THE MONSTER ON THE HILL: A STORY OF ENVIRONMENTAL INJUSTICE IN
APPALACHIA

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**Introduction**

My growing awareness for issues pertaining to environmental injustice in Appalachia — which developed over the course of my college education — initiated my desire to produce a body of work that explores this topic. Although I had some prior knowledge pertaining to both the region and the environmental issues at hand, it was not until my time at Ohio University, located in Athens County, Ohio, that I consciously considered the two as interconnected issues. Prior to my post-secondary education, I linked environmental injustice and industrial pollution solely to marginalized populations residing in urban areas. While that relationship is prevalent and true, rural low-income areas, such as those in Athens County, likewise have been and continue to be impacted by the environmental degradation by entities like the chemical and oil and gas industries.

Polluted urban and rural areas are examples of “environmental sacrifice zones,” which can be defined as any geographic area disproportionately impaired by environmental damage, due to socioeconomic status. This applies to Athens County — the poorest county in the state of Ohio — which has a history of suffering from environmental damages related to industrial extraction practices, such as coal mining. Despite attempts by federal agencies to reduce public health threats related to environmental degradation in the United States, poor communities tend to receive less protection than communities that are affluent and have a majority white population (Bullard, 1994, p.10).

For this project, I chose the K&H Partners injection wells in Torch, Ohio — located in eastern Athens County — as the focal point of the stories I have written. Over the years of strengthening my familiarity with the issues, I have met and developed
relationships with several sources residing near the facility, who have compelling stories regarding their experiences with the facility, as well as with their fears about how it will impact their health and safety.

The K&H is a Class II injection well, designated to dispose of wastewater related to oil and gas production. There are various types of injection wells, classified according to descending degrees of toxicity, from Class I, to Class VI. Class II wells are the only wells specifically created for the oil and gas industry. This allows for the unmonitored disposal of oil and gas waste products. In this case, the waste the K&H receives comes from the oil and gas extraction practice of hydraulic fracturing.

Hydraulic fracturing, also known as fracking, is an extraction technique in which water, sand and various chemicals are blasted into the ground at high pressure, often a mile or more. This fluid mixture fractures and opens up the layers of shale formations underground, releasing the gas and oil to flow out to the head of the well. What also flows out are waste fluids, comprised of the materials used in the extraction process, which contain known carcinogens and volatile chemicals and hydrocarbons that are extremely flammable, such as methane. The water is also enriched with radium, as the deep layers of shale that are being fracked are highly radioactive, and contain high amounts of salt.

In addition to the scientific side of the potential dangers of frack waste, I sought to write about the power imbalances between the industries and the residents they impact, as well as with the regulatory agencies that fail to establish safeguards against the environmental damages the residents protest. There are also issues of transparency that I wanted to explore. In the case of the well in Torch, the residents I spoke to had no prior
knowledge of the well’s existence until questioning the Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR). Ohio laws only require well permit applicants to place a five day public notice in a newspaper of general circulation where the well is to be located, even during a time where newspaper readership is steadily declining. In the case of the K&H well, it was published in the *Athens Messenger*, a publication which is not widely circulated in Torch, which is about 20 miles east of Athens. The public comment period that follows, the time allotted for appeals, closes after 15 days. This is why many Torch residents felt excluded from the conversation, and that they were not given a chance to even understand the practices they object to. I found this particularly troubling.

My goal was to show that the outrage of the residents is not unfounded: there is research that points to the potential dangers injection wells may pose to water supplies, which is a fear of theirs. Another is that these wells have the inclination to be explosive, as they contain several volatile organic compounds, which was mentioned earlier; there are already several documented incidents where wells have burst into flames, triggered by things such as lightning strikes. The residents also complain of fumes, smells, and noise from truck traffic.

I also wanted to delve deeper into the region’s history with industry-related environmental degradation, such as with the chemical giant DuPont’s C8 contamination of the Ohio River. The C8 contamination has been linked to numerous cancer cases of residents who consumed the affected water supplies — which the company had known about for years, without disclosing it to the public (Dutton, 2003). These are the same people who protest the injection wells now, as they no longer want to be victimized by the industry’s malpractice and lack of transparency.
The stories I wrote are works of advocacy journalism, not intended to be published in traditional news media. Advocacy journalism, in a few words, can be defined as a form of reporting that embraces a non-objective viewpoint, being transparent with readers about what this viewpoint is. The reporting is intended to be factual, especially with environmental advocacy journalism that relies on science and research to support the claims that are made in the writing. The bias is intentional, so this journalism is in a separate category from both propaganda and “media bias.” Examples of publications that embrace this type of reporting are ClimateWire, The Daily Climate, the Pulitzer Prize-winning website InsideClimate News, and the progressive magazine Mother Jones, which offers commentary on environmental issues as well.

With the scientific evidence I have collected through my research, and the anecdotal accounts of the affected residents, I aim to arouse empathy and curiosity from the readers at hand through written and visual elements, packaged onto the website, www.themonsteronthehill.com (the password is monster — it is password protected in case of future publishing). The information I collected has led me to draw my own conclusion on this topic, and because of my above intentions, this would put me in a position of bias. Although my work may not have a tangible effect on the issue, I seek to heighten awareness, at least to some, of the issue’s existence by amplifying the voices of the residents I have met.

**Literature Review**

Advocacy journalism is undoubtedly met by criticism, especially from journalists reporting for traditional news media. The ethics and legitimacy of advocacy journalists
are often questioned, as their motives and intentions for their work are clearly aligned with the organizations and goals they support — and this clashes with the codes of ethics written by well-established journalism organizations. I must acknowledge these arguments to defend, as well as critique, my own work as an advocacy journalist. I will also consider the qualities attributed to responsible environmental reporting, whether that is currently practiced in modern news media, and where advocacy journalism fits in this conversation. This literature review examines these questions by looking at the characteristics of environmental advocacy journalism and whether the elements of subjectivity can detract from the legitimacy of reporting. I will also explore the argument that traditional journalism is superior when reporting on these issues.

**Advocacy journalism, NGO’s, and transparency**

The Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) is the oldest organization representing journalists in the United States. Its Code of Ethics states that journalists must avoid conflicts of interest, which means to act within the concerns and intentions of an organization would be incompatible with conducting journalism. It expands on that by outlining the several ways journalists would violate this principle, which includes working in a campaign and lobbying, among other activities (Brown, n.d.), both of which are aspects of the non-governmental organization, Greenpeace, where veteran investigative journalist Phil Vine now works.

Vine (2017), who works at Greenpeace of New Zealand, writes about this in his article published in the *Pacific Journalism Review*: “When is a journalist not a journalist? Negotiating a new form of advocacy journalism within the environmental movement”.
Greenpeace is an NGO dedicated to campaigning against environmental threats such as climate change — through methods like direct action and lobbying. They hired Vine for his investigative journalism skills, along with his 25 years of experience in the field. Since joining the organization in January of 2017, Vine has been questioned by former colleagues about the ethics of his decision to join the NGO. Colin Peacock made Vine the topic of an episode of Mediawatch, a New Zealand podcast dedicated to critically look at the country’s various news media outlets. On the podcast, Peacock asked, “Is he kidding himself?” in regards to Vine’s audacity to hold onto his title as a journalist, despite involvement with the organization (Peacock, 2017). The National Business Review, New Zealand’s main business publication, asked Vine directly: “Do you have a moral problem with this?” (Rotherham, “Greenpeace investigative team to target NZ corporates”). These types of questions are commonplace in conversations surrounding the ethics of advocacy journalism.

It is important to critically analyze the argument of legacy media outlets, which is that journalists lose their credibility once assuming the role of an activist. Vine (2017) writes:

“One of the interesting lines of attack from mainstream media was that a journalist working with an NGO like Greenpeace could not be trusted. This points to a possible reason for the fallout from a crisis of credibility facing mainstream media with one symptom” (p. 45).

A 2012 Gallup poll reported that 60 percent of Americans have “little or no trust
in the mass media to report the news fully, accurately and fairly” (Reavy, 2013). The goals of legacy media organizations to remain an objective source of news and information have been ineffective as far as garnering public trust. Interestingly, according to the 2017 Acumen Edelman Trust Barometer, NGO’s surpassed media by eleven percentage points — 58 percent vs. 47 percent — in the U.S. (Edelman, 2017). Vine (2017) writes: “It could be said that my going across to ‘the dark side’ has substantially lifted my credibility with the public, if not with fellow journalists,” (p. 47).

There is some validity to the arguments of Vine’s critics, however, in terms of the ethical practices detracting from the credibility of journalists engaged in activism. In August of 2015, Greenpeace published an exposé on two academics — both climate change skeptics — who agreed to write about the benefits of coal use and carbon emissions. The academics were approached by the journalists, who were posing as energy company representatives, inviting them to participate in research funded by their fake companies. An article by Matthew Powers (2015) of *The Conversation* questions the ethics of this method, even if deceptive reporting can be justified at times — such as the groundbreaking reporting of Nelly Bly, who in 1887 exposed the conditions inside psychiatric wards by posing as a patient.

*The Conversation* article acknowledges that arguments in favor of deceptive reporting “center on the disparity between the small deceits required of reporters and the larger deceptions they reveal” (Powers, 2015). However, the article notes that in September of 2015, another environmental advocacy publication, *InsideClimate News*, utilized leaks, lawsuits and freedom of information requests to expose what ExxonMobil knew about climate change, and its efforts to prevent public action (Powers, 2015).
Even if Vine urges that NGO’s tend to have a better track record of credibility than the media as a whole, deceptive reporting practices pose the risk of bringing its own credibility down as well. The argument that advocacy investigative journalism is inherently more trustworthy due to its transparency should be scrutinized, because how the reporting is conducted matters just as much as the platform. Perhaps the rather precarious reporting practices are attributed to a passionate organization’s goal to expose what they seek to undermine at all costs — and this welcomes well founded criticism.

The conservative advocacy group, Project Veritas, claims to work toward dismantling “big government” and “media bias” through its undercover investigative work, exposing prominent figures in politics and media engaging in corruption. Most recently, the group came under fire for its failed sting operation on The Washington Post. In November of 2017, the newspaper reported that several women accused Alabama U.S. Senate candidate Roy Moore, a Republican, of pursuing them while they were underage when he was in his 30s. A Project Veritas operative, Jaime Phillips, was sent to speak to a reporter about fake claims involving her and Moore, telling the reporter that Moore had impregnated her as a teenager, which led to her having an abortion. While this was meant to expose sloppy reporting on part of The Washington Post — implying that the other reporting on Moore was illegitimate — the newspaper did some fact checking, and found that Phillips’ story was false after all. The Post then ran a story on the Veritas sting operation instead (Boburg, Davis, & Crites, 2017).

Parallels can be drawn between these two situations. Both organizations utilized the same sorts of tactics, anchored in lying, to draw attention to an issue they see as pervasive. For Greenpeace, it is the energy industry’s manipulation of academic research;
for Project Veritas, it is liberal media bias and malpractice in reporting they seek to expose. One succeeded in exposing their issue in question, the other did not. If the Veritas operation had succeeded, it would have exposed the public to the reporting blunders of one of America’s foremost news publications, which is arguably a service to the public — although through lying — because shedding light on important issues is what advocacy journalism intends to do.

The failed Veritas operation is labeled shady, and rightfully so, as literally fabricated a story to use as bait for the *Washington Post* to fall for; this is especially problematic, as the story involves sexual misconduct on part of a prominent politician. Planting a lie is another level deeper than to simply act as an undercover operative. However, the reporting of Greenpeace can be under similar scrutiny, by principle, even if their conduct is not of the same level of severity as the Veritas operation. In any case, there is irony when an organization that prides itself on the transparency of its reporting is rather opaque in its reporting practices.

There is also a difference between the reporting work of Greenpeace, which is involved in lobbying work, and *InsideClimate News*, which is strictly a publication. *InsideClimate News* — although a classically non-objective environmental advocacy publication — does not have any interests in promoting itself as an organization. Greenpeace, however, does exist as an organization outside of its reporting, which opens up the opportunity for public relations work to exist under the guise of journalism.

