Frackademia, Divestment, and the Limits of Academic Freedom

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Abstract

“Frackademia” is a term coined by liberal bloggers used to describe the flow of money and influence from oil and gas companies to universities. As such, frackademia is a useful construct that builds on scholarship examining ways in which the appearance of scientific “doubt” is manufactured through the use of academic authority and status. But the concept is also a fruitful one for analyzing the ways in which the oil and gas industry can exert influence on university campuses, and in particular how they invoke common sense discourses—ones that seem politically neutral—to advance their agendas.

Frackademia allows us to reflect on three ways in which oil and gas is changing academic freedom in the US. First, the industry uses political and economic leverage to give universities flak for expressing views that critique fossil fuels or climate change. Second, they exploit the corporatization of the American university by encouraging the erosion of traditional models of academic governance and promoting the “scientization” of the academy. Third, they increasingly colonize academic space, meaning they occupy space on academic campuses, both physically and metaphorically, and police forums of academic speech in which corporate interests are implicitly or explicitly critiqued.
Introduction

“Frackademia” is a term initially coined by liberal bloggers used to describe the flow of money and influence from oil and gas companies to universities. This money is used to shape knowledge and discourse about oil and gas activities such as “fracking,” and is usually used as shorthand for the corporate capture of traditionally “neutral” university research. In particular, bloggers such as Steve Horn at DeSmog Blog decry the release of supposedly “objective” reports coming out of university departments, penned by university-affiliated faculty, or published by university-affiliated institutes that are in fact authored by faculty or others with strong ties to or history with the oil and gas industry (Horn, 2012a). Horn calls these kinds of reports “shill gas studies.” “When does a study on the unconventional shale gas industry become a ‘shill gas study’?” Horn asks. “The quick answer: when nearly everyone writing and peer reviewing it has close ties to the industry they're purportedly doing an ‘objective’ study on” (Horn, 2012a).

As such, frackademia is a useful construct that builds on scholarship examining ways in which scientific “doubt” is manufactured by academics, scientists, or engineers who have status and authority because of their affiliation with universities (Ceccarelli, 2011); (Oreskes & Conway, 2010). Frackademia certainly aims to sow public doubt about science, as is the case with the “tobacco strategy” described by Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway. “Frackademics” produce reports that tend to downplay public health or environmental risks of fracking, for example. However, frackademics also produce research that is both instrumentally useful to the industry—they provide the industry with information that actually improves oil and gas operations—and that provides the industry with a veneer of objectivity and prestige (Goozner & Gable, 2008). One scholar on the
oil and gas university connection notes, “The imprimatur of a university brings much-needed prestige, recognition and legitimacy to research, and that’s why industry has always tried to associate with academic bodies” (qtd. in Basu, 2012).

But limiting the concept of frackademia to identifying which scholars have ties to industry—however that is identified—has its practical limits. For example, as is the case with nuclear power professionals, experts in petroleum engineering, geology, and geophysics often move back and forth from industry. Universities with programs in these areas see this movement as an advantage because such professionals bring students “real world” experience, which better prepares them for future careers. Furthermore, because hydrofracturing operations are highly technical, expertise from the field is often necessary for effective report-writing, grant-seeking, and publication. It is also in the public interest for regulators to be trained in the technologies they are supposed to be watching over. Finally, it is worth saying that merely accepting industry funds does not automatically mean that one’s work is biased or flawed (see Wogan, 2013), though many cases of oil and gas pressuring academics to produce particular types of research after receiving funding have been noted (Goozner & Gable, 2008); (Dodge, 2012); (Elgin, 2015). The American Association of University Professors (AAUP), for example, does not support bans on researchers accepting funding from particular industries because “the distinction between degrees of corporate misdeeds is too uncertain to sustain a clear, consistent and principled policy for determining which research funds to accept and which to reject” (qtd. in Jaschik, 2007).

