

# WHAT THE FRACK? ACTIVISM IN THE MARCELLUS SHALE REGION

Denise P. Ferguson, Pepperdine University  
denise.ferguson@pepperdine.edu

Michael F. Smith, LaSalle University  
msmith@lasalle.edu

## ABSTRACT

The Marcellus Shale extends from southern New York across Pennsylvania, and into western Maryland, West Virginia, and eastern Ohio. The production of commercial quantities of gas from this shale requires large volumes of water to drill and hydraulically fracture the rock. Concerns about the availability of water supplies needed for gas production and questions about waste water disposal have been raised by water-resource agencies and citizens throughout the Marcellus Shale region. Both activist and energy-company coalitions are engaged in communication with the goal of establishing the legitimacy of their positions. This paper 1) reviews activism theory and issue management literature, 2) provides background on the Marcellus Shale issue and the coalitions involved in the public debate, 3) examines the coalitions' website messages and media coverage in their attempts to establish the legitimacy of the issue positions, and 4) advances understanding of activist and corporate communication and adaptation.

## INTRODUCTION

Amwell Township, in rural southwestern Pennsylvania, sits atop one of the largest fields of natural gas in the world (Griswold, 2011). As in other areas across Pennsylvania and extending throughout the Marcellus Shale region, towns in Amwell Township and many local residents have benefitted from the economic boom resulting from energy corporations' building more than 60 wells for drilling natural gas in the area. Landowners have received lucrative long-term lease deals that have allowed them to get out of debt, improve their farms, and purchase luxuries they never dreamed would be possible. Drillers who live near the wells have brought revenue to local motels, shops, and restaurants. Some local residents believe the gas industry has had a positive impact on the township, and "is definitely the right thing for Western Pennsylvania....We need this natural gas to keep functioning" (Griswold, 2011, p. 8).

Other Amwell Township residents are not so sure that the economic benefits are worth the environmental and health risks. Pets and farm animals have died; children and adults have become ill with stomach pains, extreme fatigue, and other ailments related to toxic levels of arsenic and benzene, known human carcinogens found in foul-smelling drinking water near drilled areas. One local family was told to leave their home and not go back because of the dangers to their health. Said one resident about the gas company responsible for drilling: "They've ruined our lives.... No amount of money that we'd ever get from royalties would ever replace my children's health" (Griswold, 2011, p. 9).

On a larger scale, both the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and Department of Health have come under fire for their handling of health complaints about illnesses due to gas drilling. The agencies were criticized for failing to respond to “complaints of headaches, nausea, vomiting, sore throats, nosebleeds, eye irritation and rashes” associated with the poor air quality and emissions due to fracturing (Fulton, 2012). While the Department of Health says it investigates every resident’s claim, the agency did not begin recording complaints related to gas drilling until 2011, although about 5,000 Marcellus Shale wells have been drilled since 2005 (Begos, 2012; “Pennsylvania Department of Health...,” 2012). The Pennsylvania DEP announced in July 2012 that it will undertake a one-year “monitoring project” of the “release of air pollutants” near Marcellus Shale gas drilling facilities (“Long-term ambient air...,” 2012).

The Amwell Township case demonstrates how an organization’s behavior can create tensions among residents of a community (and, in the case of the Marcellus Shale issue, across a state and region), and lead to communication and actions by activists and organizations directed at eliciting support and change. Additionally, the handling of health complaints due to gas drilling by the lead Pennsylvania agencies and criticisms from residents that their “actions don’t match their words” (Begos, 2012, para. 1) provide just the site for study of how citizens hold public policy decision-making and implementing bodies accountable and mobilize to apply pressure when there is a failure to meet their expectations.

Public policy activism has been tied to the beginning and evolution of the profession and study of public relations (Coombs & Holladay, 2007). Individuals organize in groups in order to influence one or more target organizations through action. Public relations scholars argue that these activists are co-creators of the relationships between organizations and their publics, contributing to the development and resolution of issues and, ultimately, to social good (Smith & Ferguson, 2010). Heath (2006) and Heath & Waymer (2009) argued that “the dialogue of society is best when it helps organizations be more reflective and work for legitimacy; it voices perspectives to help society be more fully functional” (p. 201). One important social role of activists and their organizations is to elevate a society’s value standards, as environmental groups have pushed for higher environmental standards in the U.S.

Smith and Ferguson (2001) argued for longitudinal studies of activists that examined the interactions between community members, activist organizations, and their targets’ responses. While many studies have examined either activist or organizational campaigns, it is the clash of messages between activist and target organizations that produces and reproduces issue definitions and influences the development of the conflict (Smith, 1995). Greater understanding of this clash is required in order to understand and predict how relationships between activists and organizations develop (Smith & Ferguson, 2010).

This is such a longitudinal study, examining the communication of coalitions of community members, activist organizations, the energy industry, government, and regulatory agencies in Pennsylvania supporting and opposing the Marcellus Shale natural gas drilling. The article begins with a review of activism and issue management literature, then proceeds to background on the Marcellus Shale issue and the coalitions under study. The public relations efforts of two

coalitions on either side of the issue are then analyzed, and the article concludes with a discussion of directions for future research in activist-target communication.