Perhaps this calls for drawing a distinct line between advocacy journalism, and under that, a sub-genre that is activist journalism. The lines become blurry in terms of whether it is appropriate to grant the title of “journalist” to Vine and other Greenpeace
reporters, but it can be argued that they are at least *activists*; the same goes for those who work at Project Veritas. What separates them from other advocacy journalists, such as those at *InsideClimate News*, is that their intentions are not just to report; the sites where they publish their work clearly outline what they intend to do, which is to bring about change to the issues they view as important. Activists are known to go to extreme lengths to bring about this change, and maybe this is why these “advocacy-activist” journalists go to such extreme lengths, such as undercover reporting, to achieve this change. Environmental advocacy publications have no such stated goal, but merely focus on reporting on factual science — which can bring about change.

**On the argument that every journalist is an advocate**

Another argument that arises when disputing the legitimacy of advocacy journalism is how journalism, inherently, is a work of advocacy. The journalist Matt Taibbi (2013) makes this case in his piece, “Hey MSM: All Journalism is Advocacy Journalism.” Taibbi criticizes David Gregory, former moderator for NBC’s *Meet the Press*, for his comments pertaining to the reporting of Glenn Greenwald of *The Guardian*. Greenwald broke the stories detailing the United States and British global surveillance programs, based on the classified documents provided by former CIA employee and whistleblower, Edward Snowden. Gregory argued that the legitimacy of Greenwald’s reporting should be in question, alleging that he may have gotten too close to Snowden.
On *Meet the Press*, Gregory (2013) famously asked Greenwald: “To the extent that you have aided and abetted Snowden, even in his current movements, why shouldn’t you be charged with a crime?”

Taibbi deems this situation one of irony, urging that the debate over the legitimacy of advocacy journalism is in itself illegitimate. Taibbi acknowledges that Greenwald certainly does practice advocacy journalism, but to pretend that he is the only one to do so is naïve and incorrect. Taibbi writes:

“All journalism is advocacy journalism. No matter how it's presented, every report by every reporter advances someone's point of view. The advocacy can be hidden, as it is in the monotone narration of a news anchor for a big network like CBS or NBC (where the biases of advertisers and corporate backers like GE are disguised in a thousand subtle ways), or it can be out in the open, as it proudly is with Greenwald, or graspingly with Sorkin, or institutionally with a company like Fox” (Taibbi, 2013).

He argues that the difference between journalists claiming their adherence to objectivity, and the “advocacy journalist” by title, is that the latter is at least transparent about what he or she advocates for. He writes that early on in his career as a journalist, he sought to be open about his stances in the pursuit of this transparency, granting the readers the truth to what his biases are. He does acknowledge, however, that there is value to reporting that is labeled to be “objective,” such as the reporting of the *New York Times* — which he calls “Just the facts, Ma’am,” style (Taibbi, 2013). The value, he
writes, is that people trust this approach, but this becomes problematic when reporters violate this contract by choosing the facts to support certain political and financial interests, while still masquerading their work as objective journalism.

Paul Farhi (2013) of *The Washington Post* entertains Gregory’s argument in “On NSA disclosures: has Glenn Greenwald become something other than a reporter?”

Farhi opens his commentary by writing: “Glenn Greenwald isn’t your typical journalist. Actually, he’s not your typical anything. A lawyer, columnist, reporter and constitutional liberties advocate, Greenwald blurs a number of lines in an age in which anyone can report the news.”

Farhi then asks the question: “But has Greenwald — one of two reporters who broke the story of the National Security Agency’s classified Internet surveillance program — become something other than a journalist in the activist role he has taken in the wake of the NSA disclosures?”

Farhi appears to question whether journalism and activism can coexist — or rather, if being an activist discredits one from being a journalist.

His piece quotes Edward Wasserman, dean of UC Berkeley’s journalism school, who said that while having a “social commitment” does not disqualify one from being a journalist, the public should remain skeptical of reporters who are also “advocates.” Wasserman said that in the case of Greenwald’s reporting, this does not apply.

However, Wasserman’s comment and this kind of sentiment in general troubles Taibbi, who writes:
“We should be skeptical of reporters who are advocates, because they might be pulling punches to advance a cause? Well . . . that's true. But only if we're talking about all reporters, because all reporters are advocates. If we're only talking about people like Glenn Greenwald, who are open about their advocacy, that's a crazy thing to say. People should be skeptical of everything they read. In fact, people should be more skeptical of reporters who claim not to be advocates, because those people are almost always lying, whether they know it or not” (Taibbi, 2013).

Whether Taibbi’s claim that every journalist is an advocate holds merit or not, the statement does not provide an answer to legitimacy of advocacy journalism. There is merit to his argument that every reporter has an agenda — and therefore advocates for something. This is why Taibbi thinks advocacy journalists by title are more trustworthy, due to the transparency of their biases. However, transparency does not cement any organization or publication’s legitimacy or trustworthiness, especially when the advocates are so closely tied to their cause. All reporters might be advocates, but it is more important to ask what they are advocating, and how they are advocating for it.

For example, placing the articles published in InsideClimate News, and Energy In Depth — the oil and gas advocacy website managed by the Independent Petroleum Association of America (IPAA) — inside the same box would not be appropriate. This is not because they sit on opposite ends of the argument on energy policy; there are greater questions that must be raised, such as where the funding comes from, and what kind of stakes the writers or the publications hold. Writers for Energy In Depth are advocates for
energy independence and oil and gas use, and the website serves as a public relations platform for a fuel industry lobbying group. Although they are transparent about their stance, it does not mean that their credibility is enhanced — in fact, using a news site for public relations purposes is misleading and diminishes the credibility of the presented viewpoint when financial interests are involved. Overvaluing transparency can lead to drawing dangerous conclusions in the conversation of advocacy journalism. Transparency on the stance one takes means nothing when public relations campaigns, faulty science and misrepresented facts are presented under the guise of journalism.

‘Balanced’ coverage and ‘roughly equal attention:’ a case study of global warming coverage and responsible environmental journalism

The practice of “balanced” reporting in traditional journalism is one that has been adopted for decades as a journalistic norm, where to practice objectivity means granting an equal platform to both sides of an argument. “Balance as bias: global warming and the US prestige press,” a 2004 paper in Global Environmental Change by Maxwell T. Boykoff and Jules M. Boykoff explore how the “prestige-press” (which includes the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Los Angeles Times, and the Wall Street Journal) covered global warming from 1988 to 2002. It argues that the media’s adherence to this principle actually detracts from balance by giving voice to a minority population within the scientific community — or outside of it — who only offer opinion, void of substantial evidence, despite covering a strictly scientific issue (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2004, p. 125).

The authors urge that this is particularly concerning, and they write: “Since the general public garners most of its knowledge about science from the mass media,
investigating the mass media’s portrayal of global warming is crucial. The disjuncture above is one illustration that — through the filter of balanced reporting — popular discourse has significantly diverged from scientific discourse,” (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2004, p. 125).

The authors call the act of giving voice to deniers of global warming research “denial discourse,” and that the treatment of these sources is damaging to the reporting, writing that the media allows for a “voluble minority view that argues either that global warming is not scientifically provable or that it is not a serious issue — roughly equal space to air its suppositions,” (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2004, p. 126). In Democracy without Citizens: Media and the Decay of American Politics, Robert M. Entman (1989) offers a similar argument that generally, in journalism, “Balance aims for neutrality. It requires that reporters present the views of legitimate spokespersons of the conflicting sides in any significant dispute, and provide both sides with roughly equal attention” (p. 30). Media scholar W. Lance Bennett (2016) writes in News: The Politics of Illusion, that while news content or political emphasis might occur in coverage of politics, it is usually not the reporter’s bias. Instead, he writes, “To the contrary, the avoidance of political partisanship by journalists is reinforced, among other means, by the professional ethics codes of journalists, by the editors who monitor their work, and by the business values of the companies they work for” (Bennett, 2016, p.44).

Boykoff and Boykoff highlight the differences between generally unanimous scientific discourse regarding global warming. In the samples of global warming articles collected between 1988 and 2002, the authors found that the majority of articles (52.65%) offered balanced coverage, where both sides of the view that humans were contributing to
global warming were given roughly equal representation, even when a strong scientific consensus is present (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2004, 129).

The authors observe an example in a *Los Angeles Times* article in the early ‘90s. The *Times* reported: “The ability to study climatic patterns has been critical to the debate over the phenomenon called ‘global warming.’ Some scientists believe — and some ice core studies seem to indicate — that humanity’s production of carbon dioxide is leading to a potentially dangerous overheating of the planet. But skeptics content there is no evidence the warming exceeds the climate’s natural variations,” (Abramson, 1992).

Note that the reporter wrote *some scientists*: this article was published after the 1990 World Climate Conference in Geneva, where over 700 scientists gathered to release the Scientists’ Declaration, a document that said: “A clear scientific consensus has emerged on estimates of the range of global warming that can be expected during the 21st century. Countries are urged to take immediate actions to control the risks of climate change,” (Leggett, 2001, p. 21). Seven hundred scientists amounting to “some” is a bit problematic. Even more problematic is that climate scientists at the time had almost unanimously decided that climate change exists, and that the causes are undoubtedly anthropogenic. Naomi Oreskes, renowned science historian, analyzed how unanimous this conclusion truly was. In 2004, she conducted an analysis by scanning through abstracts published from 1993 to 2003, with the mention of the search term, “global climate change.” Of the 928 papers analyzed, none disagreed that anthropogenic causes are to blame for global warming (Oreskes, 2004, p. 1686). Yet, the language used in the media at the time does not seem to match the scientists’ consensus.
In addition, it can be argued that the media’s goal towards “balance” creates the opportunity for stakeholders such as oil companies and conservative policy research organizations to utilize publications as a platform to disperse their views. For example, in 1998, a proposal drafted by an informal group of industry opponents of global warming research was leaked. The proposal contained ideas such as “a campaign to recruit a cadre of scientists who share the industry’s views of climate science and to train them in public relations so they can help convince journalists, politicians and the public that the risk of global warming is too uncertain to justify.” The proposal also included plans to measure the success rate of their tactics by counting the number of news articles that convey the message of uncertainty. This plan had a proposed budget of $600,000 for media-relations (Cushman, 1998). In essence, news media have been utilized by corporations as PR platforms, which inarguably damages the purpose journalism aims to serve.

J. Donald Hughes (2010), characterizes the time of 1975, to present day as the “Consensus and Resistance” period in regards to the climate change conversation (p. 77) Hughes identifies some fronts that lead to the obstruction of action against global warming; the first is the assumption that challenging research is positive and necessary because it leads to “open discussion and further investigation.” Hughes urges that the “skepticism” conversation is often responsible for the delay in mitigation efforts. The culprits are the second front, and he writes: “From the industries whose activities cause it, and therefore who might have to bear the cost of the efforts to counter it. This includes petroleum and coal companies, other fossil fuel industries, and automobile manufacturers” (Hughes, 2010, p. 78). In other words, stakeholders invest a lot into the skepticism argument, suggesting that balanced reporting — while the intentions are good
— tends to work in the favor of a minority position, giving power to those whose voices would otherwise be irrelevant, for good reason.

The paper, “The Measurement of Key Behavioural Science and Constructs in Climate Change Research” by Connie Roser-Renouf and Matthew Nisbet (2008), addresses a blog post — although not a news article — that illustrates the power of media and credentials. Media has the ability to not only influence others into accepting or considering misleading information, but also to reaffirm the beliefs of those who already carry such sentiments. The blog post in question is by John Tierney, esteemed columnist at the New York Times, which looked at results from a study of climate change knowledge and risk perception. The study claimed that “people who know the most about climate change, and who trust science are less concerned about the future” (Roser-Renouf & Nisbet, 2008, p. 38). Although the cited study concluded that the methodology could have led to the “uncertain results” they collected, Tierney wrote a blog post about the findings. It attracted an audience of fellow climate change deniers, and among the 150 comments on the post, Roser-Renouf and Nisbet (2008) found that most of the commenters concluded: “See, those of us who understand the science, know that fears of climate change are overblown” (p. 38).

In “The danger of fair and balanced,” an essay published in The Columbia Journalism Review, Robert S. Eshelman (2014) also explores how journalistic principles were exploited by oil and gas companies. Looking in retrospect, Eshelman quotes Bill McKibben, former New Yorker staff writer who covered climate change in the 1980s and still writes about global warming and other issue pertaining to fossil fuel usage. Of the coverage in the 1980s, McKibben says, “Journalists talked to scientists and just reported
it. It hadn’t occurred to them that it should be treated as a political issue as opposed to a scientific one” (Eshelman, 2014).

