would be no problem in accepting sponsorship dollars from the NRA, BP, or Koch Brothers (unlikely as an offer may be). But I have to ask, is there ever a situation where somebody at NPR (John King? [*Operations Manager for Corporate Sponsorship*]) gets a twinge of doubt about accepting money from an organization that advocates destructive or harmful practices? There don’t seem to be any criteria which look at the ethical practices of a proposed sponsor; only whether or not they meet The Guidelines. [*These can be viewed at <http://www.npr.org/blogs/ombudsman/NPR%20Underwriting%20Credit%20Guidelines.pdf>.*]

[At this point in the analysis I had sent to Ms. Grisham I inserted the initial email inquiry I sent to the Ombudsman about ANGA sponsorship as follows:]

March 6, 2011

To NPR:

I was unpleasantly surprised to hear that the American Natural Gas Alliance has been allowed to underwrite radio broadcasts on NPR, including “Morning Edition” and “Wait, Wait, Don’t Tell Me.”

No doubt you are aware of the extensive adverse environmental impact shale gas extraction by high volume, slick water, horizontal drilling hydrofracturing is having in Pennsylvania and other states. (The New York Times has recently published a three part series on the issue.)

As a long time member of my local NPR station (WSKG), I have appreciated the high quality news and other programming you offer, and I realize the necessity for non-profit broadcasting to solicit funding from underwriters.

But the question must be asked: how low will NPR stoop with regard to a company’s harm to the planet before it says No.

ANGA is a propaganda machine that distorts the truth about shale gas extraction. (The claim that natural gas emits less CO₂ than coal is only true for actual combustion of the fuel; when the entire life cycle of gas production is factored in the claim is no longer valid. The many other distortions perpetrated by ANGA cannot be addressed in this limited space.)

So NPR, if ANGA is OK, how about BP? Or how about Koch brothers’ industries, profits from which are used to sabotage public understanding of global warming? Will you accept their money? How low will you go?

Jim Weiss
member WSKG

[In their response to my inquiry they elaborated about underwriting and The Firewall but said nothing about selection criteria. I did not include the text of their email at this point in my analysis document, although I did quote from it later on. Now back to my Dec 2012 analysis, Part 2.]

2. Is the firewall relevant to my inquiry?

As you [*Lori Grisham*] can see, I did not raise any issues about the objectivity of NPR news with respect to gas drilling. My concern was with the much larger issue of the environmental harm, particularly on the global scale, that ANGA generates.

I have had several email and phone exchanges with the ombudsman's office over the past 20 months and every time my inquiry has been met with the same response - a statement about the "firewall" between sponsorship and news/editorial content. I have also read the many posts by Alicia Shepard [*the former NPR Ombudsman*] about the firewall. But that was not the point of my inquiry in March 2011, and is not today. My inquiry remains, how harmful must a company have to be in order for NPR to reject its sponsorship? Is there even a vehicle for such a determination to be made? This is not a question about funding and journalistic integrity. It's about funding and corporate ethics.

3. Does NPR have a corporate code of ethics?

The only mention in my ongoing correspondence with NPR about funding germane to my line of inquiry was in a 4/11/11 email from you [*Lori Grisham*] with the following:

"Alicia Shepard spoke to John King, the operations manager for corporate sponsorship, about this issue. He said NPR has no list of sources from which funding will not be accepted."

[This was after several unsuccessful attempts on my part to communicate directly with Mr. King.]

Hmm..., that almost sounds like an answer to "how low can you go". But then again, I wasn't really looking for a list. I wanted to know if there was a decision-making process with criteria about whether or not a potential sponsor is compatible with NPR.

I have also read, at Erin's [*another staff person at the Ombudsman office*] suggestion, the Ethics Handbook. [*The Ethics Handbook can be found at <http://ethics.npr.org/>.*] This document, while excellent, again does not really address my inquiry. It focuses almost exclusively on the firewall between corporate funding and journalistic integrity. The only reference possibly germane to my inquiry states (p 35-36):

"Part of the job of these [sponsorship and development] departments is making our funders aware that we will be editorially blind to their support – that we'll conduct our journalism with no favor or slight to them or their interests. They also vet potential supporters to make sure their interests don't present an actual or apparent conflict with our mission." [*emphasis added*]

4. Is ANGA compatible with the NPR mission?

Turning my attention then to the NPR Mission Statement (<http://www.npr.org/about/aboutnpr/mission.html>) I quote:

"The mission of NPR is to create a more informed public - one challenged and invigorated by a deeper understanding and appreciation of events, ideas and cultures. To accomplish our mission, we produce, acquire, and distribute programming that meets the highest standards of public service in journalism...."

