

“Frackademics” – Case study 5: Guardian ‘open letter’ from academics

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March 17, 2015
 Posted By : Talk Fracking

Case study 5: Guardian ‘open letter’ from academics

On 4th June 2014 the Guardian published a letter [58] (http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/jun/04/lancashire-shale-gas-uk-energy-gap), co-signed by 50 academics, on the issue of shale gas. We should begin with the concluding paragraph of the letter –

As geoscientists and petroleum engineers from Britain’s leading academic institutions, we call on all politicians and decision-makers at all levels to put aside their political differences and focus on the undeniable economic, environmental and national security benefits on offer to the UK from the responsible development of natural gas from Lancashire’s shale.

The diagram on the next page shows the 50 academics, each assigned to their respective institute. In addition to showing relevant links for each person as an individual, the institutes which are part of the NERC CDT for Oil and Gas are grouped together as either ‘core’ or ‘associate’ members . As can be seen in the other case studies, the CDT is a common thread linking many of the institutes involved.

Earlier in the letter it stated –

After nearly 30 years of near-abundant supplies of natural gas from the North Sea, we have become more exposed and vulnerable because of our increased reliance on foreign imports of energy to meet our power-generation needs.

This is an economic, not geophysical point – and it is wholly incorrect. Globally, whether or not a state produces a large proportion of its energy supply has little correlation to its economic success.

If we take the world’s 25 largest economies [59] (http://unstats.un.org/unsd/snaama/dnltransfer.asp?flD=2), and the IEA’s 2014 energy statistics [60] (http://www.iea.org/publications/freepublications/publication/keyworld2014.pdf), there is no correlation between the size of an economy and its import dependence. The world’s great manufacturing economies import most of their energy – e.g. Germany (63%), South Korea (87%) and Japan (97%). 18 of the world’s largest 25 economies import more than 50%. And if energy production creates security, why are net energy exporters such as Sudan, Libya, Iraq, Venezuela, Nigeria and Egypt in such economic and/or social trouble?

The strength and security of an economy is based on more than just its sources of energy.

The letter continues –

According to the independent British Geological Survey, the Bowland Basin, which covers significant parts of north-west England, currently sits on top of 1,300 trillion cubic feet of natural gas. If we extract only 10% of this valuable resource, that is enough to boost our domestic supply to meet existing demand by at least a further 25 years, according to geoscientific experts.

If the signatories are geophysical experts, they must know this statement is inaccurate:

Firstly, the British Geological Survey (BGS) are not ‘independent’. They are partly funded through NERC, and are now required to operate their organisation on a commercial footing – creating a dependency upon companies requiring their geophysical expertise.

Secondly, BGS has never stated that there is a certain (https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/209306/Resources_vs_Reserves_-_note_-_27-6-13.pdf) ‘resource’ (https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/209306/Resources_vs_Reserves_-_note_-_27-6-13.pdf) [61] of gas under Northern England. What their Bowland Survey report [62] (https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/226874/BGS_DECC_BowlandShaleGasReport_MAIN_REPORT.pdf) states is that there may be a fifty-fifty chance of “1,300 trillion cubic feet of natural gas” existing there. If we take the more reliable 90% probability figure, it is 40% less than that quoted. Even then, it is still just an abstract probability, and may never become a viable proposition for production at all – as Poland has recently discovered [63] (http://www.economist.com/blogs/easternapproaches/2014/11/polish-fracking).

As with so many recent statements regarding the benefits of shale gas in Britain, arguably the letter contains (http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-30013668) a lot of hype (http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-30013668) [64] with very little factual substance to back up the claims made.

In reality, what this letter represents is not a reasoned statement from fifty academics – it is a public relations smokescreen. Through their participation, those involved have arguably risked their public credibility by putting their name to a set of questionable statements (it would be interesting to check with each of them if they knew exactly what they were signing up to at the time).

The letter was drafted and the signatories organised by the North West Energy Task Force [65] (http://www.nwenergy.org.uk/) (NWETF). They are a Lancashire based lobby group which is funded by [66] (http://www.nwenergy.org.uk/about-us) Cuadrilla and Centrica – with support from their PR agents, Westbourne Communications [67] (http://powerbase.info/index.php/North_West_Energy_Task_Force) (who occasionally represent Cuadrilla and Centrica). NWETF claim that they organised and drafted the letter [68] – which explains why its content is centred around issues related to economic hype rather than geophysical science.

