



## Interns Behaving Badly

### **And reporters too? NYT public editor takes aim once again at questionable reporting at center of natural gas attack series**

The New York Times formally established the position of public editor in 2003 in direct response to the fall-out associated with the Jayson Blair scandal. Since then, the office – which serves as the Times' version of "an internal affairs division," according to past public editor Clark Hoyt – has commented on and occasionally criticized the paper's reporting on everything from Israel and Palestine to John McCain and Eliot Spitzer.

Over the past two weeks, though, the ombudsman's office, currently run by long-time newspaperman Arthur Brisbane, has appropriately focused most of its attention on the Times' increasingly controversial series attacking natural gas – posting its first reprimand on July 16, and then following up this weekend with another piece taking square aim at the way these stories are being reported and edited. In his latest column, Mr. Brisbane blows the whistle on reporter Ian Urbina's use of redaction to hide from his readers that a key U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA) "official" whose anonymous comments critical of shale formed the basis of Urbina's June 26 story was actually, as it turned out, just an EIA intern. Says Brisbane:

*Without ample descriptions of the unnamed sources, readers couldn't know who was speaking and could not judge for themselves the merits of what was said. In the case of the redacted e-mails, **the descriptors tended to obscure how many E.I.A. staffers were involved and when an intern was the e-mailer.***

The "intern" was C. Hobson Bryan, a 2009 college physics-engineering graduate who E.I.A. said was hired as an intern in summer 2009 and upgraded to general engineer in March 2011. One of his e-mails was attributed to "one official" who said the shale industry may be "set up for failure." Later, he was an "energy analyst" ... Next he was "one federal analyst" who said, "It seems that science is pointing in one direction and industry PR is pointing in another." ... **Can an intern be an "official"? It doesn't sound right to me.**

Here's a link to the original redacted EIA emails, and here's a link to the unredacted versions grudgingly posted by the Times last week, after EIA itself released the same emails to Congress earlier this month. Among the things that really jump out: the reporter's painstaking work to block-out just about every single word or reference that even remotely hints at the notion that his key source of quotable material – Hobson Bryan III, a 2009 graduate of Washington and Lee Univ. – was merely an intern.

In a response column posted alongside the public editor's piece on Sunday, Urbina's editors write that the redactions were necessary "to protect sources" – as if mentioning the kid's status as an intern at a massive federal agency that typically employs dozens of them at any given point in time was somehow going to be enough information to expose his personal identity to the world.

Of course, while the Brisbane confutation does an excellent job of spotlighting the tricks used by the reporter to add artificial heft to his piece, it doesn't spend much time detailing what the intern actually wrote – or with whom he was in contact as part of his "official" duties with the agency. According to the unredacted emails, the intern's primary charge initially was to frame-out and stand-up a new EIA website focused on shale. To do that, he tapped other EIA interns for research, an outside web developer for design work, and none other than the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) – perhaps the most prominent anti-shale group in the U.S. — for recommendations on content.

As you'd expect, and as the emails show, NRDC didn't waste any time at all in hooking young Mr. Bryan up with all the goods – sending over its 2007 regulatory wish-list document entitled "Drilling Down" (ironically, the same name used by Urbina for this series), a several-times-over debunked study on air quality in DISH, Texas, another air study oft-cited by shale critics from Al Armendariz (rebutted here by Ed Ireland of BSEEC), and links to the website of the Oil and Gas Accountability Project (OGAP), perhaps the shrillest opponent of responsible energy development in operation today, and the group most closely associated with Deborah Rogers, whom Urbina quotes in his July 25 piece without ever mentioning her affiliation with OGAP.

In correspondence back to NRDC's Amy Mall, the EIA intern was quite grateful for the attention, and quick to confirm that he was on board with NRDC's "very helpful" recommendations. He even tells Ms. Mall that he's "going to make sure there are links to 'Drilling Down' in the final product." And it's at that point, frankly, where things get a little bit weird, with Bryan shifting gears a bit to provide Ms. Mall with a window into his profound philosophy on life ([page 40](#)):

Having recently graduated from geology and engineering, I think I can safely say that trusting industry to regulate itself is a bogus idea, comparable to letting the wolf guard the hen house. Through the experiences of my mother who was an environmental lawyer, my father who is a sociologist that specializes in environmental impact assessment, and a grandfather who was a hydrologist, I've had a lot of exposure to situations **where greed and lack of social responsibility goes unchecked, undermining the wellbeing of society and the environment.** Fortunately there are still people who value nature in its pristine, original form **and the collective good over the pockets of just a few.**

Of course, at other points in the emails, the intern doesn't come off quite as "thoughtful" as he does above. In an email dated Sept. 16, 2009, Bryan, the intern, wrote a message to a friend ([page 38](#)) lamenting that much of his work had been rejected by his superiors — "what the eff I am really here for if they already have their own versions of the 'unbiased, objective, EIA truth.'" Bryan was about to reach his breaking point. "Watering down these sections anymore is going to make me feel like a young boy without a dick [sic.]," he wrote. "Maybe we should just frac them."

Other emails show Bryan sending around links to papers and presentations from peak-oil advocate Arthur Berman ([page 33](#)), the lead source for Urbina's [discredited article](#) on shale economics. Berman, Bryan, NRDC, OGAP, Rogers, and Urbina. Are we the only ones around here with a nagging suspicion that some of these pieces may just fit together somehow?

In his widely read daily "Playbook" email [sent around yesterday](#), senior POLITICO reporter Mike Allen links to the Brisbane rebuttal and uses the occasion to offer up a cautionary "memo to young journos." Among his suggestions: "Including other points of view strengthens, not weakens, your article." And: "Referring to a single source in multiple ways doesn't serve your reader." We'd hasten to add one more: Don't allow yourself to be captured by a small group of ideologues and interest groups. Because if you do, the only decent journalism generated from it will likely come from the public editor himself.