But doesn't this mission statement direct itself only to the journalism function of NPR, (as does the Ethics Handbook)? But what about the corporate mission - the core principles of NPR as an organization, apart from its journalism? Is there one? Apparently not. Presumably, then, these declarations of principle (including the firewall) are intended to apply to NPR in its entirety - both its product and practice.

In that case I would argue that accepting sponsorship dollars and broadcasting superficial and misleading messages from an organization (ANGA) that deliberately obfuscates the truth about shale gas technology, and more importantly about climate change, is not compatible with the NPR mission of creating "a more informed public" or providing "the highest standards of public service.." How diligently has NPR researched the diverse practices of ANGA and the industry it represents?

Here are just three examples of ANGA at work.

1. ANGA promotes natural gas as the clean burning fuel and therefore contributes less to global warming. As I stated in the email (3/6/11) quoted above, this claim ignores the contribution of methane itself, not just CO₂. This was first analyzed in a scientific paper by Cornell professor Robert Howarth. In response ANGA has launched a campaign to discredit Howarth. See for example <http://www.boulderweekly.com/article-9614-fracking-and-academic-freedom-ii.html>. ANGA has even gone so far as to put a paid ad at the top of the Google page that links to their website (<http://www.anga.us/howarth>) whenever “Robert Howarth Cornell University” is entered into the Google search window. [*Note: This paid ad no longer appears.*]

While there is a scientific debate about the contribution of methane from shale gas extraction to climate change (several more papers since Howarth have supported his analysis), scientific debate is (or should be) simply that. It should not be a campaign to besmirch the professional credibility of another scientist.

Incidentally, as you must know, NPR recently reported that the NYS Attorney General announced plans to sue the EPA over its failure to include methane pollution in recently drafted regulations on GHG emissions from gas drilling (<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=167005442>). [*This page no longer comes up.*]

With respect to the issue of scientific debate, the fossil fuel industry has highlighted several “impartial” university studies that claim to show there is no environmental harm from hydrofracking. Over the past year three of those reports have been withdrawn by the universities (Penn State, SUNY Buffalo, and U. of Texas) because industry funding and ties to the authors were concealed. In at least one case (SUNY Buffalo) the “institute” established under the university’s imprimatur was subsequently closed with much embarrassment. Incidentally, ANGA was approached for funding by the UT “Energy Institute” but that relationship fell apart because ANGA wanted more editorial control over the product (<http://mobile.bloomberg.com/news/2012-12-06/texas-energy-institute-head-quits-amid-fracking-study-conflicts.html?cmpid=yhoo>, and personal communication with Mark Drajem, author of the Bloomberg article.) Personally, I don’t think it would have made much difference if ANGA was involved. The whole process was hopelessly contaminated - certainly not created to better inform the public.

2. FracFocus. The gas industry has generated much attention with a new initiative called FracFocus. This website is supposed to list the chemicals that are injected into a

well when it is drilled or fracked. However, there is a rather large loophole which ANGA fails to identify. A large percentage of those chemicals do not get listed because they are “proprietary”. Also, many chemicals are mixtures under trade names and the ingredients are not disclosed. Does this create a more informed public?

3. The ANGA website claims that gas drilling is regulated under federal environmental laws including the Clean Water Act, Clean Air Act, etc. (<http://www.anga.us/issues--policy/safe--responsible-development/hydraulic-fracturing-101>). In fact, only very limited aspects of the process are regulated under these laws.. Most of it has been exempted by the so-called Halliburton loophole amended to the 2005 federal energy act. Does this create a more informed public?

5. Is NPR using the firewall as a convenient excuse?

I'm sure we can agree that citing an extended catalogue of ANGA practices would not serve much purpose here. Let me close by referring you [*Lori Grisham*] to a recent article, “A Convenient Excuse” (<http://thephoenix.com/Boston/news/146647-convenient-excuse/>), by Wen Stephenson, former senior editor of NPR's *On Point* and also a former editor at the Boston Globe, PBS Frontline, and The Atlantic.