What this kind of group is, and their work represents, is what is known in the USA as “astroturfing” (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Astroturfing) (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Astroturfing)

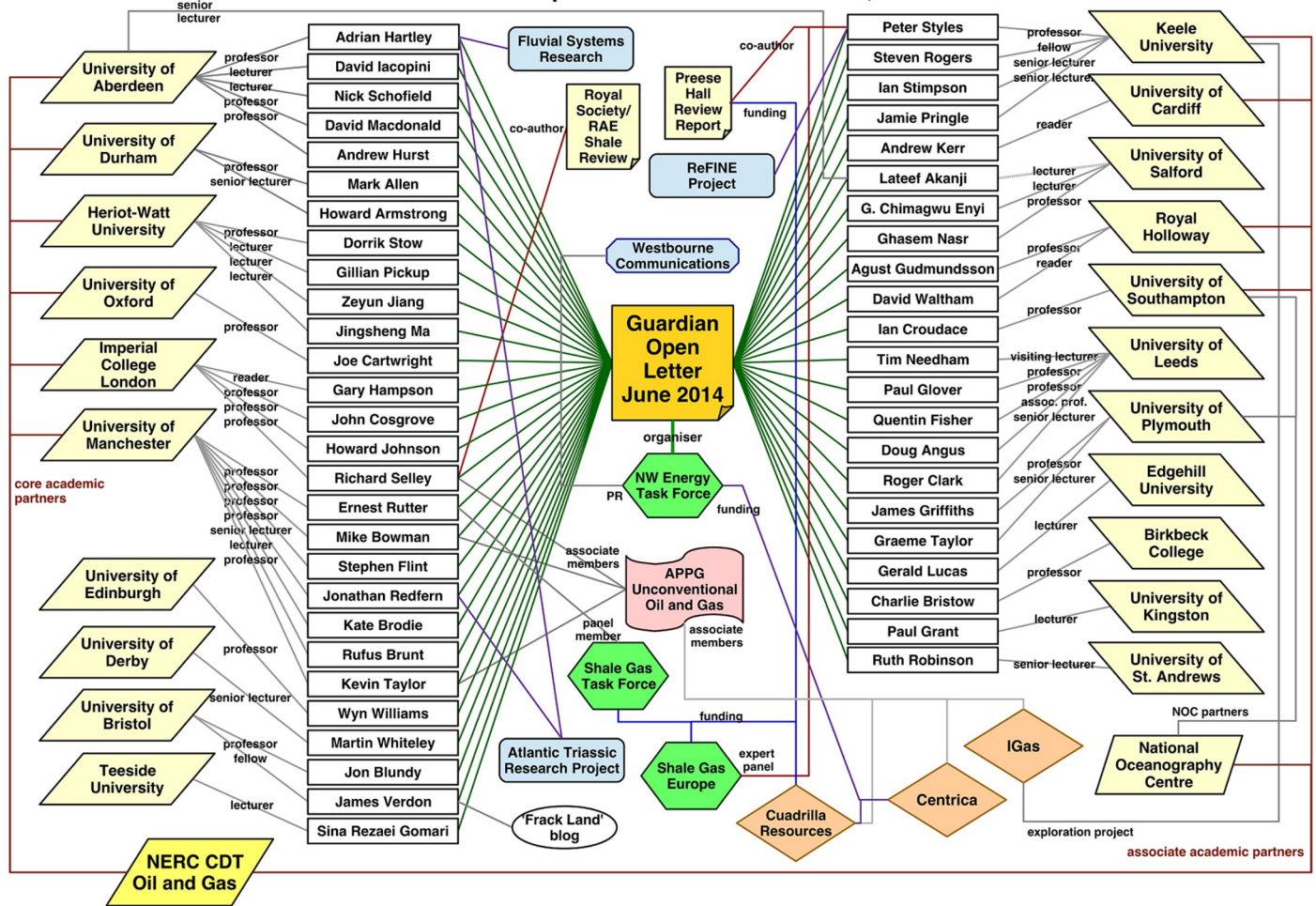
(<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Astroturfing>) [69] – the creation of 'fake grassroots' organisations whose primary purpose is to front public relations material for their funders. Front groups such as this are now also used in public relations in Britain, as noted in the quote in the previous case study, to engineer doubt within contentious debates.

This letter came just a few days after a letter from Talk Fracking [70] (<http://www.talkfracking.org/news/150-celebrities-scientists-and-organisations-call-for-fracking-debate/>) – signed by 150 celebrities, academics, business people and community groups – which called for a public debate on fracking. This kind of tit-for-tat PR is what astroturf groups are designed to do. For example, shortly after Talk Fracking ran a nation-wide speaking tour, 'We Need to Talk About Fracking' [71] (<http://www.talkfracking.org/about/>) – which the industry refused to take part in – the industry launched its own exclusive event, 'Let's Talk About Shale' [72] (<http://www.talkaboutshale.com/>).