## **ACTIVISTS AND TARGET ORGANIZATIONS**

Interacting with activists is something that many organizations resist (Smith & Ferguson, 2001). In early research, activists were viewed as problems for organizations (see L. Grunig, 1992). J. Grunig (1989) argued that “when members of active publics join activist groups, they contribute to the constraints on organizational autonomy that create a public relations problem and bring about the need for a public relations program” (p. 3). Smith (1995) argued that activists are often treated as threats to other organizations because they may disrupt an organization’s routine, influence the development of issues that may be threatening to an organization, use tactics that may appear threatening, and are perceived as being made up of members whose commitment to a “cause” is threatening.

In the last decade, the public relations efforts of activists have become a legitimate part of public relations scholarship (Smith & Ferguson, 2010). Moving away from a corporate-centric view of public relations, recent scholars acknowledge that part of the historical evolution of public relations is connected to activism. Coombs and Holladay (2007) claim that activists were practicing public relations before the existence of large corporations, and their efforts to be heard and press for change “spurred the growth of corporate public relations” (p. 75). Corporations viewed activists

as barriers to overcome or challenges to meet, and helped create the ‘need’ for modern public relations. If we shift the focus a bit, activism can be seen ‘as’ modern public relations. In the 1960s activists utilized public relations to attract the attention of the corporate elite, developing and utilizing many of the modern tools of public relations. (Coombs & Holladay, 2007, p. 52)

Analysis of the communication activists engage in to voice their concerns and advocate change reveals their purposes, strategies, and tactics. The next section discusses key findings in the literature related to how activist organizations pursue their desired goals.

### **Activist Purposes, Strategies, and Tactics**

Activist organizations use public relations for two primary, interrelated purposes: to rectify the conditions identified by the activist publics and to maintain the activist organization or sustain the movement (Smith & Ferguson, 2010). The focus in this study is on the first purpose. For example, environmental groups pursue environmental issues; anti-war activists seek an end to an armed conflict. Activist organizations operate in the “tensions between what is and what ought to be” (Heath & Waymer, 2009, p. 201), or oppose institutional behaviors that violate what the activists believe would be more legitimate and socially responsible. This legitimacy gap (Sethi, 1977) can create the strain that motivates activists and leads them to execute strategies to get their messages out and push for change. Activists pursue a preferred resolution to an issue, which provides the first goal of activist public relations, the outcome desired by the organization. There are three sorts of goals activist organizations pursue: (1) to elicit or resist change on the part of a target organization or, more broadly, an industry or field; (2) to seek public policy or regulatory

changes that would, in turn, effect change in institutional or public behavior; or, most broadly, and/or (3) to change social norms (Smith & Ferguson, 2010).

Activists and their institutional targets both use public relations strategies (messages and actions) and tactics (tools) to gain support for their positions on issues. Direct issue strategies are those designed to clearly debate an issue and the merits of particular policy options, and to influence the outcome or decision about an issue. They include arguments used to refute activist or institutional claims, or arguments designed to influence decision makers. Typically, they are pursued using issue advertising, press statements, position papers, letters to the editor, etc. Indirect issue strategies are those designed to create a favorable environment of public opinion about the advocates and their positions that ultimately create the premises upon which direct strategies are judged and/or accepted. These include things like corporations sponsoring “educational” programs on the industry; taking proactive steps to change practices; community involvement and engagement, etc.

A number of studies have examined how activists use public relations to achieve their goals. These studies have primarily looked at public relations strategies, or the general approach to communicating to achieve a goal, and tactics, or the particular tools used in public relations, such as press releases, Web sites, and other computer-generated, technology-dependent techniques (Knight & Greenberg, 2002). Several of the studies in this area seek to add to our understanding of and refine the typologies of tactics used by activists and by institutions in responding to activism. In a review of 34 cases of activism, L. Grunig (1992) concluded that activists’ tactics ranged along a continuum and included contact with the media (see also Ryan, 1991), direct solicitation campaigns aimed toward the public or regulators, lobbying, public forums, petition drives, litigation, pseudoevents, public education, picketing, boycotts, and sit-ins. For example, activists sometimes approach organizations directly, only to be rebuffed and therefore compelled to turn to methods that are more confrontational (Ryan, 1991).

When leaders from Operation PUSH initially approached Nike about its minority hiring practices, they were publicly criticized by the shoemaker’s spokesperson. Operation PUSH promptly organized a boycott of Nike products, which resulted in a great deal of publicity (Smith, 1992). In a study of an Addyson, Ohio, Bayer/Lanxess Chemical Plant after harmful air and water emissions, Zoller (2009) found that citizens groups petitioned the company to make changes, attempted to document neighbors’ complaints, generated media coverage about the issue and began to press state and federal environmental protection agencies to make a finding against the chemical maker. Through nearly five years of meetings, trading accusations about motives and expertise, and pressure from both citizens and regulators, Lanxess established a Public Advisory Group and invested over \$2 million in equipment upgrades to reduce emissions and avoid future malfunctions.