McKibben explains that this kind of reporting shifted when the fossil fuel industry targeted the media, turning the issue of global warming into a political argument. Eshelman (2014) writes: “The fossil fuel industry succeeded. In the ensuing years, the industry not only won over conservatives on the matter of climate change, but they also played into the media trope of balance and fairness.” It is this journalistic principle, he explains, that led reporting to present the science as something that is still under debate. This is despite the fact that scientific certainty — represented by 97 percent of qualified scientists agreeing that global warming is caused by human activity and fossil fuel usage — exists.

The Online News Association, another major organization representing journalists — in this case, digital journalists — addresses “balance and fairness,” in an article written by Allan D. Abbey (n.d.) that is appropriately titled as such. The article even calls the terms “classic buzzwords of journalism ethics,” delegitimizing how they are used in today’s context. It notes the often pervasive “false balance” phenomenon, where a reporter presents an opposing point of view even when the facts are presumably well known. The article addresses global warming as an example of such, noting the 2013 Yale University study that found only 63 percent of Americans believed global warming is happening, and how “false balance” journalism might be a party to be held accountable for this (Abbey, n.d.)

In 1992, former investigative journalist Ross Gelbspan was approached by a Harvard Medical School doctor who had researched a link between climate change and
the spreading of global disease. The two wrote an op-ed for *The Washington Post* that highlighted these concerns. After the op-ed was published, he received letters from readers questioning whether they hyperbolized this issue. The letters encouraged Gelbspan to consult the works of skeptical climate change scholars. This shows that giving voice to these opinions leads to public skepticism (Eshelman, 2014).

Gelbspan was planning to pursue further research about climate change to write a book when he received these letters. Following the advice of his readers, he looked into the skeptics’ arguments, and found them compelling. Before disposing the book project, however, Gelbspan still proceeded with the interviews he had scheduled with several leading climate scientists. A scientist he spoke to told him to look into the skeptics’ backgrounds, dispelling the idea that their arguments were sound, urging that they cherry-picked data. Although many of the skeptics were legitimate scientists, they were not specialists in climatology, and their research funding was not coming from usual sources such as the National Science Foundation, but instead, from unclear, unidentified sources.

With this information, Gelbspan decided to pursue the book project. Published in 1998, *The Heat is On*, covers the dangers of climate change, the deceptive tactics of the energy industry to keep mitigation efforts from being executed, and the continuous politicization of an issue of scientific fact. He has also written another book about climate change, *Boiling Point*, published in 2004, and focused the rest of his career writing several magazine articles and newspaper op-eds about climate.

Penn State University climate scientist Michael E. Mann calls industry manipulation tactics, like what Gelbspan first faced, the “climate wars,” saying that a principle line of attack was to question reporters who presented climate change as fact,
and to challenge the legitimacy of their journalism because it lacks the principles of fair and balanced reporting. But to do that, Eshelman (2014) writes, means “frequently using industry-backed spokespeople as key sources about the actual science — not a debate over potential policy solutions, of which industry should fairly be a part.”

Eshelman also attributes poorly written articles on climate change to underfunded newsrooms. He writes: “When the media industry was flush with revenue, newsrooms were well stocked with experienced, issue-specific reporters and editors. But since the early 2000s, shrinking staffs, the elimination of environmental deks, and narrower news holes has made reporting on climate change even more difficult. The industry has been corrupted not only by its inability to evaluate the political interests of deniers, but by market forces bearing down on their own business.”

In 2013, InsideClimate News reported on the lack of specialized environment reporters after the New York Times dismantled its environment desk. After this, only about a dozen environment reporters were left at the top five papers in the U.S. After the cut, the Los Angeles Times was the only newspaper out of the five to have a designated environment desk (Bagley, 2013).

InsideClimate News reported that at the Washington Post and USA Today, environmental news is handled by news desks that also cover science and health. The Post only has two reporters dedicated solely to environmental coverage, and none of the journalists on USA Today’s science, health and environmental desk focus on environmental issues. All newspapers in question utilize other non-specialized journalists from the entire newsroom to report on the environment (Bagley, 2013).

Dean Baquet, then managing editor for The New York Times, said that
environmental stories are “partly business, economic, national or local, among other subjects,” arguing that due to the complexity of the stories, reporters from all desks must report on environment stories to tackle the various aspects of them (Bagley, 2013). This illustrates what Eshelman fears.

The article quotes Bud Ward, editor of *The Yale Forum on Climate Change and the Media* and four-decade veteran of environmental reporting says: “You cannot look at the media’s coverage of climate change outside of the context of industry-wide decline.”

In May of 2013, Heidi Cullen, the chief climatologist, the nonprofit news organization, *Climate Central*, appeared on CBS’ *Face the Nation*. According to a study by *Media Matters for America*, it was the first time in five years that a scientist had appeared on any of the Sunday talk shows to talk about climate change. The study also found that influential shows such as *Face the Nation* failed to invite scientists to explain events such as Hurricane Sandy and persistent drought in the U.S. to explain how they are connected to global warming and human activity (Santhanam, 2014). In other words, those who understand science have often been excluded from or underrepresented in mass media.

The study presents this in numbers. In 2013, 43 percent of sources quoted on global warming in Sunday Shows were media professionals; 29 percent were politicians (75 percent of whom were Republicans); while only 14 percent were scientists (Santhanam, 2014).

Eshelman (2014) writes that if the fossil fuel industry has “won the first round in their campaign to influence the media, environmentalists are moving to win the second.” This is where specialty websites — such as the aforementioned *Climate Central*, and
other publications like *ClimateWire*, *The Daily Climate*, the Pulitzer Prize-winning website *InsideClimate News*, and the progressive American magazine *Mother Jones* — play a part in introducing science-based reporting on climate change where traditional media often lacks.

Just as transparency alone does not add to the legitimacy of advocacy journalism, the same goes for traditional journalism and its aims to be balanced. To be fair and balanced in the “he said-she said” style of reporting, and by entertaining “denial discourse,” actually detracts from the quality. Ultimately, both forms of journalism cannot be deemed worthwhile as long as facts are questionable.

As observed in this case study of climate change coverage, there is a need for environmental advocacy journalism, which can fill the gaps where legacy media outlets lack. The absence of experienced science writers and the damaging consequences of denial discourse can lead to faulty science reporting. Environmental advocacy news organizations hire qualified scientists — unlike traditional media organizations — who objectively have a greater understanding for the topics. Especially in the case of climate change news, where the science overwhelmingly points to one side, there is no room for a minority opinion; there is certainly not room to give that minority an equal platform, which legacy news organizations have been found guilty of. The politicization of climate change has distracted from the fact that it is an issue of science. Advocacy journalism publications do not bother giving a platform to oil and gas company representatives or conservative policy organizations, and instead focuses on the wealth of available science, which is the best way to support their stance on environmental issues. It could be argued that bias in this case is not only harmless, but necessary.
Mainstream journalists shed neutrality, and are redefining ‘objectivity’ and ‘balance’

A Politico opinion piece by Mitchell Stephens (2017), “Goodbye Nonpartisan Journalism. And Good Riddance,” bids adieu to “fair and balanced” journalism, or as Stephens calls it, “on-the-one-hand-this, on-the-other-hand-that” style reporting. He labels these standards as “shackles” and “straight jackets” for reporters, who have been shed in favor of calling out the falsehoods touted by the Trump administration in today’s political era. Equating this to the Watergate reporting of Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward of the Washington Post, he celebrates the rise of investigative reporting and fall of the pretense of “objectivity.” He writes that in essence, the journalistic standards that legacy media has upheld in recent years is disinterested and serves the public very little (Stephens, 2017).

He briefly summarizes the history of American journalism, addressing the fact that objectivity was not commonplace at the birth of reporting, and in fact, newspapers were “loud and boisterous,” and seldom failed to call out political leaders in rather aggressive language (Stephens, 2017). The first American publication to assume a nonpartisan identity was The New York Times, which in the 1890s consistently wrote about the lynching of African-Americans in an “objective” tone, which of course neglected the truth that black Americans were being terrorized by white Americans every day (Cunningham, 2003). Objective journalism as a solidified concept was birthed from the idea of Walter Lippman, a reporter who urged reporters “to remain clear and free of his irrational, his unexamined, his unacknowledged prejudgments in observing,
understanding and presenting the news” (Dean, n.d.) The concept was keeping the reporting method objective and disciplined, not requiring the reporter to be neutral. This is not how the approach was received, evident in the neutral and balanced reporting practices of mass media.

Another figure in history is Lowell Thomas, NBC broadcaster who introduced the idea of playing it “down the middle,” as he called it, when covering politics. This was evident in his style of reporting in the coverage of the 1932 presidential campaigns to Franklin Roosevelt and President Herbert Hoover. This began to attract mainstream journalists toward the middle, Stephens writes, picking out the habit of consciously selecting and pairing quotes from a Democrat and a Republican. But journalists always fail to represent all sides when reporting, as often, nonwhite and nonmale voices are seldom included, and in the McCarthy era, anti-Communist opinions were also left out. Investigative journalism faltered as it leaned toward vanilla reporting, Stephens writes (Stephens, 2017)

The author also adds that although journalism in the Trump era is evolving, or going back to its roots of being “loud and boisterous,” legacy media failed to do so far into the 21st century. “Indeed, their obsession with nonpartisanship lingered long enough to leave them deeply vulnerable to manipulation by a boisterous, rudderless presidential candidate like Trump,” he writes (Stephens, 2017) And although fact checkers were determined to label the now-president’s various claims during the campaign as falsehoods, they shied away from using the “L-word,” that is lying, and inviting outspoken Trump supporters to televised panels, presumably in the name of balance.

Now, Stephens writes that mainstream journalism organizations are beginning to
recognize their careful reporting as tepid, riddled with blind spots and omissions. In a September of 2016 article, the New York Times finally used the word “lie” in a headline about Trump’s “birtherism” assertions, which claimed that President Barack Obama was not born in the United States (Barbaro, 2016). A week later, the Los Angeles Times wrote that “Never in modern presidential politics has a major candidate made false statements as routinely as Trump has” (Finnegan, 2016).

Stephens (2017) writes that the “but” in mainstream reporting was often followed by a response to a charge or accusation made in a story. Now, the “but” is often followed by extending the charge. The lead paragraph from an Associated Press story picked up by ABC News reads, “The White House’s handling of intelligence reports on the Russia investigation has been labeled unorthodox and, to the Democrats, suspicious. But when it comes to Trump’s relationship with his spy agencies, that's par for the course” (Trump’s approach to intel agencies shows anxiety, distrust, 2017).

In “How Donald Trump changed political journalism,” Dylan Byers (2017) of CNN similarity writes that Donald Trump’s unconventional presidential campaign spurred the resurgence of aggressive journalism and the fall of “he said, she said” reporting. He writes:

“To many journalists, political scientists and media experts, this was a welcome change: It unburdened the American press from false equivalency and made them more responsible stewards of information. To critics, especially on the right side of the political spectrum, the whole endeavor laid bare the innate biases of a coastal, liberal news media” (Byers, 2017)
The latter part of the argument suggests that transparency may assist in the credibility of media, when the biases are “laid bare,” as Byers writes. This is relevant to Farhi’s argument that journalists’ biases always exist and are innate, and supposed neutrality only masks this. Further, comments made by conservatives who denounce the rise of this aggressive journalism always believed in media bias anyway, so they feel alienated regardless.

He quotes Washington Post reporter David Fahrenthold also celebrates this. “In 2008, there was the news story, then there was the fact-check,” he said. “Now fact-checking has become the news story. This is a good thing for journalism. Fact-checking is not a separate endeavor” (Byers, 2017).

A column in the New York Times, “Trump Is Testing the Norms of Objectivity in Journalism” by Jim Rutenberg (2016), also remarks that the neutrality of political journalism is quickly dissipating. What Rutenberg finds interesting are comments made by Joe Scarborough of Morning Joe, who happens to be a Republican, which he quotes in his column. On his show, Scarborough shared a conversation he had with an anonymous foreign policy expert, who gave Trump a national security briefing on nuclear weapons. “Three times he asked about the use of nuclear weapons,” Mr. Scarborough said, and described that one of the questions of the president was, “If we have them, why can’t we use them?” (Rutenberg, 2016).

