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NYT Doubles-Down on a Really Bad Bet

2011 JULY 19

by Chris

tags: Arthur Brisbane, Deborah Rogers, Ian Urbina, Marcellus Shale, New York Times, Rick Berke



When New York Magazine [reported earlier this month](#) that the national editor of *The New York Times* had sent an internal memo laying out a “surprisingly detailed” defense of reporter Ian Urbina’s latest [front-page attack](#) on natural gas, the hope was that the memo would spur an equally detailed response by Arthur Brisbane, The Times’ public editor. That hope was realized when Mr. Brisbane’s 1,100-word piece [was posted](#) on the paper’s website over the weekend, a column in which Brisbane takes square aim at The Times for going “out on a limb” and “lack[ing] an in-depth dissenting view in the text.”

The Brisbane piece is remarkable for a number of reasons, and on a number of levels – but the views it conveys and questions it asks are ones that have been raised plenty by [several respected experts](#) over the past three weeks. Just today, in fact, the head of the U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA) told the U.S. Senate that “the data clearly show that shale gas is rapidly becoming a significant source of natural gas supply” – a direct hit to The Times’ thesis. [According to POLITICO](#), he went on to tell the lawmakers that emails from EIA cited by The Times as part of its reporting “came from an entry-level staffer who had been hired as an intern in 2009.”

Notably, as the criticisms of The Times have continued to pile up – most recently from The Times itself – the response on the part of the reporter who authored the piece (and the editors who allowed it to run on the paper’s front-page) has been to dig-in and double-down. In an interview on public radio last month, Urbina sought to defend his story [by characterizing it](#) simply as a way to advance a “full and candid discussion of all the factors that play into the long-term viability of [natural gas].” His editors have taken a different tack, [basing their defense](#) of Urbina’s work on the notion that, since it took him six months to do it, and since it includes lots of emails from “industry insiders,” it must be good. Of course, activity isn’t the same thing as achievement. Just like volume isn’t the same thing as veracity (read on, after the jump).

But all that aside, what really caught our eye in the Brisbane piece are the sections in it capturing the responses he received from the paper’s editors, and Urbina himself. In one exchange, Brisbane asked the reporting crew why it didn’t think it necessary to give ExxonMobil a call, one of the world’s largest publicly traded companies and a major player in shale gas development in the United States and abroad. If shale is just one big Ponzi scheme, as The Times, channeling its sources, suggests, then why, as Brisbane asked, would a company like Exxon [invest \\$41 billion](#) – more than the GDP of Guatemala – to purchase a major shale producer like XTO?

Now, if these Times guys had any real conviction on the issue, they would have responded back to Brisbane in a straightforward manner – sticking to their guns and dismissing the Exxon investment as further proof that even the biggest companies, conducting the most intensive due diligence, can easily get swept up and led astray by the “irrational exuberance” of shale. Sure, they would have still been wrong. But heck, at least they would have been consistent.

Instead, Urbina and deputy national editor Adam Bryant chose a decidedly less courageous response path – telling Brisbane that their beef wasn’t with Exxon or the other majors at all, but rather with



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“independents” that continue to be “the most vocal boosters of shale gas.”

But then again, if the independent producers are the real problem here, if independents are the ones responsible for creating the “bubble” trumpeted by The Times, then how does the paper square that view with the fact that Exxon (and [Shell](#), and [Chevron](#)) established its foothold in the Marcellus by purchasing – wait for it – an independent? Unfortunately, the majors [never got the chance](#) to answer that question for the piece. Because it wasn’t asked. Because what the reporters would have learned by posing it would have undermined the predetermined path of their narrative. And that’s no fun at all.

Of course, it’s also no fun to be publicly called-out for shoddy reporting by your paper’s ombudsman, something The Times’ editors would never have predicted possible given the relative impunity they experienced following all those hit-pieces previously filed by Urbina attacking natural gas. Plainly put, these guys thought they’d skate by unnoticed, even while violating the most basic standards governing fair reporting and proper sourcing. No one quibbles with including the well-known perspective of Deborah Rogers in your piece. But the fact that you consider it unnecessary to mention that Ms. Rogers is [affiliated with the Oil and Gas Accountability Project](#), one of the most aggressively anti-shale activist groups in the country, is just bizarre. And yet: The Times continues to stand by that and other curious decisions it made.

As for the paper’s case itself, it’s based on data and emails dating as far back as 2007 – long before the promise and potential of shale development in the United States, and certainly around the world, had been fully realized. Today, that potential is being actualized – and no one knows quite how transformative it will prove to be heading into the future. All we know is that it will be transformative. Indeed, it already is.

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Tom [PERMALINK](#)

July 19, 2011

It is any wonder the Times stock has declined over 61% from its 5-year high or had to sell its soul to a Mexican investor to survive?

[REPLY](#)



SideShowBob [PERMALINK](#)

July 20, 2011

Chris.....On Monday on the EID-Northeast Marcellus Initiative Facebook site, I posted a link to New York Times Public Editor Arthur Brisbane’s scathing dress down of Ian Urbina’s woefully biased and ignorant attempted smackdown of the Marcellus play and shale gas generally. And as Tom so succinctly states above, the “Gray Lady,” this once proud “go to” source of info and public trust is going down like the Titanic, or as they say in the submarine service.....Gray Lady Down. So, many thanks for reporting on Mr. Brisbane’s defense of a free, unbiased press, something that has seen precious little daylight in New York City and Philly during this Marcellus debate.

[REPLY](#)

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