Recent studies focus specifically on how activist organizations marshal digital and social media to spread their messages and rally supporters. For example, the American Family Association capitalized on Internet technology’s ability to instantaneously and inexpensively communicate with members and followers of the organization when it mobilized thousands of people to pressure organizations to stop advertising on television programs that promote lifestyles and values that are in opposition to the AFA, and to boycott organizations that offered benefits to

same-sex couples and donated money to homosexual organizations and events. The AFA developed the boycottford.com Web site, posting numerous documents “exposing and indicting Ford’s pro-homosexual agenda” and links to Web sites that provide Ford’s “gay-themed advertisements” (Coombs & Holladay, 2007, p. 72). Word of the boycottford.com Web site spread virally, and more than 700 Web sites had links to the AFA Web site within three days. This mobilization blitz was effective: within one week Ford dealers met with the AFA, and soon after the AFA suspended its boycott.

Activists organize around issues they believe impact them and about which they have strong positions. The next section reviews the issues management process and the communication of activist organizations in the issue lifecycle.

## **Issues Management**

Activism research centers on the identification, development, and resolution of issues. Botan and Taylor (2004) argued that “at the heart of issues management is a belief that organizations and publics can engage each other in ways that allow for one or both parties to change” (p. 654). The goal attainment function of activism clearly centers on issues, which evolve over time and tend to be either a question ready for decision (Jones & Chase, 1979), organizational decisions that create problematic conditions for publics (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Grunig J., 1989), or a condition to which people attach meaning and create arguments (Crabbe & Vibbert, 1985). Thus, if an environmental organization believes that government policy would resolve an environmental problem, it utilizes public relations tactics designed to generate support for legislative remedies (Smith & Ferguson, 2001). Issues management literature suggests that issue advocates must draw attention to the problem, position themselves as legitimate advocates, and successfully argue for their recommended resolutions to the problem (Crabbe & Vibbert, 1985; Heath, 1997; Vibbert, 1987). Through its public relations activities, an organization communicates its positions on issues, solicits support for action and, ideally, engages target organizations in policy discussions.

Issues management theorists have contended that issues are cyclical—that is, they rise and fall in status on the public’s agenda (see Crabbe & Vibbert, 1985; Downs, 1972; Hainsworth, 1990; Jones & Chase, 1979). As issues gain status, activist organizations gain attention, members, and resources. When issues appear to be resolved or otherwise fall from the public’s agenda, activist organizations suffer. Activists “recognize issues earlier and package them to shape the interpretation of others” (Zietsma & Winn, 2008, p. 71). To survive, activist organizations must adjust to changes in their “issues environment” (Jopke, 1991; Smith, 1995). To be successful, they must establish their legitimacy and undermine the legitimacy of their target organizations, which is the subject of the next section.

## **The “Legitimacy Dance”**

Activism “is a crucial factor in the evolutionary history of issues management” as it “creates or builds on the legitimacy gap between the activists and the target organization, whether business, government, or other nonprofit” (Heath & Waymer, 2009, p. 196; Heath, 1997). This legitimacy gap, which requires the exigence of a solution, provides the “motivation” for activism and social movement, and the “grounds” for the five stages of activism: strain, or stress, mobilization,

confrontation, negotiation, and resolution, which are “the key elements of activism” (Heath & Waymer, 2009, p. 206). This strain “is the motive that attracts followers and sustains nonprofits in their efforts to correct what they target or frame as the evils of society” (p. 213), while “activist organizations employ the strategy of ‘incremental erosion’... challeng[ing] the legitimacy of its target by chipping away at premises that are needed by the business” (Heath & Waymer, 2009, p. 197) to sustain its current operation. During the “strain” phase in the development of activism, the definition and framing of issues contributes to the interaction between activists and organizations (Heath & Palenchar, 2009; Jaques, 2004).

Coalitions on multiple sides of an issue are engaged in communication with the goal of establishing the legitimacy of their positions. Activists and their targets perform a “legitimacy dance,” each questioning the other’s issues, motives, and right to exist. Institutions and activists seek to (a) gain legitimacy for their role as advocates for particular issues and (b) to gain support for their positions on those issues, and the subsequent public policy or organizational actions being pursued. They face a dual legitimacy challenge (Smith & Ferguson, 2010). On one hand, they must establish the legitimacy of their organization, values, issues positions, and their role as advocates for a particular issue(s). On the other hand, they must undermine the legitimacy of their target organizations and/or the values and issues positions they represent. One important step in the early stages of an issue’s life cycle is establishing the issue’s legitimacy, or acceptance of the issue by increasingly broader segments of the public (Cralle & Vibbert, 1985).

Activists, then, organize around local, regional, national, and/or international issues, employing communication strategies to apply pressure and seek their desired solutions, which typically involves corporate or public policy change. The next section provides examples of public policy issue activism and results.