Scarborough said he didn’t have a choice but to share this conversation, because it was something he believed Americans had a right to know. Scarborough was once a critic of “liberal media bias,” but made this comment: “How balanced do you have to be when
one side is just irrational?” (Rutenberg, 2016).

The mainstream media is moving away from “denial discourse,” which is when the media grants a platform to a minority position, even when the facts are otherwise settled through evidence (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2004, p. 126). The media is recognizing the importance and utmost need for this, and this is credited to the unprecedented incidences of Trump’s mispeakings, and there is recognition that welcoming an opposing view would only be harmful, even if conservatives would dismiss this as “liberal media bias.” Fifty-five percent of respondents in an October 2016 poll conducted by Quinnipiac University said the media was biased against Trump during the election; 9 in 10 of those surveyed identifying as Republicans had this response (McCaskill, 2016).

The Poynter Institute interviewed Dave D’Alessio, an associate professor of communications at the University of Connecticut who studies media bias in presidential elections that have taken place since 1948. In the interview, Alessio said: “Broadly speaking, I don’t trust anybody that says the media are biased because the very nature of bias is that it’s a perception — it’s something that people see and they base it on what they see. There’s something called a hostile media effect. Basically whenever people are engaged in an issue — and there’s no one more engaged than a presidential candidate — they see coverage as biased against their position, no matter what is it” (Kramer, 2016).

In other words, no matter what the media’s practices are, there will always be a perception of bias on part of somebody. This is when the public perception and mistrust does not necessarily matter, because it is unavoidable. Denial discourse, or the attempt to “play it down the middle” may never be enough to satisfy some, so perhaps it is best not to appease them, and to stick to the facts — even if overwhelmingly centered on “one
side.” Now, Trump and his supporters are not only accusing the media for being biased and liberal, but have moved on to label negative news stories as “fake.” This itself may be an illustration of the inherent impossibility of satisfying the portion of the public that is incredulous to the media; they will go as far as denying the accuracy of the articles themselves. The real kind of “objectivity” journalism needs right now is the kind that Lippmann introduced, which is to stay consistent and disciplined in the reporting practice, not strive for impossible neutrality.

**Conclusion**

There are several factors pertaining to the argument on whether advocacy journalism is a legitimate form of reporting. There is the question of if a reporter is surrendering the title of journalist once committing to advocacy journalism; there is the idea that every reporter is actually an advocate for something; and there is the question of the media’s role in unbiased, balanced reporting. In the literature review, it became apparent that reporting methods are extremely important in determining the ethics and credibility of the work, as seen in the case of the undercover reporting of Greenpeace, and the similar tactics of the conservative watchdog group, Project Veritas. When a lack of transparency is involved in the methods of reporting, it weakens the argument that the transparency makes an organization inherently more credible.

There is also the potential for a reporter to make the switch to becoming an activist rather than a journalist — or even a public relations representative — when writing for an organization like Greenpeace, which has interests outside of producing quality reporting. When the stories have a tendency to support an organization’s
objectives, the credibility can likewise be questioned, which differentiates this kind of advocacy reporting to the work published in advocacy-centered publications that do not answer to an outside organization. Perhaps this explains for their unconventional reporting tactics. This also makes Taibbi’s argument that “every reporter is an advocate” irrelevant in the conversation, because it matters who and what the journalist serves, and how the reporting serves it. His point is that reporters who disclose their activism are inherently more credible because they are not hiding under the guise of objectivity, unlike reporters who work for legacy news outlets. It can be determined that there is a time and place for advocacy journalism, but it does not make it inherently superior to traditional forms of journalism only because of transparency, as more factors are involved in credibility than simply the disclosure of biases.

The literature review did reveal that advocacy journalism is necessary when the “balanced” reporting tactics of traditional media falters. The case of climate change reporting shows that the inclusion of “denial discourse” in the name of committing to balance is harmful in influencing public opinion, especially when facts are almost unanimously accepted by relevant scientists. Traditional reporting especially lacks when legacy media outlets fail to employ experienced science writers, which many environment-focused advocacy publications do employ, such as Climate Central. Bias does exist within these publications, but this should not be counted as a factor against credibility when the expertise is solidly grounded, and when the reporting is facts-based and science-focused, such as in the case of climate change reporting.

Lastly, it seems as though traditional media outlets are moving away from “he-said-she-said” journalism, with the election of Trump, whose statements have been
proven false numerous times. Although this reporting — even if it is facts-based — will be considered biased by conservatives, there is little a reporter can do to ease these suspicions, when they exist regardless of what the reporting looks like.

Not all advocacy journalism can be situated in the same category. As stated before, transparency does not inherently make a journalist or a publication more credible, nor does it add to the legitimacy of their work. To say that transparency is the cornerstone of journalistic integrity is incredibly problematic, as merely stating a position or non-objective viewpoint does not say anything about the journalist’s ability to fact-check or about the truthfulness of the reporting. The journalistic work of Greenpeace, which has motivations — such as lobbying — outside of goals to produce quality reporting, is different from environmentally focused publications that have no motivations other than advocating for the environment. Outside motivations make truthfulness and the selectiveness of facts come into question. This does call into question the title of those like Vine, who claim that working for Greenpeace does not deny the ability to be a journalist; perhaps he is still a journalist, but one who is closer to an activist than one who simply writes for the sake of advocacy. Publications like InsideClimate News, although forthright about their stance on environmental advocacy, adhere to science when reporting on the issues they care deeply about — because facts, when they are readily available in such abundance, are the best way to advocate for an issue. If anything, this is in line with the SPJ Ethics Code, which advises journalists to “seek truth and report it” (“SPJ Code of Ethics,” 2014). In the case study of climate change reporting of traditional news organizations, it was apparent that many were hung up on the ethics of “fair and balanced” reporting, neglecting the most important truths of the matter.
Advocacy journalism can be extremely important, and a publication adopting a stance does not detract from the quality of its reporting, as long as the reporting is facts-based — and all journalism should be held at the same standard. This is the direction Taibbi’s argument should have gone, when he argued that “every journalist is an advocate.” Every journalist should be an advocate for the truth, void of motivations that would interfere with the prioritization of anything but that. In the case of environmentally-focused publications, they can be more qualified than most publications to write about the issues they advocate for, because they are equipped with a staff of writers that are knowledgeable in science — and the environment is objectively a scientific issue.

Transparency is good, but it should not be the only thing that separates an advocacy journalist from a traditional journalist; advocacy journalism is only valid when the reporting is anchored in truth; advocacy journalism can even surpass the quality of work of traditional journalism, especially when the publication has a particular expertise on the matter they advocate for. In conclusion, it can be said our of all factors of journalistic integrity, truth is paramount — no matter if it is advocacy journalism or traditional journalism — and transparency does not relieve one of the duties of responsible and factual reporting.

Reflections

Changing Course
Early into the process of producing my thesis project, I knew I wanted to pursue a story on the Class II injection wells of Athens County. This story aimed to highlight the likely environmental damages attributed to the practice, such as the high potential for drinking water contamination, as well as to shed light on some of the other factors that impact the quality of life of those who live nearby. I also sought to thoroughly discuss the role socioeconomic status and rurality plays in facility placement, and the subjects I interviewed all agreed that the placement of these facilities near their homes is attributed to this factor. However, after lengthy conversations with my sources about past experiences that they feel reflect what is happening with the injection wells now, it became increasingly apparent that the wells were not an isolated phenomenon, and that it would not be appropriate to write a story about them while omitting the history of other forms of environmental injustice in this area. Accounting for this serves as important context to understand the area’s issues in its current state. This story quickly turned into a story about environmental injustice as a whole while recognizing it as social justice-centered work of advocacy journalism, while the narrative focus remained the K&H Partners injection wells in Torch, Ohio. The story did not change, but it widened.

One component that led to further exploration of this region is DuPont’s contamination of the Ohio River. The chemical, C8, was detected in the Ohio River which infiltrated the drinking water sources or the people living near the K&H wells today, and DuPont was at fault. Detailed records show that for decades, the company did not disclose its knowledge of the chemical’s presence in the water supply, as well as the known dangers and carcinogenic effects of C8. Instead, the company merely issued standards for reasonable levels of exposure, and minutes from a meeting in the ‘80s
reveal that it refrained from mitigating the contamination, because the efforts were not “economically attractive.”

The residents I spoke to see this issue as precedent for what industry malpractice can do to put human health in harm’s way, as well as the likelihood for the oil and gas industry to be hiding under a similar lack of transparency. For many of the residents, the C8 contamination serves as a major motivation for their feelings toward injection wells and industry skepticism today. For example, the mother of one of my subjects is currently going through litigation against DuPont for her kidney cancer, believed to be caused by the C8 contamination. It is her mother’s health complications that has initiated her interest in researching water contamination, which brought her attention to the injection wells just miles from her home. She said: “And anytime [the industry] doesn’t let you see things, every time they don’t follow regulations, when they sneak these injection well sites in when people aren’t paying attention, it feels kind of sneaky. And it’s always going to make me think of the C8 issue.” Many I spoke to also believe that the absence of mitigation efforts is attributed to the passiveness and lack of empathy toward underserved regions, furthering the argument that this is a class based issue.

I searched for examples of instances where companies were caught admitting their placement biases, to showcase this problem as one that is beyond an abstract theory or conspiracy. In 2016, a representative of a Texas drilling company openly stated during an environmental law forum that the company avoids drilling in areas populated by “large homes.” A company spokesperson claimed that the comments, obtuse in nature, were merely made in jest. The spokesperson claimed that the remarks only attempted to underscore “how hard we work to site our locations in the best possible place for
residents and the community.” Comments like these, even if they are not in reference to the particular area I am writing about, illustrate the scope of the issue at hand.

Exploring more aspects of this argument based on anecdotal accounts added another layer to the story. Socioeconomic status does not only influence facility placement, but also determines the rationalization used in the placement. Industries use language that suggests placement will introduce new jobs to economically repressed areas, and this softens the blow of the potentially devastating environmental degradation that will happen, in exchange for the proposed jobs that do not require a college education — which has a particularly high demand in this area. As the Ohio River is situated in the nation’s “chemical valley,” working in factories like DuPont was a norm, if not a status symbol, as it pays well. Sources said some of their neighbors even sided with DuPont, despite having their own water sources contaminated.

Robert Bullard, sociology professor at Texas Southern University, writes about this in his 1994 paper, “Overcoming racism in environmental decision making.” He writes: “Poor people and people of color often work in the most dangerous jobs and live in the most polluted neighborhoods, and their children are exposed to all kinds of environmental toxins on the playground and in their homes and schools” (Bullard, 1994, p.10) Even in the case where they are provided jobs, they must accept the jobs privileged people would find undesirable. Workers at the DuPont plant in question were also exposed to C8.

But, in the case of the injection wells of Athens County, there is little to no evidence that it employs a significant number of people in this area, if any. Out of observation, the tanker trucks largely have out-of-state license plates — mostly from
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West Virginia and Pennsylvania, but come from far away as Mississippi, Louisiana or Texas — and K&H Partners LLC. is a West Virginia based company. There are usually only a handful of workers visible at the K&H facility, perhaps only two or three workers at a time. At smaller facilities, often only one worker is present to operate it.

This type of rhetoric seemed particularly relevant in the current political climate, as promises of job booms touted by President Donald Trump continue to be proven misleading, adding a layer to the story that included politics at the federal level. He assured the public that the riddance of regulations on extractive industries — especially coal mining — will result in a resurgence of jobs. However, the Labor of Bureau Statistics reports that only 1,200 coal-mining jobs have been created during Trump’s presidency thus far, which is only 100 more than were created during the Obama administration between August and December of 2016. Prospective workers still buy into this, and a November 2017 article in Reuters reports that former miners in Pennsylvania are refusing job training in other fields due to their confidence that the president’s promises will be realized (Volcovici, 2017).