This article is essentially an open letter to the media challenging the ethics of journalistic neutrality when confronted with the overriding issue facing human civilization (and all life). The issue is obviously climate change.

I have taken a few quotes from Stephenson's article:

“I found it increasingly difficult to look into my children's eyes.”

“In the face of this situation — as much as it pains me to say this — you are failing. Your so-called "objectivity," your bloodless impartiality, are nothing but a convenient excuse for what amounts to an inexcusable failure to tell the most urgent truth we've ever faced.”

“I also know that you take your responsibility as journalists, as public servants, seriously. Why is it, then, that you are so utterly failing on this all-important topic? I could be wrong, but I think I understand. I'm afraid it has to do with self-image and self-censorship.

Nothing is more important to me as a journalist than my independence. Yes, I'm still a journalist. And I'm as independent as I've ever been — maybe, if you can imagine this, even more so. Because leaving behind my mainstream journalism career has freed me to speak and write about climate and politics in ways that were virtually impossible inside the MSM bubble, where I had to worry about perceptions, and about keeping my job, and whether I'd be seen by my peers and superiors as an advocate. God forbid."

In short, I'm freed of an insidious form of self-censorship, based on a deeply misguided self-image all too common among mainstream media types, in which journalists, including "serious" opinion journalists, are supposed to remain detached and above the fray — not to say cynically aloof and perpetually bemused — in order to be taken seriously. Once you've become an advocate, once you've taken an unambiguous moral stand, so the thinking goes, your intellectual honesty is compromised.

Well, I'm sorry, but that's just bullshit.

When I became a journalist, I didn't check my conscience, my citizenship, or my humanity at the door. Nor, when I became an advocate and activist, did I sacrifice my intellectual honesty. If anything, I salvaged it.

It's time to end the self-censorship and get over the idea that journalists are somehow above the fray. You're not above the fray. If you're a human being, you're in the fray whether you like it or not — because on this one, we really are all in it together. And by downplaying or ignoring the severity of the climate crisis — or by simply failing to understand it — you're abdicating your responsibility to your fellow human beings.

What it all comes down to, then, is this: *Which side are you on?*"

"Why are you a journalist? How do you get out of bed in the morning and look at yourself in the mirror? How do you look your own children or grandchildren — any children — in the eyes?"

6. Conclusion

I began this analysis with the question: does NPR's care where its money comes from? Wen Stephenson might phrase it: does journalistic honesty equate with intellectual honesty? [*Perhaps I should have instead used "moral integrity".*]

If the US (or other countries) embark on this new wave of “extreme energy extraction”, be it tar sands, shale gas, shale oil, etc., the world is committed to decades of increasing fossil fuel dependence that essentially dooms the planet. By accepting corporate funding from ANGA, and broadcasting their benign sounding 10 second announcements several times a day for months (years?) NPR is also broadcasting its implicit approval of the carbon future. This is a fundamentally immoral policy. NPR’s firewall does not just protect journalistic independence; it is a stonewall behind which NPR is hiding to avoid moral accountability.

A clearly articulated policy on how NPR will evaluate a proposed underwriter in terms the impact of its business on the social good is long overdue. Its absence is a glaring hole in the NPR corporation’s ethical structure. The time has come for honest engagement. Not only should NPR reject any further funding from the fossil fuel industry, you should make a public explanation for this decision. How else can you look into your children’s eyes?

“Epilogue” - September 2013

The foregoing summary and analysis was sent to Lori Grisham (who requested it) on December 17, 2012. I never received any acknowledgement or reply. I sent one more follow-up email which was also never acknowledged. That brought to an end my attempt to bring transparency and accountability to NPR - until now.

A final note for signers of the MoveOn petition:

According to MoveOn petition guidelines, email addresses need to be supplied as to where these petition notices will be sent. NPR would not provide me with a general email address. They require use of their on-line Contact Form. There is also no general email address for the Ombudsman office. Therefore these petitions will be sent to Lori Grisham at the Ombudsman office, and to John King, Operations Manager for Corporate Sponsorship.

Thank you for your interest in this issue.

Jim Weiss