### **Public Policy Activism**

There seldom are any “single” issues in complex public policy debates. Issues intersect with each other, thus making the analysis of the dance between activists and others more complex. Smith (1995) examined the evolution of the nuclear freeze issue in the 1980s as it evolved from a disarmament issue to an environmental issue. Ferguson (1999) examined the communication and mobilization of a faith-based coalition directed at influencing the 1994 midterm congressional elections. The Ohio Citizen Action Good Neighbor Campaign directed toward the Bayer/Lanxess Chemical Plant (Zoller, 2009) sought public policy, regulation, and equipment upgrades due to dangerous air and water emissions. The public policy debate in Addyson, Ohio, is relevant to the current study, because in both activism is focused on environmental issues.

The Addyson case demonstrates the process by which an activist organization can elicit change on the part of an organization (Smith & Ferguson, 2010). However, the case illustrates other dimensions of the interplay between activists and corporations. Bayer/Lanxess had developed a conduit through which it could consult with its community—the Public Advisory Group, a common corporate mechanism for engaging with activists (Heath & Palenchar, 2009). The Westside Action Group (WAG), a local citizens group, questioned the legitimacy of the advisory group, and the company questioned the ability of WAG to understand the science behind its emissions problem. The contest between the various groups included advocacy through the

media, but also moved from direct pressure to engagement through meetings to the lobbying of regulators by citizens' groups (Smith & Ferguson, 2010). This progression represented the interplay between activists' and the corporation's strategies as the issue evolved. As Zoller (2009) noted, "Activists seek to build sources of legitimacy, power, and urgency that increase their likelihood of being heard by a corporation" (p. 94). As the citizens group sought to influence the company's actions, it sought to gain power by marshaling expert information and the regulatory power of the Environmental Protection Agency (Smith & Ferguson, 2010).

The Marcellus Shale dispute offers another example of the clash between communities, environmental activists, and an industry seeking to utilize a natural resource. Background on the Marcellus Shale dispute reveals the full range of issues in this environmental dispute.

## **MARCELLUS SHALE BACKGROUND**

For over 75 years, geologists and gas companies knew that there was natural gas lodged within the Marcellus Shale Formation, which stretches from New York through Pennsylvania, Ohio, and West Virginia. However, the pockets of natural gas encountered early on were seen as a nuisance, since the uncontrolled bursts of natural gas disrupted drilling in shallow gas wells (Harper, 2008). While these bursts raised awareness of the presence of gas, they were too short-lived to be sustained in any profitable way. The Marcellus Shale formation varies in depth from several hundred to several thousand feet, and in many places lies under layers of sandstone, limestone, and, most significantly, the aquifers that supply water to many communities throughout the region.

Interest in Marcellus Shale's potential as a source of natural gas re-emerged in the 1980s, when the U.S. Department of Energy commissioned a thorough geological survey of the area (Harper, 2008). Between the early 1990s and 2003, several factors converged to propel further exploration of the area (Harper, 2008; Pennsylvania Geological Survey, n.d.). First, the steadily increasing price of natural gas, fueled by increased worldwide demand, made it a valuable commodity. Relatedly, international tensions prompted many in the U.S. to seek less dependence on foreign sources of natural gas. Another factor was the development of drilling technology that would allow gas companies to reach and extract a continuous flow of natural gas. Range Resources drilled the first well in Washington County, Pennsylvania, in 2003, and by 2005 was producing natural gas (Harper, 2008).

The boom in the Marcellus Shale region really began in 2007. Terry Engelder of Pennsylvania State University and Gary Lash of the State University of New York-Fredonia believed that previous studies by the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) had underestimated the potential amount of natural gas that could be extracted from the Marcellus Formation. The USGS estimated that the deposit contained 2.7 trillion cubic feet of natural gas; Engelder and Lash claimed that the more accurate amount was closer to 500 trillion cubic feet (Frazier, 2011; Messer, 2008). The results were announced in a press release issued by Penn State and attracted national media attention, prompting an influx of energy companies to open shop across the Marcellus region, primarily in Pennsylvania (Frazier, 2011).

The impact on the region was swift and substantial. In 2005, only four deep wells existed in Pennsylvania. By 2008, 271 new wells had been added, and in 2010 alone, 1,386 new wells were drilled, accounting for 50 percent of all the new natural gas wells in the U.S. (Maykuth, 2011). Similarly, the amount paid to lease the drilling rights from landowners had risen from about \$50 an acre in 2005 to over \$3,000 per acre (Brubaker, 2011). Thousands of gas workers flowed into the state from around the country, and an army of trucks descended on the largely rural landscape.

Such rapid development in a region rich in other natural resources, such as farmland and forests, was bound to raise concerns. The issues surrounding the development of the Marcellus Formation are complex and interrelated. They include:

- Environmental issues: While natural gas itself is generally seen as a cleaner form of energy than coal or oil, the process of extracting and transporting it impacts forests, air quality and, as will be seen later, water quality.
- Economic/socioeconomic impact: With natural gas prices hovering around \$100 per barrel, the potential economic benefit to the states, counties, and municipalities across the region is great. While many of the gas developers have headquarters out of state, a number of local businesses, from manufacturing to realtors, may benefit from increased work.
- Infrastructure: The impact of thousands of trucks over rural, sometimes undeveloped roads, is substantial. In addition, the flow of new workers into the region means communities often have to provide additional services, such as schools and public safety. Tax revenue is generally needed to support these services.
- Leases: Companies seeking to drill must secure the rights to the land, either from private landowners or, for publically owned lands, the state. The amount of royalties paid and the conditions under which the land can be used (e.g., how large the drilling site is, where access roads may be built) can sometimes be contentious.
- Legal issues: Related to the question of leases are land rights; local governments sought to understand their ability to regulate well locations, and those concerned about their household water quality needed to understand their legal remedies.
- Taxes: This issue takes many forms, but the most significant is the extent to which gas producers pay taxes on the proceeds made from selling the gas extracted. As states struggle with the ongoing effects of a weak economy, any stream of tax revenue is welcome. However, Pennsylvania is one of the few states that does not levy such a tax.
- Water resources: Water is essential to the gas extraction process; however, drinking water quality may also be affected should anything go wrong with the drilling. Given that much of the water in the Marcellus region flows down state toward Philadelphia and other cities, this issue became a statewide concern.

The nature of the Marcellus Formation makes it challenging to extract the natural gas, and the solution companies have developed to address that challenge makes water resources one of the most significant issues in the debate over Marcellus Shale.

Hydraulic fracturing is a process by which fissures holding pockets of natural gas deep within the shale are broken up so that gas may be released and pumped to the surface (Sjolander, Clark, Rizzo, & Turack, 2011). The process involves driving a conventional vertical well deep into the

ground, then gradually turning a pipe horizontally along the seams of the shale. This horizontal pipe could stretch for as long as 5,000 feet. In order to expand the natural fissures that contain gas and to smooth the way for it to come to the surface, between 3 and 5 million gallons of water mixed with a small amount of chemicals is pumped under high pressure into the shale (Brzycki, 2011). While hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, allows companies to pull more gas from the ground, the process also poses a number of potential water quality threats. The process forces chemically-tinged water into the shale; while much of it returns to the pipe, some may be forced beyond the shale into other layers. The pressurized water may rupture the pipes carrying it, thus releasing the chemical mix into the ground water. The water used in fracking usually returns to the surface during drilling, where it must be stored and disposed of. The water used in the process must be hauled to and from the drilling sites, and, for some time, no universal plan existed for the disposal of the waste water. For example, some municipalities allowed the water to be dumped in their waste water treatment facilities until it was discovered that they might not be able to filter out all the chemicals used.

While all the issues mentioned above are important and interwoven, this study focuses on the issue of fracking and its impact on water quality. This issue has generated much of the public debate about drilling in the Marcellus Shale Region of Pennsylvania, primarily related to three important water-resource concerns raised by gas production: 1) supplying water for well construction without impacting local water resources; 2) avoiding degradation of small watersheds and streams as substantial amounts of heavy equipment and supplies are moved around on rural roads; and 3) determining proper methods for the safe disposal of the large quantities of potentially contaminated fluids recovered from the wells (Soeder & Kappel, 2009, para. 9).

The next section outlines the methods used in examining the direct and indirect issue strategies activists and their target organizations employed in their website communication and in key media outlets since the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) launched an investigation of fracking and its impact on water quality in March 2010.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Pro-drilling and anti-drilling actors and coalitions entered the public debate in 2008, with both the Marcellus Shale Coalition and Marcellus Protest, and their supporters, developing website presences and generating increasing media coverage and public discussion. This study analyzes their discourse surrounding the Marcellus Shale development between the March 2010 EPA announcement that “it will conduct a two-year study to investigate potential adverse impact of hydraulic fracturing on water quality and public health” and March, 2012.

This analysis examined the direct and indirect issue strategies mentioned earlier. Direct strategies were those meant to advance advocates’ positions on an issue. In this case, the issue of water quality related to fracking was the focus. Therefore, direct strategies meant to either change fracking regulations or to defend the status quo were examined. Indirect strategies generally seek to legitimize both activists and corporations responding to activist pressure. Scholars (Coombs, 1992; Crable & Vibbert, 1985; Heath & Palenchar, 2009) have identified a variety of legitimacy strategies through which advocates seek to establish their authority to “speak” on public policy

issues (Coombs, 1992). The current analysis was thematic, seeking direct and indirect strategies in practice and grouping them into lines of arguments prominently featured in the discourse during the two years under study.

The sources for this discourse were the Web sites of the two leading pro- and anti-fracking advocates: the industry group called The Marcellus Shale Coalition and the activist umbrella organization Marcellus Protest. In order to verify the extent to which these strategies influenced the public discourse and policy decisions, this study examined public communication in prominent Pennsylvania (*Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, and *Williamsport Sun-Gazette*) and national (*The New York Times* and *Christian Science Monitor*) media by key anti-drilling organizations, which are identified in the next section.