It became important to showcase why there is a lack of job growth, and the answer is that mechanization is the culprit, not Obama-era environmental regulations. The popular and effective mining technique, mountaintop removal mining, only needs about a dozen employees to operate a single site. In addition, it makes the homes in the valleys under the sites susceptible to flooding, further solidifying the argument that these industrial activities have a tendency to hurt populations more than help.

In regards to the oil and gas industry, the president also celebrated the prospective job growth of the Keystone XL Pipeline, when he signed the executive order to approve
the project. However, the State Department reports that the project would only create 35 permanent jobs past the construction stage. Again, the political elements of these stories illustrate the fact that the problems associated with the environmental issues of Southeast Ohio extend beyond the area itself, as the same type of language that is pervasive in this region is applied to the language of the President of the United States, as he defends the potentially devastating activities of extractive industries nationally.

Questions of Ethics and Conflicts of Interest

It must be acknowledged that I embarked on this project based on my own feelings and outrage toward injection wells, and environmental injustice in Appalachia as a whole. In the literature review, I explored what I considered to be different forms of advocacy journalism: one type being more journalistic — especially in science writing — and the other existing closer as a written form of activism rooted in personal motivations. I was rather critical of the latter in my literature review, but I must acknowledge that my project would likely fit into this category. Although it contains some scientific research studies to explain what injection wells are, much of the science cannot explain how injection wells pose a threat to human health, as this research is still limited. This forces me to look at what is available in related research that may be applicable to injection wells, but it likewise forces me to stray from science writing, and lean on the anecdotal accounts of my sources — the residents of Torch, Ohio. It then becomes a story about the residents’ point of view and their strife living next to these facilities, expanding into a story about how the problem is systemic and similar communities are targeted in the
same ways. The goal now, in ways, became amplifying the voices of these residents, which puts my ethics in a vulnerable position and is — almost inarguably — a work of activism.

Since freshman year of my journalism studies, I have been studying the topic and had already drawn conclusions on the potential environmental damages and risks to human health, as well as the apparent ethical violations of the companies’ strategic placement of these facilities targeting rural, underserved areas. I had also developed my progressive politics toward climate change and environmental issues well before then, so the questions of ethics and legitimacy of this type of reporting explored in the literature review must also be explored within the context of my own work, and whether my piece can still be acknowledged as a legitimate work of journalism under these conditions.

Christina Selby (2016) writes about this in an Open Notebook article titled “How to Be (Or Not to Be) an Advocacy Journalist.” She writes about how environmental journalists are often questioned about their ethics and the motivations of their work, as they are closely tied with the topics in which they write about. An example of which is Hillary Rosner, an environmental journalist, who interviewed for a Knight Journalism Fellowship. During the interview, a member of the selection committee said: “I think of you as an advocate rather than a journalist. Can you defend yourself against that?” Her response to this was that she believes clean water and clean air are basic human rights, and that holding these views while writing about them should not disqualify her from being a journalist (Selby, 2016).

Inherently, there is bias or an underlying advocacy motivation behind good journalism, and not in the way that Taibbi approaches the “every journalist is an
advocate” argument. Selby writes:

By definition, investigative journalists uncover stories of corruption and/or wrongdoing, working from the belief that the public has a right to know and should take action based on that knowledge. As the Pulitzer Prize–winning publication ProPublica observes, journalism at its best serves the public and seeks to stimulate positive change. If journalists and advocates share the desire to bring about change, what’s the problem? Why draw a line between the two? And if there’s a line, where is it?

She quotes Michael Kodas, who teaches environmental journalism at the University of Colorado, Boulder, who argues that journalism should motivate people to take action after reading the information that is presented to them, and that this merely serves as the Fourth Estate. However, he adds: I think it becomes advocacy when you become a little too fine-tuned with the action you want them to take.”

This is where I must begin to take a critical look at my involvement. I have known my main sources for a long time, and have developed relationships and familiarity with their stories, which I found quite compelling. I know them on a personal level, and the content of our conversations would suggest that I feel just as strongly about their situations they do. This has resulted in a stronger level of trust, but this does place me in the position of potentially being used as a mouthpiece for their cause.

Obviously, I know about their stance on the issues I am writing about, and that is why I am writing about them as people that are impacted by them. Under its “Seek Truth and Report It” section, the SPJ Code of Ethics states: “Be vigilant and courageous about
holding those with power accountable. Give voice to the voiceless.” I would argue that this is what I aim to do, even it is by being so close to my sources who are certainly advocates for their cause. However, Selby cautions against getting too close to advocates. She writes that when she first began environmental reporting, she belonged to several environmental nonprofits where she would uncover story ideas. Months into her freelancing endeavor, she realized that journalism tends to have an uncomfortable relationship with habits such as hers, calling this a “potential conflict-of-interest nightmare.”

I want to argue that getting to know my sources and their strife served only as a catalyst to my work, motivating me to dig deeper into the issues they feel so strongly about. However, perhaps this can be equated to Selby’s experience with joining environmental advocacy groups to mine for story ideas. Yet, I can argue that I am not a member of Torch Can Do, and I am certainly not paid by them or any other advocacy group to write about this issue.

This is where Bill McKibben, introduced earlier as a former New Yorker staff writer, draws the line. He co-founded 350.org, a climate-based nonprofit, which he volunteers for. He says that he has never taken a single paycheck from the nonprofit. He says: “I’ve never taken a penny from them—or any other environmental group—precisely because I always want to be free to say what I want to. That seems to me the great privilege of being a writer.” I would likewise argue that payment does distinguish one from being either a journalist or an activist, which ties to the argument that Phil Vine, who says he is a journalist employed by Greenpeace, is more an activist who writes than a journalist.
However, the ways I worded the some of the questions inarguably display my show of bias; perhaps some of it is because I want to maintain my ties with my sources; maybe some of it is because I already know their stance on the issue, that I have no reason to ask this as a follow up question. Nonetheless, I can see how this can be problematic.

For example, a question I asked a few of my sources was: “What are some of the biggest frustrations you’ve run into in your activism, such as in bureaucracy with entities like ODNR?” This question takes into account that I already know they have frustrations, and that they have had negative encounters with the Ohio Department of Natural Resources in the past. Again, this question does reveal my bias in how I assume they would struggle with bureaucracy, and that this struggle involves ODNR. Even if I believe this bias is harmless — as it is pulling information from past conversations with my sources — I can see how it can be troubling for some, and that my questions could be perceived as problematic. The way I wrote and selected my questions also reflected what story I wanted to see pan out; in other words, I already had a sense of what I wanted my story to look like. This came from two factors: firstly, I already knew how the sources feel, and what their experiences with the issue are; secondly, I knew what point I wanted to get across, which was to showcase how damaging environmental injustice can be to marginalized, rural populations. What I believed is the most effective way to do was to provoke empathy from the readers, so I sought to craft a story that is worthy of said empathy. This is why I formed the questions to extract as much information regarding their strife with government officials — by “giving voice to the voiceless.”

Maybe this reveals to readers that there is an agenda in my work — but when the
experiences of my sources are not only anecdotal, but are also reflected in lawmaking and recurring incidences in other areas, the information extracted from interviews is not uncalled for or inappropriate, I would argue. Further, I am only pursuing this work of advocacy as an individual who feels strongly about an issue after viewing the available evidence, and not someone who is tied to an organization with interests such as lobbying. While my work can benefit my sources who are a part of their own activist organization, I am not being commissioned by them, and I sought out their stories out of my own volition.

However, even if I am not being paid, this could easily be considered a conflict of interest. In the article “New Media Synergy: Emergence of Institutional Conflicts of Interest,” Sandra Borden and Michael Pritchard (2001) explain that although traditional notions of “interests” may suggest material stake, a personal bond is likewise a conflict of interest. They write that any relationship of value has the ability to produce conflict. I would agree, and the relationships I developed with my sources would suggest that I know them as people, beyond simply my sources or activists I interview for the sake of a story. I know about their familial matters, and they are enthusiastic about speaking with me because they understand my stance on the story. I would caution myself against calling this a friendship, but to many, this may closely resemble a friendship.

In the chapter “Conflict of Interest Enters a New Age” of The Handbook of Mass Media Ethics, Edward Wasserman (2009) writes about conflict of interest in a way that suggests it is an inevitable factor of journalism, and not something that can be eradicated, but instead should be managed. He writes:
“Does that mean journalism is necessarily corrupt? No, but as a truth-telling practice it is inevitably a negotiated approximation, and the notion that it can be practiced within a hermetic zone of undiluted dedication to the public good is impossible to sustain. Instead, conflicts of interest are best seen as an inescapable feature of the terrain that journalists navigate, which cannot be purged, but must be managed, more or less well, more or less ethically” (Wasserman, 2009, p. 230).

He offers suggestions to manage said conflict, such as “forbidding activities that might either bind journalists to individuals or entities affected by news coverage, or be construed by others as creating such bonds.” In other words, he suggests avoiding “the appearance” of conflict in order to manage credibility (p. 232). Perhaps I fall into this category: that the conflict with my sources is so apparent — such as by the tone and language of my writing — throughout my piece that it eradicates any sort of credibility I might have. He also quotes the authors of Doing Ethics: The principle of independence calls on journalists to remain free of associations or activities that may compromise their integrity or damage their credibility” (Black et al. 1999, p. 119). I found myself in a gray area situation when I attended a meeting with Ohio gubernatorial candidate, Dennis Kucinich, who was in Torch to discuss the future of dealing with injection wells. Although I was there as a journalist writing a story about the topic relevant to the meeting, I was also in attendance as a voter — one who was definitely considering voting for Kucinich in the primary election. I was interested in attending the meeting outside of my work as a journalist, and I was greeted warmly by my sources who organized the meeting, thanking me for my attendance. This made me question my ethics a bit, but I
would still defend my work, as I do not think that my favorability for the candidate would
discount me from attending an important event relevant to what I am writing about.
Another point of mediation that Wasserman suggests is disclosure, describing it as a
“moral minimum” of managing conflicts of interest (p. 237). As my piece is one that I
would think is very clearly a work of advocacy/activist journalism, I am unsure of how
explicit my disclosure should be.

With the information I have gathered from media scholars and the commentary of
environmental journalists, I am also unsure where this puts me on the spectrum, how
problematic my conflicts are, or if and how I should manage them. Many of these points
apply to me, and many of these points I do realize put me in a compromising position as
someone who calls herself a journalist. I would still defend my work as a work of
journalism, as my intentions are to shed light on an issue I perceive as important, with
stakes that may not be proven — yet — to be high, but with enough anecdotal evidence
that it affects the quality of life of real people. Along with the evidence of systemic
discrimination and environmental injustices, I would defend that it is reasonable to write
these issues from the angle I have chosen, even if it does lean toward activism — when
science is lacking. My piece does not directly call for specific action, nor do I inject
myself into the story through commentary. I am merely documenting the experiences of
these individuals, along with related occurrences in other areas, that may or may not
convince readers that this is an issue; ultimately, it is up to them. Therefore, I defend my
work as a work of advocacy journalism, even if the approach may be considered
questionable in traditional contexts.


Boburg, S., Davis, A. C., & Crites, A. (2017, November 27). A woman approached The Post with dramatic — and false — tale about Roy Moore. She appears to be part


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THE MONSTER ON THE HILL

BY ALISA R. WARREN

Industry has rocked Athens County, a rural county located in the winding Appalachian hills of Southeast Ohio, for decades. Some residents fear whether the injection of hydraulic fracturing waste fluids can infiltrate their drinking water supplies; their fears are not rooted in mere paranoia.

As an area that has beared witness to the boom-to-bust cycle of coal mining, it also fell victim to chemical drinking water contamination on part of DuPont, the manufacturer of Teflon — shown to have likely caused kidney cancer and other ailments many in the area have been afflicted by. This was after a successful decades-long cover up by the company. Naturally, this only makes some wonder: what could the oil and gas industry be hiding?
Felicia Mettler was never an activist — she never intended to become one. She was a stay-at-home mom who lived a quiet, private life in a ranch style home nestled into a wooded area, concealed from the road by a hidden drive. Just down the driveway sits the doublewide trailer where her ailing mother resides. Mettler has lived in Coolville, Ohio her entire life.

The walls of her home are wood-paneled, adorned with photos of her three children. She describes herself as a mother before anything else.

“My lifelong dream was not to become an activist,” she says, “but as it turns out, unfortunately, somebody has to do it.”