Just as "fracking" is being brought to the UK from the US, increasingly US-style public relations are distorting local and national public debates, and promoting policies which are arguably harmful to the public interest. Whether it likes it or not, academia is being drawn into this process. And the increasing level of funding which ties academia to corporate interests makes it harder for the public to trust that their research information, and government decisions based upon it, are truly impartial.

The Guardian letter is immaterial to the evidence-based debate on unconventional oil and gas – and yet at the same time it is valuable. It highlights how, in order to engineer consent, those promoting these technologies are resorting to bogus and distorted messages. However, their flaw is that, when tested using objective evidence, they can easily be exposed as 'astroturf' due to the inaccuracies their that messages contain.

Guardian 'Open Letter' From Academics, June 2014



(<http://www.talkfracking.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/map-5-web.png>)

[58] Lancashire's shale gas can fill UK energy gap, Guardian On-line, Wednesday 4th June 2014 – <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/jun/04/lancashire-shale-gas-uk-energy-gap> (<http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/jun/04/lancashire-shale-gas-uk-energy-gap>)

[59] United States, China, Japan, Germany, France, United Kingdom, Brazil, Italy, Russia, India, Canada, Australia, Spain, South Korea, Mexico, Indonesia, Netherlands, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Switzerland, Argentina, Sweden, Poland, Belgium, Norway – source, *GDP and its breakdown at current prices in US Dollars*, United Nations Statistics Division, December 2014 – <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/snaama/dnltransfer.asp?fid=2> (<http://unstats.un.org/unsd/snaama/dnltransfer.asp?fid=2>)

[60] *Key World Energy Statistics 2014*, International Energy Agency, September 2014 – <http://www.iea.org/publications/freepublications/publication/keyworld2014.pdf> (<http://www.iea.org/publications/freepublications/publication/keyworld2014.pdf>)

[61] *Resources vs Reserves*, DECC/BGS, June 2013 – https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/209306/Resources_vs_Reserves_-_note_-_27-6-13.pdf (https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/209306/Resources_vs_Reserves_-_note_-_27-6-13.pdf)

[62] *Bowland Shale Gas Study – Main Report*, DECC/BGS, June 2013 – https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/226874/BGS_DECC_BowlandShaleGasReport_MAIN_REPORT.pdf (https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/226874/BGS_DECC_BowlandShaleGasReport_MAIN_REPORT.pdf)

[63] *Polish fracking: Shale fail*, The Economist, 14th November 2014 – <http://www.economist.com/blogs/easternapproaches/2014/11/polish-fracking> (<http://www.economist.com/blogs/easternapproaches/2014/11/polish-fracking>)

[64] *Ministers' shale gas 'hype' attacked*, Roger Harrabin, BBC News, 12th November 2014 – <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-30013668> (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-30013668>)

[65] North West Energy Task Force – <http://www.nwenergy.org.uk/> (<http://www.nwenergy.org.uk/>)

[66] North West Energy Task Force: ‘About us’ – <http://www.nwenergy.org.uk/about-us> (<http://www.nwenergy.org.uk/about-us>)

[67] Powerbase: ‘North West Energy Task Force’ – http://powerbase.info/index.php/North_West_Energy_Task_Force (http://powerbase.info/index.php/North_West_Energy_Task_Force)

[68] “Focus on the scientific facts and get behind shale”, say academic geoscientists and engineers to politicians, North West Energy Task Force, 5th June 2014 – http://www.nwenergy.org.uk/_focus_on_the_scientific_facts_and_get_behind_shale_say_academic_geoscientists_and_engineers_to_politicians (http://www.nwenergy.org.uk/_focus_on_the_scientific_facts_and_get_behind_shale_say_academic_geoscientists_and_engineers_to_politicians)

[69] Wikipedia: ‘Astroturfing’ – <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Astroturfing> (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Astroturfing>)

[70] *We Need to Talk About Fracking*, Talk Fracking, June 2014 – <http://www.talkfracking.org/news/150-celebrities-scientists-and-organisations-call-for-fracking-debate/> (<http://www.talkfracking.org/news/150-celebrities-scientists-and-organisations-call-for-fracking-debate/>)

[71] Talk Fracking – <http://www.talkfracking.org/about/> (<http://www.talkfracking.org/about/>)

[72] Let’s Talk About Shale – <http://www.talkaboutshale.com/> (<http://www.talkaboutshale.com/>)

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Appendix (<http://www.talkfracking.org/frackademics/frackademics-appendix/>): **Information sources for case study diagrams**

This report has been commissioned by Talk Fracking

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