## **MARCELLUS SHALE ACTIVISM**

The coalition of activist organizations against drilling can be located through Marcellus Protest, an alliance of western Pennsylvania groups & individuals “building a broad movement to stop the destruction of our environment and communities caused by Marcellus Shale gas drilling as well as to support other directly affected communities” (About Marcellus Protest, n.d.). The website is an information clearing house about Marcellus Shale gas drilling and activism and related issues, and notes that more than 90 organizations are active in this issue. The organizations that are represented most in media coverage, with their leaders as sources when issue developments occur, are Citizens for Pennsylvania’s Future (PennFuture), Damascus Citizens for Sustainability (DCS), Delaware Riverkeeper Network (DRN), PennEnvironment, Earthjustice, and the Philadelphia chapter of Sierra Club. Anti-drilling activists (especially DCS, to whom the film was dedicated) were aided by the release of *Gasland*, an anti-drilling HBO documentary that presented a “devastating, though factually challenged, industry portrait” (“Shale gas industry,” 2010). Said Jan Jarrett, executive director of PennFuture, “Whatever you think of the film, it’s had a huge impact” (“Shale gas industry,” 2010), winning Sundance Film Festival and Academy Awards.

This section examines the indirect and direct strategies employed by the Marcellus Shale activist coalition in order to argue about the issue of fracking, establish its legitimacy as an advocate, and to question the legitimacy of pro-drilling energy companies and positions.

### **Indirect Strategies**

Activists used indirect issue strategies to create a favorable environment of public opinion about the advocates and their positions by (1) building the premises of their direct strategies into their organizational identity, (2) establishing the right of activists and local citizens to have a voice in drilling decisions and, and (3) arguing for transparency.

Most organizations begin building their identity through mission statements and other messages meant to establish the values that will guide organizational decisions and discourse (Cheney & Vibbert, 1987), and which are visible on their websites. In addition to the positioning of the activist coalition identified on the MarcellusProtest.org site, opposition to gas drilling features prominently on activists’ websites. For example, Damascus Citizens for Sustainability identifies

itself as “a collaborative effort to preserve and protect clean air, land and water as a civil and basic human right in the face of the threat posed by the shale gas extraction industry” ([www.damascuscitizensforsustainability.org/about-us/](http://www.damascuscitizensforsustainability.org/about-us/)). Founded in January 2008, some consider DCS “the leading group in the opposition movement, mounting a highly visible and pointed campaign to ultimately halt gas drilling’s march toward this area” (Hust, 2010, para. 5). PennFuture, focused on conservation of natural resources, lays out a “10-point plan to set world-class standards for drilling, and to make sure those standards are enforced” (Media Room/Testimony, n.d.).

A second indirect strategy centered on establishing the legitimacy of activists in participating in decision making about gas drilling, and the related strategy of arguing for transparency in the process. For example, activists stressed that “citizens need to be at the table, not locked out of the room” (Coulombis, 2011, para. 20). Likewise, activists warned town councils that they would be committing “political suicide” if voters were not allowed to decide the issue of local drilling (Crompton, 2011, para. 9). Meetings on the issue draw large crowds of citizens who look to help from local and state government and regulatory agencies because they “believe local people should be able to decide” (Majors, 2011, para. 14). The call for energy companies’ and government bodies’ transparency and release of documents was often connected to promoting citizen activists’ voice in decision making. PennFuture’s Jarrett suggested that limited public access to recommendations about whether to tax or regulate energy companies “begs the question about whether the outcome is completely controlled and predetermined by the administration,” (para. 17). Likewise, Jarrett and other environmental leaders pressed for information to be made accessible in Pennsylvania as it is in other drilling states (Napsha, 2011).

### **Direct Strategies**

Direct issue strategies employed by activists, designed to clearly debate an issue and the merits of particular policy options and to influence the outcome or decision about gas drilling 1) called for regulations on fracking to ensure safe environmental and health standards are met, and 2) opposed natural gas development in the absence of thorough investigation and safe standards. Activists’ first direct strategy was to call for stronger regulations and standards, based on environmental studies (which they pressed to have access to in the indirect strategy discussed earlier) and reported dangers to residents’ and animal health. Activists claimed that state government and agencies were failing to protect public health, and were not exercising their power to regulate (Majors, 2011). When Gov. Corbett rescinded the previous administration’s stricter regulations on natural gas drilling, PennFuture claimed the state Department of Environmental Protection was giving up a “valuable tool for evaluating and reducing air pollution” (Worden, 2011, para. 5). Environmental activists pushed for, and were successful in, broadening the application of a new local impact fee on energy companies to pay the cost of drilling-related damage not only to community infrastructures but also to the restoration of land, wildlife, and outdoor recreation areas (Coulombis & Olson, 2011).

Second, activists lobbied council members to oppose gas development, saying that the hydraulic fracturing process used to extract gas represents an imminent threat to the city’s water in the absence of conclusive studies and regulations to ensure safe drilling standards. For example, PennEnvironment and Delaware Riverkeeper Network called for the Philadelphia Water Department to be more assertive and “take an aggressive stand against natural gas development”

(Maykuth, 2010, para. 1). In August 2011, environmental groups filed a federal lawsuit to stop the Delaware River Basin Commission from adopting any regulations to allow more drilling until a “broad, cumulative-impact study is completed” (Bauers, 2011, para. 13).

