

## Drilling Deeper into the Shale Gas Story

*One newspaper reporter's quest for answers*

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Drilling for gas may seem straightforward enough, but reporting on it is anything but, says NY Times journalist Ian Urbina. Marcellus Shale is an environmental story, a geopolitical story, and with huge amounts of money at stake, a story that has landed Urbina in the eye of a storm.

Since his first article on drilling waste last February, Urbina has been documenting the complexity of shale gas drilling. Last month he addressed a standing-room only crowd at Cornell, speaking about the role of journalism in the hydraulic fracturing debate.

After covering the BP oil spill in the Gulf, Urbina proposed to his editor that they do a series of articles about onshore gas drilling, to answer some of the hard questions that might possibly help avert a similar disaster on land. Urbina was concerned about what he saw as “exuberance” over natural gas, bubbling through Washington. Even after the price of gas plummeted to \$4/mcf the excitement remained high, especially on Capitol Hill where legislators were pulling together stimulus packages and other types of support.

Isn't it a newspaper's job to do the research and raise questions about the assumptions that everyone is taking for granted, Urbina asked? “You only have to look back to coal bed methane or ethanol to see that we've had this kind of exuberance [from legislators] before.”

So Urbina began collecting information. Every month he'd send out FOILs (freedom of information letters) – “mainly to see how high the stack would get,” he joked. When the stack grew to more than 30,000 pages he realized he had a story.

In developing the project, Urbina's goal was to look at the “big picture” – not just “fracking”. Another goal, he said, was to produce something three-dimensional. That meant charts, graphs, maps and, most importantly, links to the documents. “That's where the *real* story resides,” Urbina said.

He's had challenges. For example, seeking an answer to a very simple question: how much radioactivity is in the waste fluid produced from the wells?

Urbina knew the numbers were out there because drillers had to report those numbers to the state (Pennsylvania). But those reports were not collected in a central location. Not only that, he had to request the information by identifying the title of the form. “It took us three weeks to figure out that the form we needed was 26R (Chemical Analysis of Residual Waste Annual Report by the Generator),” Urbina said. Then he and his fellow researchers had to make appointments to review the documents in local offices of the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP). The kicker: they had limited time to review the documents and, if they didn't finish, they had to wait weeks for another appointment.

“Documents matter,” Urbina said. Even though it's a real investment of time and money for the paper, people need to have access to primary sources.

Who's reading those documents? Regulators, Urbina said. People in the industry, news readers and even a few journalists – though he wishes more journalists would take advantage of the wealth of data he's provided online.

Urbina admitted that he could simply include quotes. But, he said, it's important to let the documents speak for themselves. Is dilution really the solution to pollution? There's an EPA

document investigating that very question, he said, noting that it was “leaked” to the Times, as it clearly notes “FOIA-exempt” at the top.

Despite industry pressure – and accusations that his reporting is inaccurate – Urbina is committed to continuing his series. His most recent article, on October 20, examines the impact of gas leases on the housing mortgage industry.

“Our country has serious energy problems,” he said, and followed up with questions on how energy policy is developed.

Urbina acknowledged “pushback” from the gas industry, but said that if he’d chosen to write about the pharmaceutical industry he feels that there would be a similar response.

Still, Urbina said, “I have been surprised by the misinformation the industry has been willing to put forward.”