Nonetheless, frackademia remains a fruitful site for rhetorical analysis because of the ways it invokes tropes of balance, “scientization,” and innovation, all in order to
shape the contemporary American university in ways that serve the interests of oil and gas. Most universities actively and explicitly support and nurture these three values. For example, universities typically aim to present students with a wide variety of perspectives, which could be thought of as “balance” on a grand scale, and at its best represents the plurality and breadth promised, for example, by a liberal arts education. “Scientization” is a term meant to reflect the dominance of rational, data-driven decisionmaking and leadership. At its best, it reflects systematic modes of analysis and the use of data to support conclusions. Finally, innovation has since the postwar era been a key value of the American university (Bush, 1945); (Atkinson & Blanpied, 2008)(Goozner & Gable, 2008) and private-public partnerships are nothing new. When functioning well, innovation encourages robust research and development enterprises and can spur economic growth and technological progress (Atkinson & Blanpied, 2008).

However, rhetorics invoking balance, scientization, and innovation have their shadow sides, which are made visible through an analysis of how they are invoked by frackademia. Because the industry point of view is understood to be the mainstream or commonsense point of view at the universities under study, arguments opposing or critiquing that worldview are deemed radical or extreme and must be “balanced” or disciplined. Industry viewpoints require no such balance because they are simply “objective,” or represent “reality.” Similarly, scientization can be used to replicate the corporate model within the university system, which brings along with it rhetorics of precarity, inappropriate metrics to measure success, inadequate vertical leadership structures, and poor oversight mechanisms that allow for academic freedom to be squelched in the name of efficiency. And finally, innovation—the sacred cow of
rhetorics of progress at both universities and beyond—can also be used to motivate university-industry partnerships in which power and knowledge are exploited and manipulated.

None of these rhetorics are necessarily specific to oil and gas influence on the American university; they are not particular to frackademia. Examples of rhetorics of balance, scientization, and innovation are found across disciplines, institutions, and industries and might be more properly be attributed to the neoliberalization of the university (Olssen & Peters, 2005); (Barkawi, 2013); (Hall, Massey, & Rustin, 2015); (Hearn, 2015); But in many states, universities are particularly prone to exploitation by oil and gas specifically, given its enormous resources and the likelihood that university systems have been dramatically underfunded. As such, frackademia offers a fascinating site of study for understanding broader processes of neoliberalization and the rhetorical strategies of that particular industry vis-à-vis knowledge production.

Frackademia allows us to reflect on three ways in which oil and gas is changing academic freedom in the US. First, the industry uses political and economic leverage to give universities flak for hosting views that critique fossil fuels or climate change. Flak is typically accompanied by the rhetoric of balance referred to above. Second, oil and gas exploits the corporatization of the American university by encouraging the erosion of traditional models of academic governance and promoting the “scientization” of the academy. Third, the industry increasingly colonizes academic space, meaning they occupy space on academic campuses, both physically and metaphorically, and police forums of academic speech in which corporate interests are implicitly or explicitly critiqued. The door through which they walk is labeled “innovation.” As such,
“frackademia” can be understood as both a cause and a symptom of a larger restructuring of the public American university. This restructuring is shaping the public missions of universities such that they look more like private institutions serving a few particularly powerful private sectors.

**Frackademia and Corporate Influence on Campuses**

Liberal bloggers and public interest groups use the term “frackademia” to define the increasingly “cozy ties between Big Gas and institutions of higher learning” (Schiffman, 2013). As state governments approve large cuts to the funding of higher education institutions—sometimes in the billions of dollars—oil and gas companies have increasingly stepped into those funding voids (Schiffman, 2013); (Horn, 2012b). Such funding, and the influence it buys, can come in many forms, such as paying for research facilities, sponsoring conferences, and funding particular types of research (Schiffman, 2013). This research is almost always “directed toward finding more efficient and cheaper ways of getting gas out of the ground,” rather than studying its environmental and public health effects (Schiffman, 2013).