The summer of 2015 was the catalyst to her new life, as an activist.

Her mother-in-law, Phyllis Reinhart, started hearing noises that summer. Noises so loud, she says, Reinhart described them as unnerving. They noticed that the water in their birdbath would ripple for no reason, and other times, they smelled mysterious, chemical odors that were otherwise unexplainable.

“They thought it was the facility across the highway, but they weren’t sure,” Mettler says. “So they made some phone calls and learned that it was an injection well, and it turns out to be one of the largest injection wells in the state of Ohio.”

This is the K&H Partners injection well facility in Torch, Ohio. It is the source of the noises, the smells, and the ripples in the birdbath.

The K&H is located off Route 50. It is visible from the highway as a cluster of massive, green tanks atop a hill that overlooks the highway across from a rest stop. Every day, dozens of tanker trucks trudge up the long, dirt road that leads up to the tanks; all of them, Reinhart can hear. She resides just 1,800 feet from the facility.

“When I didn’t know what it was, my son and I was going to some place really early in the morning,” says Reinhart. “There was a bunch of lights, and I was like, ‘what is that space station on the hill?’ I just didn’t notice it before because I never went out that early in the morning.”

She has since assigned it a different nickname, knowing what the well is, but fearful of what it is capable of.

“I guess we’ve all been afraid of monsters in our younger days,” she says. “What do you think about when you think of a monster? You don’t know what they are — that’s what’s scary.”

She sees a neurologist for her anxiety, and credits her rising blood pressure to her fears and nightmares about the K&H.
In the case of the K&H well, the injected fluid comes from the waste of high pressure horizontal hydraulic fracturing, most commonly known as fracking.

Fracking is a gas extraction technique in which water, sand and various chemicals are blasted into the ground at high pressure. This concoction fractures and opens up the deep layers of shale formations, allowing the gas to flow out to the head of the well. What also flows back is large amounts of waste fluids, comprised largely of water and salt, so the industry prefers to call it brine.

That’s what the tanker trucks haul up to facilities like the K&H; in fact, the trucks are labeled as “brine” trucks, quietly neglecting the fact that the chemicals used in the initial process are likewise in the wastewater that comes back up. The wastewater contains carcinogens such as lead, arsenic and other volatile chemicals. In addition, the returning water is enriched with radium, because the deep layers of shale where the fracking occurs is highly radioactive.

The fact that waters containing these chemicals are injected into the ground — and often near aquifers — is what arouses fear in residents like Mettler and Reinhart. The potential contamination of groundwater is their main concern, and both regulatory agencies and industry representatives insist that these fears are unfounded.

On its website, the Environmental Protection Agency states, “Deep underground injection of brines in formations isolated from underground sources of drinking water prevents soil and water contamination.”

The problem is, it is unclear where exactly the water goes, and how far it is capable of traveling. A 2002 study published in The Journal of Cave and Karst Studies suggests there is a potential for fluids underground to move farther and faster than originally assumed.

Although not fracking wastew- ter, the study found that bacte- ria-laden injected wastewater migrated horizontally under- ground for thousands of feet in just 26 hours, contaminating a drinking water well in Ontario, Canada. The contaminated water sickened thousands of residents. Even software mod- els could not predict the speeds in which the fluids would travel; in fact, it traveled 80 times faster than predicted.

In a meeting with representa- tives of the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, Felicia Mettler voiced her concerns and her uncertainty. Among those in attendance was the chief of the Oil and Gas Division, Rick Simmers.

The meeting disappointed Mettler.

“I left with more questions than I had answers,” she says. “I had asked Chief Simmers, ‘do you track where the water goes?’ He looked at me across the table and said, ‘yes, we do.’”

Here Mettler was, sitting before government officials to discuss her concerns about injection wells, barely knowing what they even are. Not being familiar with the issue, she couldn’t formulate the questions she wanted to ask, because she didn’t even know where to begin.

“I wish my follow-up question had been, ‘So how far has it traveled, and where is it now?’ But being a mom — a stay-at-home mom, a housewife — this is not something that I do every day. I’m not in politics. I don’t have a big college education.”

The K&H Injection well facility, situated in Torch, Ohio of Athens County, disposes of wastewater from the oil and gas extraction method of hydraulic fracturing, most commonly known as fracking. It injects this wastewater underground, but neither the facility nor regulatory agencies track where the waste goes once pumped. The K&H is one of the largest wastewa- ter injection wells in the state; in 2017, it received 4,418,466 barrels. That is 185,575,572 gallons.
The EPA’s insistence that Class II wells shall be lined with extra layers of protection and drilled deeper than other classes of wells suggest that the materials being dealt with would be deemed serious. However, since 1988, oil and gas production wastes are deemed non-hazardous by the EPA and exempt from hazardous waste regulations. This gave well operators permission to test their wells for structural integrity less frequently than their other well counterparts.

Abraham Lustgarten of ProPublica recounts the consequence of such decisions in his investigative piece, “Injection Wells: The Poison Beneath Us,” noting various instances of well leaks and contamination that can be traced back to poor oversight and neglect.

In a small town called Chico, near Fort Worth, Texas, with a population of about 1,000 people, the town’s director of public works noticed a cluster of trees withering and falling to the ground; this cluster was near a Class II injection well.

Interestingly, this well was authorized by the Railroad Commission of Texas (RRC), which oversees both oil and gas drilling sites, and disposal wells. The Chico well met the requirements of federal law, as the RRC reviewed the quarter-mile radius around the well to ensure that the waste would not reach the surface through abandoned wells, or other holes in the ground.

However, the water did flow back to the surface. In fact, Ed Cowley, Chico’s director of public works, told Propublica that the flowback resembled that of an artesian well.

Even though residents feared that the waste could reach their drinking water, RRC officials did not sample the water or soil near the leak. The RRC also denied Cowley’s accounts of dead trees or the pool of brine that sat at the site and insisted that the breach was small.

The commission did not issue any violations — or could not issue any — against the disposal company, because it had followed Texas rules. It did, however, restrict the amount of waste that could be injected into the well.

A few months later, more brine spurted out of three more old wells operated by the company, as reported by Propublica.

Residents were ignored, and even the director of public works was accused by the RRC of making up what he saw. This was in 2003.

In 2008, samples of Chico’s municipal drinking water were found to contain radium.

There was a tanker truck spill in Torch, in November of 2017, witnessed by Felicia Mettler. The truck, with a Mississippi license plate, was on its way to the K&H facility when it tipped over. The truck is owned by Vacuum Trucks Rentals Inc., based in Mississippi. The trucking company is Contractor Transport LLC, based out of Pennsylvania.

“The closer I got to the scene, the stronger the smell,” says Mettler.

The fluid — between 1,200 and 1,500 gallons of it — spilled on the highway where there was a drainage pipe directly under it, which leads to a creek that flows into the Ohio River.

“The safety of our drinking water is in jeopardy of contamination,” she says.
The ODNR webpage on Underground Injection Control page uses rather mild language describing the wastewater that is disposed through Class II wells, which seems to reference the brine’s high salinity as the main reason for concern.

“Oil-field brine is a saline by-product generated during oil and gas well operations,” the ODNR website states. “The salinity, or dissolved content, of Ohio oil-field brines vary considerably from one geologic formation and can vary regionally within the same formation. Ohio brines can be more than six times as salty as seawater.”

Approximately 98 percent of all brine is safely disposed of by injection back into brine-bearing or depleted oil and gas formations deep below the surface. Nearly two percent is spread for dust and ice control subject to local government approval and requirements.

The Ohio EPA rushed to the scene at the site of the spill, calling the Little Hocking Hocking Fire Department to plug the culvert and install a temporary dam to limit migration. The trucking company also hired a contractor to assist in cleanup efforts.

The response was swift and thorough, especially for a spill that supposedly involves merely some salty water.

In November of 2017, a tanker truck carrying frack brine tipped over on Route 50. The truck, on its way to the K&H injection well facility, spilled between 1,200 and 1,500 gallons of waste fluid onto the highway. The local fire department and the Ohio EPA rushed to the scene of the spill.

As reported in another ProPublica article by Abraham Lustgarten, “The Trillion Gallon Loophole,” records on more than 220,000 well inspections nationwide conducted between 2007 and 2010 suggest that safety is often not prioritized.

“More than 1,000 times in the three-year period examined, operators pumped waste into Class 2 wells at pressure levels they knew could fracture rock and lead to leaks,” Lustgarten writes. “In at least 140 cases, companies injected waste illegally or without a permit.”

Legislative measures dating back to the 1970s have allowed the oil and gas industry to define all material related to oil and gas extraction as non-hazardous, no matter the contents.

Regulatory agencies are understaffed and must balance encouraging oil and gas production with environmental protection. The Ohio Department of Natural Resources is not only in charge of wildlife conservation measures and managing state parks, but also working directly with oil and gas companies by issuing permits.

Lustgarten reports that in some states, funding for enforcement has dropped even when drilling activity has increased, which leads to more wells and more waste that is not sufficiently monitored by regulatory agencies.

Besides being understaffed, there is the question of loyalties and stake holding. An injection well facility must pay ODNR five cents for every in-state barrel of wastewater it injects, and 20 cents for every out-of-state barrel. This goes to the same entity, ODNR, that issues the permits for these facilities — and the cents add up when the barrels are in the millions.

In an email to the Ohio anti-drilling group Stark Concerned Citizens, ODNR geologist Tom Tomastik bluntly explained that the law allows any chemicals, even radioactive materials like radium, to be injected into Class II wells without public disclosure.

“It does not matter what is in it,” Tomastik wrote. “As long as it comes from the oil and gas field, it can be injected.”

In the Propublica report, John Apps, geoscientist and injection well expert for the U.S. Department of Energy’s Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, said that Class II wells present a serious problem.

“The risk to water? I think it’s high, partially because of the enormous number of these wells and the fact that they are not regulated with the same degree of conscientiousness,” said Apps.

Even supposing that the injection of this frack waste — the secret recipe so precious that fracking fluids are considered a proprietary secret — poses no threat to drinking water sources, residents already have plenty else to worry about.

Susie Quinn lives just a mile away from the K&H facility. She has lived in Torch for 22 years.

“As the crow flies, it is 5 miles from where I grew up, from [Route] 113,” she says. “And it’s also 5 miles from where my parents moved when I was a teenager.”
Like Phyllis Reinhart, she has become accustomed to the smells from the facility.

"We’ve had a lot of occasions when we’ve had strange odors — sometimes they come and go," says Quinn.

“One night, my son came back from getting pizza, and he said, ‘Mom, it smells like the factory out there.’ He works at the chemical factory." Having worked at a chemical factory herself, she confirmed this.

That night, Quinn called Reinhart and her husband, Ron. They all agreed that they were experiencing the same odors, and the same noises from the constant flow of tanker trucks.

“My husband and I have enjoyed gardening together, that’s kind of our thing," Quinn says. "And we cannot have a conversation out in our yard as we garden because of the noise from the traffic, and it’s constant. It’s 24/7 — it doesn’t matter if it’s Christmas. It’s constant."

One day in 2016, they counted the trucks that trudged up the hill to the K&H. Over a 24-hour period, they saw more than a hundred tanker trucks, and this is not an anomaly. Every day, they see this. And every day, the trucks carry the same noises that rattle their homes. The odors are equally omnipresent.

This is at the very least, irritating, but she fears much worse can happen.

Until recently, Quinn was never afraid of thunderstorms.

"Originally, my greatest fear was [injection wells] polluting our aquifers, where we get our water from," she says. "Recently, it’s been more of the worries about human error and lighting strikes.”

Quinn cites a June 2015 injection well explosion in Oklahoma, having watched the

WE KNOW IT’S NOT SALTWATER, LIKE THEY WANT US TO THINK. BECAUSE SALTWATER DOESN’T BURN, AND WE’VE SEEN PICTURES WHERE THESE TRUCKS HAVE BURNED. AND THESE HOLDING HAVE CAUGHT FIRE.
video of the explosion — which depicts flames and massive columns of black smoke shooting straight into the sky — over and over again. There are indicators that the explosion was caused by lightning strikes.

A month before that in Whitesboro, Texas, lightning is known to have been the direct cause of a massive fire at an injection well site there.