Pro-drilling organizations, identified in the next section, also attempted to influence public discourse and policy decision making with their communication strategies and tactics. The next section analyzes their public communication in prominent Pennsylvania (*Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, and *Williamsport Sun-Gazette*) and national (*The New York Times* and *Christian Science Monitor*) media.

## **THE ENERGY INDUSTRY RESPONDS: INSTITUTIONAL TARGET STRATEGIES**

The Marcellus Shale Coalition (MSC) is a membership-based trade association formed in 2008 whose 200-plus members range from major energy companies involved in drilling to associated businesses such as law firms, water treatment and disposal companies, and even realtors.

Because the MSC views itself as “the leader in framing the issues in the Marcellus Shale region” (“Making Connections”), this analysis will focus on how this institutional target engages with activists. The organization employs a blend of centralized and decentralized approaches to managing issues. The MSC itself is the source of most formal statements, press releases, and social media messages related to Marcellus Shale issues; however, coalition members conducted nearly 1800 outreach events and 543 site tours in 2010 (“Making Connections,” 2011). Not only did these approaches serve to extend the reach of the MSC, but also allowed the Coalition to distance itself when specific member organizations faced controversy.

This section examines the indirect and direct strategies employed by the MCS in order to argue about the issue of fracking, establish its legitimacy as an advocate, and to question the legitimacy of other players in the debate.

### **Indirect Strategies**

Indirect issue strategies seek to position an institution as a credible advocate on the issue. MSC sought to create such an environment by (1) building the premises of its direct strategies into its organizational identity; (2) claiming that its approach to communication was transparent, and (3) privileging “local” over “national” or “outside” media and regulators.

Like anti-drilling activists, the Marcellus Shale Coalition attempted to unify the identity of allied energy companies through mission statements and other messages meant to establish the values that guide its actions. MSC created the premises for its claims by declaring it was “an organization committed to the responsible development of natural gas from the Marcellus Shale geological formation and the enhancement of the region’s economy that can be realized by this clean-burning energy source” (About Marcellus Shale Coalition, n.d.).

When the EPA announced it would conduct a comprehensive review of fracking (“EPA Initiates,” 2010), the MSC response read, in part: “The members of the Marcellus Shale Coalition develop and drill wells in an *environmentally responsible* manner, including the use of

hydraulic fracturing to complete a well for production” (“MSC Statement on EPA Study,” 2010 emphasis added).

Another way in which the MSC established the premises of its direct strategies was to establish and publicize its “Guiding Principles.” Announced in October, 2010, with the help of the popular former Pennsylvania governor and Homeland Security Chief Tom Ridge (“A Commitment to the Community,” 2010), the principles were subtitled “Our Commitment to the Community,” another indirect strategy that will be explored below. Among the principles were: “We implement state-of-the-art *environmental protection* across our operations;” “We continuously improve our practices and *seek transparency* in our operations;” and “We encourage spirited public dialogue and *fact-based education* about *responsible* shale gas development” (“Guiding Principles,” 2010, emphasis added). Throughout the document, MSC was positioning itself as a responsible, transparent representative of the energy industry.

Establishing the MSC’s approach to debate as “transparent” and “fact-based” is a second major indirect strategy. In public arguments, one means by which parties establish legitimacy is by fighting fairly—that is, they appear to support standards of civil dialogue. MSC’s executive director argued that “...seeking greater transparency in our operations...is one of the Marcellus Shale Coalition’s Guiding Principles. We recognize the need to operate and communicate in a clear and forthright manner. It’s good business, and it’s good public relations” (Klaber, 2011, p. 40).

The final major indirect strategy is to privilege “local” approaches to engaging in disputes over fracking. This strategy took two forms. First, MSC tended to privilege local media coverage over national, implying that local coverage was less biased against MSC. In our review of media stories, those in the mid-sized Williamsport *Sun-Gazette* tended to represent industry perspectives more thoroughly than the Philadelphia *Inquirer* or Pittsburgh *Post-Gazette*. Second, MSC favored local regulatory solutions over federal. The Pennsylvania state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) was often cited as the principal authority over regulatory decisions influencing fracking.

## **Direct Strategies**

In engaging anti-fracking activists and other critics, the MSC utilized three related direct strategies: (1) insisting on transparent, fact-based review of any charges of ground-water contamination; (2) using “local” third party legitimacy to bolster its position, and (3) strategic defiance, criticizing “outside” actors but generally not local ones.

Flowing from the indirect strategy promoting the value of transparency, the MSC addressed issues by advocating for fact-based approaches. When the EPA announced it was going to launch a review of fracking, the MSC’s statement, after pointing out that no evidence of water contamination as a result of fracking had been found, indicated that “The MSC will provide information and participate as appropriate in EPA’s study...an objective evaluation of hydraulic fracturing will reach the same conclusion...that it is a safe and well-regulated process that is essential to the development of natural gas” (“MSC Statement on EPA” 2010).

In succeeding months, the MSC voluntarily released a list of chemicals used in fracking (“MSC on New Hydraulic Fracturing,” 2011); joined environmentalists’ calls for baseline measures of water quality across the region in order to demonstrate that oil production did not make the water any worse (“MSC: New, Fact Based Standards,” 2011); and argued that many other things could contaminate ground water (“About that water,” 2010; “In the know on H2O,” 2010).

