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May 6, 2011

### To the Editor:

(Re: "Study: Fracking May Be More Harmful Than Coal Use," News, April 18)

It's a commonplace notion (but a true one) that the future of the earth will largely depend on what we do within the next few years. But a major obstacle to slowing down climate change is resistance from multinational gas and coal industries, particularly in the U.S. — resistance that crucially includes their ability to fund and disseminate disinformation. Any chance of countering that power will depend chiefly on an informed grassroots movement; but those groups depend in turn on reliable science, which most often occurs within the freedom of the university. Fostering objective research that can act as a counterweight to corporate disinformation about global warning gives universities a crucial opportunity — the greatest moral opportunity, perhaps, in American history.

What kind of disinformation? The general strategy was developed by the tobacco industry in the 1950s, which succeeded in holding off significant regulation for three decades. Unable to prove

that tobacco was not a carcinogen, the industry sowed doubts about research (correct, as we now know) demonstrating that it was. Merely sowing doubt achieved the goal. One tactic was to publish rejoinders that looked like reliable science; another was to covertly fund research favorable to its agenda. (The practice persists. In a recent study by a Weill Cornell medical researcher, which concluded that lung cancer is easier to treat than previously suspected, the funding came from an industry front group, a fact not disclosed to the prestigious journal that accepted the article.) Other industries have since followed this model: the powerful influence of "climate skeptics" on former President Bush and on the votes of conservative Congressmen is well known.

What about research into fracking? A new study by Cornell researchers Prof. Robert Howarth, Prof. Anthony Ingraffea and their colleague Renee Santoro, concludes that methane released from shale, when leaked into the atmosphere, will have a far worse effect on global warming than carbon dioxide released from coal. The authors are experts with years of experience; the article was revised and peer-reviewed before acceptance.

In the Sun article on April 18, Professor Howarth noted, not surprisingly, that "[The industries] are saying the science is riddled with errors, but they are not really specifying what these errors are . . . They are also saying that I am not qualified to do this work. I take it as a sign that they can't really attack the science so therefore, they choose to attack me." A quick Google search turned up these examples among others. According to an industry newsletter, "The American Petroleum Institute, which represents more than 470 oil and gas companies, has come out with guns blazing today in response to a study by Cornell University professors." A blogger for the industry group Energy in Depth begins: "Almost year to the day after first attempt to smear shale gas fails, Howarth and crew back at it again in new report set for release this week." An advisor for the Council on Foreign Relations concluded his blog with this: "[The authors' peer reviewers] don't appear to have been on the ball. Alas, this sort of thing is inevitable in academic publishing. It's a useful caution, though, against treating peer review as a mark of infallibility." The seeds of doubt have already landed on the mainstream media. The Ithaca Journal's article on the study consisted of an interview with a self-described "pro-gas" professor who wrongly claimed that it's virtually impossible to choose between the two sides.

There's good news and bad news here. The good news first: The study provides powerful evidence that the U.S. should move as quickly as possible beyond the development of fossil fuels to research on renewable sources of energy. And it also makes more powerful the arguments against the already known risks of hydraulic fracking for dwellers in New York State, including those who live near Cornell and are therefore interested parties in any decision by Cornell to lease its land to gas drilling.

The bad news is that the study's implications can be easily neutralized and even used to discredit its authors. Last fall, when Howarth's name appeared on a list of nominees for a special EPA committee, the president of an oil and gas trade group wrote the federal agency objecting to the choice because his "past comments betray a strong and unambiguous antipathy" towards fracking, such that he "lacks the balance needed" to investigate the issues and would "open the results of the study to questions of bias." In other words, scientific research that runs counter to industry objectives constitutes "bias"; what the committee needs is "balance." (Imagine the parallel statement: "This person's research demonstrates an antipathy towards the medical effects of smoking and therefore lacks the balance needed to evaluate the implications of smoking for health.")

Where was Cornell when this letter was written? Where is Cornell now?

I believe it is time for all universities, including Cornell, to take a new role in the public sphere. Ingraffea and Howarth's study shows why the traditional protections of academic freedom, however indispensable, are no longer enough. How does it help if information that may crucially affect the lives of citizens and their children and grandchildren gets stifled by well-funded industry P.R. that has the ear of politicians and the media — for the reason that no widely respected source challenges it? Who can qualify the claim that scientists whose work runs counter to industry objectives are therefore biased and unfit for public service? The point is not that university administrators should take sides in a scientific controversy, or make scientific claims on their own authority. The point is that a basic function of a university is to establish reliable standards for seeking the truth, and in times of crisis, to clarify those standards for the public.

Every institution flourishes by foregrounding its most important achievements; Cornell now has a golden opportunity — or rather, two. As a first step, it could issue a public statement noting the importance of the study while underscoring the authors' qualifications and procedures. It gets better. The administration now has every reason to acknowledge publicly what is already obvious to many: that the risks involved in hydrofracking (to humans, to the landscape, the water, and now the air) are unacceptably high. The waffle about "having no plans to lease Cornell property at the present time" won't do now. It's time to say clearly that those plans are off the table — for good.

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