The local news channel, KTEN, reported, “The area that caught fire was an injection well site, where they bring saltwater.”

“We know it’s not saltwater, like they want us to think,” Quinn scoffs. “Because saltwater doesn’t burn, and we’ve seen pictures where these trucks have burned. And these holding tanks have caught fire.”

The thorough and correct way to explain the explosion would be: fracking wastewater brine combuts when struck by lightning, because it is laced with various hydrocarbons used in the fracking process. In holding tanks, these vapors from volatile chemicals are emitted and can catch fire easily.

It is not just saltwater.

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A nnie Burke, resident of Hockingport, Ohio, has lived in Athens County for most of her life. She is baffled — even angry — that while there are measures that could be taken to prevent these explosions from occurring, they are not being implemented at the K&H, or any other injection wells in the county.

The state does not require injection well facilities to implement protective measures like lightning arresters, unless the wells are in a densely populated area, not rural areas like Torch.

“They’re still equally possible to burst into flames,” says Burke. “It’s probably worse here, because we’re further from more advanced first responders. We have fewer pieces of equipment to fight fires. There’s trees all around; there’s still people who live within 1500 feet of these places.”

“This is just another example where they just say, ‘oh, it’s just poor people in the country, we don’t really care;’ and I don’t think that’s right.”

Coolvich and Torch are situated in Athens County, Ohio — a county that has witnessed more than a hundred years of extraction and disposal, industry disrupting its landscape. Many communities in Southeast Ohio have collapsed under coal mining’s boom-to-bust cycle. Athens County once served as one of the most active coal mining fields in the late 19th century. Today, it is the poorest county in the state.

Almost a third of the county’s population, 31.6 percent, lives below the poverty line. The median household income for the state of Ohio is $59,680; the median household income for Athens County is only a little more than half of that: $31,559.

Athens County is an environmental sacrifice zone. That’s what geographic areas are called that are disproportionately impaired by environmental damage, systematically occurring in places with high levels of poverty and minority populations. Robert Bullard, distinguished professor of sociology at Texas Southern University, has done extensive research on the phenomenon. In his 1994 paper, “Overcoming racism in environmental decision making,” he writes: “Despite the recent attempts by federal agencies to reduce environmental and health threats in the United States, inequities persist. If a community is poor or inhabited largely by people of color, there is a good chance that it receives less protection than a community that is affluent or white.”

The former is the case for Athens County, and this hasn’t gone unnoticed to residents like Mettler.

“You don’t see these facilities in the nice, rich housing developments. Ever,” she said. “They are in the lower income, lower poverty areas, all along the Appalachian Valley.”

The strategic placement is usually justified by the promise of employment and resulting economic prosperity, but in Appalachia, this is usually not the case. Usually, mine or well owners live elsewhere, and wealth is taken out of the county.

In his paper, Bullard writes that this is not a unique situation. “Poor people and people of color often work in the most dangerous jobs and live in the most polluted neighborhoods, and their children are exposed to all kinds of environmental toxins on the playground and in their homes and schools.”

And there’s proof that this is systematic.

Bullard notes that governments have funded studies to justify targeting these poor communities for these kinds of facilities.

He cites a Los Angeles-based consulting firm, Cerrell Associates, Inc., that advised the state of California on facility placement. They concluded that “ideally… officials and companies should look for lower socioeconomic neighborhoods that are also in a heavy industry area with little, if any, commercial activity.”

WHY ARE THERE THAT MANY INJECTION WELLS IN THIS DISTRICT? COULD BE BECAUSE THIS IS A LOW INCOME AREA? THAT WOULD BE MY GUESS.

This is what people like those in Torch are up against. The burden of proof is placed on the shoulders of residents, not the industry, as it discriminates against overburdened classes and pollutes their neighborhoods. Poor communities don’t have the resources to hire lawyers or experts, or even doctors to make their case.

“Why are there that many injection wells in this district?” Mettler asks, rhetorically. “Could be because this is a low income area? That would be my guess.”

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A nnie Burke has decided to actively fight the industry — not because of the “what if,” but the “what if it happens again.” This area has been neglected by, and lied to, by the industry before all of this.

Her mother was afflicted by kidney cancer — like many others in this area of the state. A woman in Coolville was awarded $1.6 million in court, in a suit against the chemical giant DuPont for having caused her kidney cancer.

Although her mother’s cancer was detected early, she had to watch her health decline steadily due to complications associated with the cancer. Her mother cannot comment on the matter, as she herself is in the process of litigation against the company.

Coolville fell victim to water contamination years ago, when the toxic chemical C8 — used in the manufacturing of Teflon, the non-stick coating of cookware — was found in the region’s
water supply; the DuPont plant in Parkersburg was detected as the cause for the contamination. A 2015 study by the C8 science panel showed that at least 69,000 people in the mid-Ohio River Valley were exposed enough to C8 contamination to put them at risk for multiple illnesses, including cancer.

DuPont knew since 1961 that C8 was leaking into the regional drinking water supplies, according to a 2003 Columbus Dispatch article. The report reveals a detailed timeline of what went down within the company in regards to the chemical contamination of the Ohio River.

The article cites DuPont records filed with a West Virginia court in 2002. The records show that scientists employed by the company issued internal warnings about the chemical in 1961. Further medical studies conducted by the company showed that C8 builds up in human blood and fails to break down in the environment — suggesting a great potential for health problems, including cancer.

More court records show that DuPont has known about contamination in the Ohio River when the company sent an employee to a local general store, Mason’s Market, to fill a jug with tap water. This was in 1984.

Internal testing established that the collected tap water was in fact contaminated, but the DuPont memo regarding the matter was stamped “confidential.”

An Alternet report by Sharon Kelly reveals that company officials conducted a meeting after the results of this testing. A meeting memo shows that officials stated that any possible efforts to cut down the pollution problem weren’t “economically attractive.”

It was not until 1991 that the company revealed any of this information to the public, when it created its own “community exposure guideline,” to establish reasonable levels of C8 for human consumption.

The guideline failed to note the 1978 reports that C8 was detected in the blood of DuPont employees. It also neglected to share the findings of a Minnesota researcher who discovered that 3M employees — a company that manufactures Teflon — with long-term exposure to C8 had higher rates of death from prostate cancer than those who did not work with C8. Both companies dismissed the findings.

Emails written by DuPont’s in-house counsel, Bernard Reilly, illustrate how DuPont officials knew about the toxic properties of C8 for years, and how the company communicated internally on this matter.

The Alternet report quotes an email written by Reilly in 2000: “The shit is about to hit the fan in WV. The lawyer for the farmer finally realizes the surfactant issue. He is threatening to go to the press to embarrass us to pressure us to settle for big bucks. F**k him.”

The fact that the chemical industry has gotten away with secrets such as these for decades concerns residents, as they fear they are facing a similar predicament with injection wells.

“We are being contaminated, freely, by industry,” says Felicia Mettler. “It’s not the oil and gas industry, but it’s the chemical industry. And it was proven, in a court of law, that they knowingly dumped the C8 into the Ohio River.”

**WE’RE NOT AGAINST THE PEOPLE WHO DRIVE THE TRUCKS, OR BUILD THE WELLS. WE’RE JUST SAYING, ‘YOU DESERVE BETTER THAN THAT. YOU DESERVE TO HAVE A JOB THAT WON’T KILL YOU AND YOUR FAMILY.’**
Witnessing this, and what big industry can do under their lack of transparency — is what compelled Annie and her husband, Bill, to do more research on water contamination caused by industrial practices.

The two actively fight injection wells with Torch Can Do — the activist organization established by Mettler (CAN DO is an acronym for Clean Air Now, Defend Ohio) — to combat injection wells, seeing the effects drinking water contamination can have on an entire community, and their families.

The Ohio Department of Natural Resources requires injection well permit applicants to place a public notice for five days in a newspaper of general circulation, where the well is to be located. In the case of the K&H well, it was posted in the Athens Messenger, which is not widely read by Torch residents.

A third K&H Partners well was proposed in 2015, and the comment period for this well was held over the holiday period. Some speculate that this was a strategy to submit the application with more mild resistance, by inconveniencing those who may have objections. This is what frustrates the Burkes — how the industry can get away with making public participation so difficult.

“And anytime [the industry] doesn’t let you see things, every time they don’t follow regulations, when they sneak these injection well sites in when people aren’t paying attention, it feels kind of sneaky,” Annie says. “And it’s always going to make me think of the C8 issue.”

She feels that her neighbors are not paying attention to what is happening. Sometimes, she is baffled that they can’t be moved to action despite the fact that they too have experienced the impacts of water contamination in very recent history. Yet she understands — their attitudes largely boil down to one thing: jobs.

The industry relies on the residents’ desire for employment, and in this region especially, there is a demand for jobs that don’t require a college education.

“We’re so economically repressed around here, that any kind of job overrules anything,” says Bill. “Just the thought of being able to take care of your family, or whatever.”

This is undoubtedly a class issue, they argue, and that the industry manipulation runs rampant throughout Appalachia.

“We’re not against the people who drive the trucks, or build [the wells],” she adds. “We’re just saying, ‘You deserve better than that. You deserve to have a job that won’t kill you and your family.’”
Larry Poe’s father worked on what he calls the “ground zero” of Teflon production at the Washington Works plant — the source of the C8 contamination — on the line where he handled C8 every day at his job for 26 years. He fell ill with Parkinson’s Disease and was bedridden for the last years of his life, until he passed in 1993 at age 70.

Poe, who lived in Parkersburg for 56 years before moving to Boston, then to New Mexico, admired his father. He was a diligent worker despite abhorring the company’s practices — but the pay was too good to leave. There was pride in working at the plant, one of the best paying employers in the area.

“I’m one of those kids who got to go to college because of it, but I also had to watch my dad die,” says Poe.

He believes that the conditions his father was worked in caused the Parkinson’s that killed him. Poe says 5 of 7 of his father’s colleagues who worked with him on that line came down with Parkinson’s, among a list of other conditions.

Poe doesn’t buy it, for a few reasons. One, he knows corporations have the ability to rule out links to certain maladies by including genetics as a variable. He personally does not know anyone in his family who fell ill to Parkinson’s, but he cannot confirm this. Further, an individual cannot “die of Parkinson’s.”

“As I was made to understand the disease as Dad was in his final year that no one dies of Parkinson’s, so it would be easy to rule it out,” he says. “Therefore, my Dad’s death certificate as I recall it had malnutrition mentioned, pneumonia and maybe a couple of other maladies.”

What the company did admit to is only the surface, he believes.

Further, Poe’s suspicions did not bud out of nowhere, he explains, because of what his father would report back home when he worked at the plant. His father, an otherwise hard worker, often called in sick during monthly employee safety meetings. His father personally renamed them — calling them employee “brainwashing” or “propaganda” meetings.

“They were ostensibly about safety issues and worker health, but often they went into why DuPont did not need a union — they were more anti-union than Walmart is today — or why workers should report injuries to the nurse at work and not to hospitals,” Poe says.
"As cheap as DuPont is, you know the meeting was not for the workers. DuPont always advertised how many man-hours had passed since the last injury while intimidating workers not to report them. Nominal prizes were given when ‘records’ were broken and publicity ensued.”

In other words, according to Poe, employees were awarded for not reporting workplace injuries.

This is wage slavery, he says, a term often used to draw comparisons to slavery and wage labor — between renting and owning a person. The workers at DuPont were subjected to this, and they were willing to accept the consequences of the paycheck they needed; Poe’s father was one of them, despite his awareness for the toxicity of the materials he worked with.

“If you have no freedom of speech at your work, and your family totally relies on your wage at this job, they basically own you.”

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Jobs. People need them. This is the incentive repeatedly touted by proponents of extraction industry operations, proposing that employment will ignite economic prosperity lacking in the rural, low-income areas that desperately need the jobs they will bring.

It was promised in the effort to extend the Keystone XL Pipeline. When signing the executive order to approve the project’s renewed efforts, President Donald J. Trump celebrated that “it’s a great day for American jobs,” claiming it would bring thousands.

Trump said the same about coal jobs when lifting regulations on American energy industries. “I’m the one that saved coal,” he said, in a December 2017 interview with The New York Times. “I’m the one that created jobs.”

