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## A Standard for Those Who Keep the Standards

By Mike Casey

June 14, 2011 | [Post Your Comment](#)

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Cross posted from [The Great Energy Challenge](#).

Just as the traditional news media began its current freefall of layoffs, staff cuts, closures, and substitution of ideology for journalism, [The New York Times](#), thank goodness, decided to double down on good (albeit not perfect) journalism.

That's why it's baffling to see a dirty energy front group operative, [Robert Bryce](#), getting a seat last week next to Thomas Friedman and Nicholas Kristof on the Times' opinion page, with a piece of [pro-dirty energy propaganda](#), without having to say if he's paid by dirty energy.

I remember from journalism school that opinion pages are run separately from the news pages. But is it really that hard for someone on the Times' opinion page staff to ask Bryce where his host organization, the [Manhattan Institute](#), gets its money? Don't Times readers deserve to know that the Manhattan Institute [gets a significant amount of money from dirty energy](#)?

I'm not even expecting that the Times actually demand a factual grounding for the opinion pieces it runs. That seems to have gone out of style a while ago. The Washington Post demonstrated this new normal with [its tortured sidestepping](#) of questions about why it let columnist George Will demonstrably lie about the wide and deep scientific consensus around global climate disruption. Basically, it seems that you can lie without consequence on the nation's most influential opinion pages.

But Bryce got away with something much more preventable: pretending he's some sort of intellectually honest thinker when his organization has ties to dirty energy money that no one bothered to note.

The ease with which intellectual burglars like Bryce can break into the major media's house of standards is why dirty energy underwrites dozens of PR firms masquerading as think tanks. And they have done so for decades, going back to the call to start farming these groups in the [1971 Powell Manifesto](#). The result is what can be described as a Front Group Industrial Complex for polluting industries, a network including the [Manhattan Institute](#), [Cato Institute](#), [Competitive Enterprise Institute](#), [Citizens for a Sound Economy](#), and the [Institute for Energy Research](#).



### Mike Casey

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**About:** Mike Casey is the President and founder of Tigercomm, a leading U.S. cleantech PR firm with offices in Arlington, VA and San Francisco, CA. He uses his 28 years... [more »](#)

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Here's something to institute on all these "institutes": Why not have a standard for all opinion pages for papers over a certain basic level of readership requiring opinion page submission finalists to disclose financial conflicts, direct or indirect, on the subject on which they have written?

After all, the Times applies these standards to its own news staff through its [code of ethics](#):

"Masquerading. Times reporters do not actively misrepresent their identity to get a story. We may sometimes remain silent on our identity and allow assumptions to be made to observe an institution's dealings with the public, for example, or the behavior of people at a rally or police officers in a bar near the station house. But a sustained, systematic deception, even a passive one ... may be employed only after consultation between a department head and masthead editors." [emphasis added]

So, for the Times' opinion page, why not apply the spirit of that standard on masquerading by always asking a few direct questions of guest writers about their funding? The total daily time required would be, what, 30 minutes?

I'm a PR guy paid by renewable energy companies, and I proudly say that on my firm's website. Robert Bryce is a PR guy flacking for dirty energy sources, yet he doesn't seem to be proudly saying that. In fact, he seems to be going out of his way to avoid discussion of his funding.

By making the polluting industry front group guys answer the funding question when they submit opinion pieces to major papers, it might inject just a little bit of honesty into what is now an all-too-frequent stream of enabled propoganda. For those working to maintain the increasingly endangered standards of good journalism, that seems like a pretty easy one to uphold.

 Other

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