Universities that engage in partnerships with oil and gas gain funding and visibility in an era of increasingly strained state support; for its part, oil and gas can lay claim to credibility and objectivity gleaned from the reputation of universities that claim to provide “sound” science. One oil and gas spokesman, referring to the creation of a controversial research institute at State University of New York Buffalo, argues that it's crucial for industry to “seek out academic studies and champion with universities—because that again provides tremendous credibility to the overall process.” (Horn,
2012b); see also (Robison, 2012). One law scholar noted that, “When research is associated with a university, lawmakers take notice and the public notices too” (qtd. in (Basu, 2012). Centers such as SUNY Buffalo’s Shale Resources and Society Institute (SRSI), the University of Wyoming’s Center for Energy Economics and Public Policy, the University of Texas’ Center for Petroleum and Geosystems and Engineering, MIT’s Energy Initiative, and the Marcellus Shale Coalition, which claimed to be affiliated with Penn State, all work to leverage this public recognition (Robison, 2012); (Galbraith, 2012)(“Frackademia scandals,” 2013).

Yet the very credibility the oil and gas industry seeks may be threatened by academic partnerships that lack clear oversight, particularly when it comes to transparency. According to Cary Nelson, president of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), the industry is “buying the prestige” of university affiliation, but universities most susceptible to private influence are “sometimes not transparent about funding nor vigilant enough to prevent financial interests from shaping research findings” (qtd. in (Efstathiou, Jr., 2012). The Shale Resources and Society Institute (SRSI) at SUNY Buffalo, for example, came under fire because it claimed to be an honest broker with regard to shale gas. Its website stated as much:

[SUNY Buffalo] is a large, comprehensive public university with no institutional conflicts, property or vested interest in the Marcellus or Utica Shale plays — unlike industry or advocacy-based groups. Thus, it is well equipped to be a purveyor of sound, unbiased information. (qtd. in (Robison, 2012)

Soon after opening its doors, the SRSI published a report on the environmental impacts of fracking—which it found to be underwhelming—yet most of the authors had ties to the
oil and gas industry, which were not disclosed (Horn, 2012b). Similar cases occurred at the University of Texas, Austin, and at Pennyslvania State University (Basu, 2012); (Galbraith, 2012); (Wilder, 2012).

Lack of transparency, therefore, remains a key feature of the “frackademia” landscape. Bloggers interested in shedding light on “frackademic” practices highlight the lack of transparency accompanying industry-funded academic research, typically via institutes such as the SRSI. Of greatest concern is when researchers—whether they are working on fracking or climate change—do not disclose their connections to oil and gas (Goldman, 2015). Bloggers also frequently note that industry-funded research—which may be flawed, or unnecessarily flattering to industry practices—often has policy impacts. The SRSI report mentioned above was used to “defend hydrofracking during May 31 testimony delivered to the House of Representatives Committee on Oversight and Government Reform” in Pennsylvania. (Robison, 2012). Another report, this one from the Marcellus Shale Coalition and bearing the Penn State logo (which was later retracted), was used to persuade “lawmakers to reject a tax hike because the report claimed it would harm industry growth” (Efstathiou, Jr., 2012).

In addition to describing academic research favorable to industry interests, the term “frackademia” also describes the emergence of state laws that permit fracking on state-owned university campuses, such as in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Colorado, West Virginia, and Texas (Schiffman, 2013); (Horn, 2012c). As such, these universities become sites not just of knowledge production that benefits the industry, but of oil and gas production themselves. We might see this as another reaction to the vulnerability state university systems feel as their annual budgets continue to be slashed; the
willingness to “frack the campus” for short-term financial gain may make sense for cash-strapped institutions. Or, fracking campuses may also be understood as evidence of an ideological stance that views oil and gas operations as both natural and necessary elements of a landscape in which economic growth is paramount while the risks of fracking are downplayed or ignored. In the next section, I suggest that both of these pressures are a result of the neoliberalization of the university, which poses serious questions for academics who wish to question or critique the influence of oil and gas on the environment, health, and social organization.

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Works Cited