There is little indication, if any, that these are victories that can be claimed. In the case of the Keystone XL Pipeline, the State Department reports that while people who own these injection wells don’t live here. People who do the fracking, they come from other states. Texas. Louisiana. They don’t care about the area, the landscape, the people who have made it their home. They don’t care what happens.
The problem is, Obama-era regulations did not take away the jobs. The industry did. The continued mechanization of coal mining has allowed the miners to be replaced by automation, thanks to technological advances that have introduced newer, more efficient mining techniques that require far fewer workers. Modern Longwall mining allows an entire wall of coal to be mined in a single slice — up to 4 km long and 400 m wide — as opposed to traditional room and pillar mining, which can only extract about half of the available coal underground because the rest has to be left as “pillars” to keep the ceiling from collapsing.

The most recent and immensely efficient technique of mountain-top removal mining has made coal mining even less labor intensive. In addition to this, it devastates scenic landscapes, literally blasting off layers and layers of mountain summits to extract the coal seams on the surface. It only takes about a dozen workers to operate a single mountaintop removal site.

Federal law only asks that the industry restores the mountain to its “approximate original contour” (AOC) post-production. This Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act of 1977 (SMCRA), mandates that reclaimed mining land must be brought back to AOC. This means that “surface configuration achieved by backfilling and grading of the mined area so that the reclaimed area, including any terracing or access roads, closely resembles the general surface configuration of the land prior to mining and blends into and complements the drainage pattern of the surrounding terrain, with all highwalls and spoil piles eliminated.”

SMCRA was established at a time when mountaintop removal did not even exist, and when surface mining was a practice done at a much smaller scale — not destroying entire mountain summits.

One cannot simply restore a mountain, so that the approximate original contour is mere fiction.

This extends beyond defiling the aesthetic beauty of Appalachia. The peaks of these mountains once housed headwater streams of the region’s rivers. Miles of these streams have either been destroyed or degraded, eviscerating aquatic life and drinking water sources. It also subjects those who live in the valleys to flooding, as the summits that once acted as a buffer for rainfall no longer exist.

SMCRA was established at a time when mountaintop removal did not even exist, and when surface mining was a practice done at a much smaller scale — not destroying entire mountain summits.

When Quinn counts the trucks, she looks at the license plates. She sees dozens of out-of-state trucks, mostly from West Virginia and Pennsylvania. The truck that spilled in November was from Mississippi. “And on the nice looking white pickup trucks, it’s usually a Texas license plate,” she says.

She sees Texas license plates on some of the pickup trucks heading to the facility. Roads are damaged from the high traffic, and she does not see more than a handful of workers at the facility at any given time. Her community takes all the damages, but reaps none of the benefits, she argues.

“I’m one of those kids who got to go to college because of it, but I also had to watch my dad die.”

In Torch, similar mindsets have taken root, in terms of accepting the presence of injection wells for the potential employment. Jobs are important, and when there is talk about the oil and gas industry providing employment, people listen.

“A man with several kids looking to have a job even just for a few months, is going to pay more attention to the wage benefits, she argues. “The people who own these injection wells don’t live here,” she says. “People who do the fracking, they come from other states. Texas, Louisiana. They don’t care about the area, the landscape, the people who have made it their home. They don’t care what happens.”
The selection for the location for a fracking pad or an injection well is indeed not trivial.

A senior executive of the Texas-based drilling company, Range Resources, drew ire from local residents, when he allegedly made some questionable remarks about drilling location selection, at a Pennsylvania environmental law forum.

Some attendees of the forum told The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette that Terry Bossert, the executive in question, openly said that the company avoids placing its shale gas wells near large homes, where residents tend to challenge these types of developments. This would only mean that the drilling sites end up... somewhere else.

Bossert issued an apology following his remarks at the forum. The letter, titled “A Driller’s Apology,” urged that his remarks were not a reflection of the company’s efforts “to create the biggest buffer between our operations and all residents.”

“It is unfortunate that my poor choice of words could call into question the unwavering commitment we have at Range in working with residents regardless of their economic means,” Bossert wrote.

Regardless of intention in this case, Range wields great power over federal agencies.

A confidential report obtained by the Associated Press reveals that the federal Environmental Protection Agency possessed evidence against Range Resources, that they may have contaminated drinking water wells with methane.

In 2010, a man in a Fort Worth suburb reported that his drinking water began bubbling like champagne. The EPA deemed the situation serious enough to issue an emergency order, which stated that at least two homeowners were in danger from a well saturated with high levels of methane, as reported in an AP article. The involvement of the federal government in this scenario is actually an anomaly, as usually state regulators handle water and air pollution.

The EPA rescinded this order a year later, but did not explain why.

The confidential report shows that the agency ordered Range Resources to stop the pollution and provide clean water for the families affected, but it withdrew the order after the company threatened not to cooperate with a national fracking study.

The company told EPA officials that it would not participate in the study as long as the agency pursued a “scientifically baseless” action against the company, and would not allow any EPA scientists on its drilling locations.

The EPA declined to answer questions about this matter, but issued a statement via email that said resolving the issue with Range Resources allowed the agency to shift its “focus in this case away from litigation and toward a joint effort on the science and safety of energy extraction.”

According to the AP report, the man in Fort Worth had to pay $1,000 a month to haul clean water to his home after the EPA’s decision to rescind its order.

In other words, a federal agency succumbed to the demands of a private company. Industry has its hands in the government — not only this, but it has access to strings that can be pulled.

It is unsurprising why the residents of Torch are skeptical of the efficacy of regulatory agencies.

Susie Quinn does not hesitate when she is asked what angers her the most about the oil and gas industry: it is the feeling of helplessness she is subjected to, by the abundance of protections the oil and gas industry are exempt from the Safe Drinking Water Act, Clean Water Act, etcetera. Quinn explains. In fact, they make their own rules. They don’t always follow them, because they have the luxury not to.
gas industry is granted by the federal government.

These frustrations take root at the Halliburton Loophole — the infamous provision included in the 2005 energy bill signed under the Bush administration.

“Basically, the oil and gas industry are exempt from the Safe Drinking Water Act, Clean Water Act, etcetera,” Quinn explains. “In fact, they make their own rules. They don’t always follow them, because they have the luxury not to.”

This provision was inserted into the bill thanks to then Vice-President Dick Cheney, who also happened to be the former chief executive of Halliburton.

Halliburton is an American multinational corporation and is one of the world’s largest oil field service companies.

To expand on Quinn’s summary, the loophole took away the federal Environmental Protection Agency’s authority to oversee hydraulic fracturing — the practice invented by Halliburton — despite the fact that it has been implicated in a number of cases involving water contamination.

In essence, this provision gives the oil and gas industry immunity from environmental protections, allowing it to expand its fracking operations on a wide scale — turning it into a Wild West of sorts.

Even more troubling about the loophole is that it allows the industry to hide what is in the wastewater pumped into the ground at the Class II injections wells such as the K&H.

The industry keeps the concoction’s formula under wraps for business reasons, it claims, as it is a proprietary secret.

This secret keeping is legal thanks to Halliburton, which gives the oil and gas industry no incentive to surrender to the demands of concerned citizens. In fracking related complaints, even doctors who seek to determine what kinds of chemicals their patients have been exposed to cannot obtain this information.

In addition, drilling companies — despite clinging to the claims that their practices are safe — have made it extremely difficult for the government to conduct studies that would determine the safety of fracking. This is seen in the case of Range Resources, which refused to participate in a national fracking study as long as the government tried to step in to mitigate drinking water contamination linked to the company.

Making this sort of participation voluntary practically renders regulators useless.

As Quinn notes, the industry regulates itself, meaning it is difficult to oversee whether they are following their own rules.

In Ohio, determining the contamination levels and disposal methods of frac waste is left up to the operators of disposal facilities, as regulations are not put in place.

The Ohio Department of Natural Resources Oil and Gas Division and the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency also do not issue standards related to how the waste is disposed, treatment methods, or chemical testing. As noted before, all waste associated with oil and gas production is considered non-hazardous by the federal EPA.

Finally, well operators are prohibited from disposing of Technologically Enhanced Naturally Occurring Radioactive Material (TENORM) waste at well sites — but this does not apply to frac waste, because ODNR defines the contents as Naturally Occurring Radioactive Material (NORM). There is also no requirement to test for radiation.

It is worth noting that research conducted in 2013 from the U.S. Geological Survey found that applying oil and gas wastewater to roads for de-icing has lead to the accumulation of radium along roadsides, as reported by the Natural Resources Defense Council. The USGS study examined the roads of Vernon Township, Pennsylvania, where this practice is applied in the winter.

The gravel deposits near roads that were examined proved there were elevated levels of radium-226.

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In 2016, the top 20 list alone received a total of $10,758,610 direct campaign contributions from the oil and gas industry. These numbers are based on contributions from political action committees and individual donors giving $200 or more.

Nineteen out of the twenty were Republicans, but sitting at the number three spot just under now-president Donald Trump, is Hillary Clinton. She received $899,543 from the industry; Trump received $919,642.

Ohio Senator Rob Portman sits at the eighth spot on the list, having received $900,842.

In the 2016 Ohio senate race between Portman and former Ohio Governor Ted Strickland, campaign contributions from outside groups further reflect this influence.
The fate of Ohio’s compliance with the Clean Power Plan was a major issue at stake in this race. Strickland was in support of this initiative, while Portman, who won the election, opposed it.

As of November 2016, the National Institute on Money in State Politics reported that a combined total of $3.1 million in campaign contributions came from committees and individuals associated with the non-renewable energy industry.

Groups linked with billionaire brothers Charles and David Koch, of the conglomerate Koch Industries — which includes oil refineries, pipelines and chemical manufacturing facilities — are said to have contributed $30 million to help Portman defeat Strickland, according to Politifact. This included ads strategically targeted at Appalachian coal-country voters, which urged that Strickland was vehemently “anti-coal.”

In contrast, only a combined total of $113,000 in donations for candidates came from groups associated with alternative energy or pro-environmental policies.

THE TREES WERE DYING ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE RIVER, ON THE PLANT SIDE, AND THERE WAS A BILLBOARD ON THAT SIDE THAT SAID HOW MUCH THEY CARE ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENT.
knowing what she knows, Felicia Mettler is angry, and she is frustrated — but she remains determined, determined to fight, driven by the thought that her children’s futures rest on her efforts.

If she doesn’t protect them, who will, she asks herself.

It baffles her as a mother that politicians are still willing to side with industry, despite having children of their own.

“It’s simply overwhelming that money is more important than not just my kids, but everyone’s kids — even their kids,” she says. “They have to live in this world too. I don’t understand it. I just don’t understand it.”

Mettler too was once apathetic about oil and gas; in fact, she was adamantly supportive of energy independence, conservatism serving as the backbone of her politics. She knew nothing about fracking or injection wells, because she didn’t have to. She firmly believed that it was necessary — not only for energy, but for job growth, too.

None of it mattered until she had to bare witness.

“I think unfortunately, a lot of the time, it takes for it to be at your backdoor to really fully understand it and care,” she says.

“IT needs to be in your backdoor — because I struggle with it all the time, knowing what I know. I just want to make people see that it’s going to affect you, too.”

Things started to make sense the further she dug, and the further she dug, the more horrified she was: of the chemicals in the wastewater, of the health effects they can have on human beings, of how little regulatory agencies know of where this water is going.

Then, the dots began to connect when she remembered that this had happened before, and how angry she was of DuPont’s C8 contamination.

“Industrial environmental impact is not an isolated issue, she realized. “The community has already sacrificed so much,” she says. “There are folks that have died. There are folks that are dying. I absolutely think that these are all combined. Industry cares about the all mighty dollar and not human beings. I truly believe that, as sad as it is.”

She could just leave, if she doesn’t like it, some people have told her — like what Poe was told by the assistant principal when he didn’t want to work with DuPont as an advisor for the environmental club.

But this isn’t just an after school program. It’s her everything.

“People have asked me why don’t you just move? This is land that I grew up on. This is my home. And I wanted my children to grow up on the land that I grew up on. I shouldn’t have to move. I shouldn’t be in this position.”

Felicia Mettler, left, and Phyllis Reinhart, right, discuss plans at their Torch CAN DO meeting. CAN DO is an acronym for “Clean Air Now, Defend Ohio.”

PHOTO: ALEX DRIEAUS