In addition to marshaling scientific evidence to refute critics, the MSC relied on third-party endorsements of its claims that fracking is a safe practice. More specifically, the MSC highlighted support it gained locally, primarily from state government officials and other regional organizations. The most frequently cited third party was the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (DEP).

In its first response to the federal EPA’s review, the MSC cited the fact that no problems have been found in wells cleared by fracking: “There have been no identified groundwater contamination incidents due to hydraulic fracturing, as noted by the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, other state regulators and the U.S. Groundwater Protection Council” (“MSC Statement on EPA,” 2010). A later release featured a DEP regulator reiterating that claim and adding “it’s standard operating procedure in Pennsylvania. And it’s important to point out that we’ve never seen an impact to fresh groundwater directly from fracking” (“In his own words,” 2010). The contrast between local and federal perspectives was emphasized in this statement: “As EPA’s study moves forward, it’s critical to consider what the top officials responsible for regulating fracturing in the Commonwealth have said” (“In his own words,” 2010).

In the following months, 34 press releases and statements featured quotes from DEP officials, or the results of DEP studies. In only two did the MSC question the DEP’s regulatory action. In order to forestall criticism that the MSC may have been working too closely with the state regulators, one release reported that “Pennsylvania officials’ oversight and regulation of hydraulic fracturing...is among the strongest in the nation” (“National Panel,” 2010).

Finally, the MSC utilized a form of what Oliver (1991) labeled defiance, which typically not only involves rejecting critics’ arguments but also undermining their legitimacy. In this case, though, the defiance was largely directed at “non-local” critics, both activists and the media. For instance, after the Philadelphia city council banned its own municipally-owned Gas Works from buying Marcellus-produced gas, the MSC labeled the action “misguided” and based on a report that advanced “a political narrative that is completely unmoored from the facts” (“MSC statement on Philadelphia,” 2011).

A more striking example of defiantly undermining the legitimacy of “outside” critics was the MSC response to an Associated Press story alleging problems with wastewater disposal. Calling the story a “hit piece,” the MSC cited stories slamming the AP story from local outlets such as the *Central Pennsylvania Business Journal*, the *Allentown Morning Call*, the *Washington Observer Reporter*, and the *Wilkes-Barre Times Leader*, among others (“AP style?”, 2011).

Like the pro-drilling coalition, activists utilized both indirect and direct strategies to bolster their own legitimacy and undermine that of their opponents. The next section summarizes two features

of direct and indirect strategies found in this study that may guide further research and practice, and offers suggestions for future research in natural gas drilling and other public policy issues.

## CONCLUSION

This study offers a snapshot of the intricacies of the interaction between activists and their institutional targets. The use of direct and indirect strategies, key components of nearly every public relations program, was highlighted. Indeed, one justification for having a public relations function is to create a favorable environment, through indirect strategies, that allow an organization to ask for public acceptance of its products, services and positions it takes on issues.

This analysis demonstrates two features of direct and indirect strategies that may guide further research and practice. First, indirect strategies provide rhetorical flexibility by appealing to values and legitimacy. Indeed, both the Marcellus Shale activists and their targets appealed to the same values to guide the public deliberation over the region's development. For instance, both sides argued that "transparency" should guide the research and investigation into the benefits and harms of drilling. However, activists questioned the degree to which the MSC lived up to that standard, thus raising legitimacy questions. Values themselves become the subject of debate during the policy process.

Second, the direct strategies enacted by both sides not only attacked and defended each side's legitimacy, but also attack and defend the legitimacy of other actors in the policy-making process. For instance, the Marcellus Shale Coalition invoked the legitimacy of the DEP, while Marcellus Protest sought to undermine that strategy by questioning the DEP's lack of independence from the industry. The legitimacy of the DEP as a regulatory body in this process thus became an issue itself. Complex issues often are debated at the local, regional, state, and federal levels, and the locus of policy decision-making becomes part of the policy debate. One extension of the present work examines how each side in the Marcellus Shale debate bolstered and undermined the legitimacy of various decision-making bodies (Smith & Ferguson, 2012).

The debate over Marcellus Shale development is only beginning, thus providing the opportunity for longitudinal studies of the interaction between pro- and anti-natural gas drilling coalitions. Like the Marcellus Shale formation itself, the rich interaction between activists and their institutional targets in this case can be mined at various levels, and further research will examine the layers of other issues involved in this significant energy policy debate. For example, while broad studies like this one yield insight into the major strategies of activists and their institutional targets, much of the debate occurs at the community level and often pits groups of residents against each other. In addition, the energy industry has engaged in a significant amount of image advertising, seeking to position natural gas as a clean, inexpensive energy alternative. Recently, America's Natural Gas Alliance (ANGA) has sought to partner with university public relations students to create and promote a campaign meant to legitimize natural gas. Future research into how specific activist and target organizations, in specific locations, debate specific issues related to natural gas drilling, and the image repair strategies they engage, would yield additional understanding about multiple areas of activist-target communication in the public sphere.

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