

Pew and the media

Nils E. Stolpe for Fishing News International
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The Pew Charitable Trusts established The Pew Oceans Commission back in 2000. It was chaired by Leon Panetta, former Congressman and Chief of Staff in President Clinton's Administration. On its website we are told "*in the first thorough review of ocean policy in 34 years, the Pew Oceans Commission released a host of recommendations in 2003 to guide the way in which the federal government will successfully manage America's marine environment.*" The recommendations focused on fishing. (Note this Commission had no connections with government agencies or any other "official" groups, and its data gathering, deliberations and recommendations were subject to neither external controls nor outside review. Some people got together and spent a bunch of Pew Trusts money for some reports and recommendations that they then spent another bunch of Pew Trusts money promoting to any audience that had been prepared by the expenditure of yet another bunch of Pew Trusts money.)

The release of the Pew Commission's report and recommendations was accompanied by a media barrage. As part of it, Mr. Panetta was interviewed by National Public Radio's Bob Edwards on Christmas Day, 2002. National Public Radio (NPR) describes itself as "*an internationally acclaimed producer and distributor of noncommercial news, talk, and entertainment programming.*" Mr. Edwards was host of NPR's flagship news program, *Morning Edition*, one of the most listened-to radio broadcasts in the country. Mr. Edwards, who has since left NPR and is now on satellite radio, remains a well-respected broadcast journalist and skilled interviewer.

During the interview, after a long description of the problems in ocean governance in the U.S. by Mr. Panetta, Mr. Edwards interjected "*you're also dealing with oil spills, with global warming.*"

In responding, Mr. Panetta mentioned overfishing, aquaculture, cruise ship pollution and invasive species. Mr. Edwards, displaying what I'd have to consider shockingly less than incisive reportorial skills – particularly considering the connections between the Pew Trusts and Big Oil – attempted no follow-up whatsoever, leaving the oil spills issue dead on the floor.

How, you might ask, was that possible? How could an established interviewer, particularly one who at the time rivaled #1 ranked radio broadcaster Rush Limbaugh in popularity, be so completely diverted from what was a legitimate and perhaps critically important line of inquiry?

Only Mr. Edwards can answer that, but an examination of the Pew Trust's relationship with National Public Radio and public broadcasting in general might provide some insight.

NPR doesn't have paying advertisers. Its acceptance as an effective and unbiased source of news and analysis is based on this. Such "objectivity" comes with a price. NPR and its member stations are dependent (decreasingly) on government handouts and (increasingly) contributions to stay in business. In fact, a line familiar to listeners is that it's supported "by listeners like you." This results in regularly scheduled on-air fund raising, generally one- or two-week ordeals during which the reporters, commentators, hosts, etc. devote hours of air time to begging for pledges hovering at around a hundred dollars a piece, and offering CDs, coffee mugs umbrellas and other trinkets in return. While I can't write for the people on the other side of the microphone, as a listener I find the process aggravating in the extreme.

NPR also has corporate-level sponsors, among which are the Pew Trusts. These aren't listeners like me, or like anyone else I know. Pew has donated on the order of \$5 million to National Public Radio itself, or its various local stations. I'd guess that the folks associated with public radio would much rather get a single check – or however "charitable" donations are distributed – for several hundreds of thousands of dollars from Pew than have to spend two weeks on the air pleading for a couple of thousand checks of a hundred dollars each.

And Pew's support of public broadcasting doesn't stop there. Take the Pew funding of the PBS (Public Broadcasting System) *Newshour with Jim Lehrer*, one of the most important and arguably influential news shows on television. Pew has given the Greater Washington Educational Telecommunications Association, the Washington, DC area PBS television station which produces *Newshour*, and MacNeil/Lehrer Productions, at least \$7 million over the last decade.

If the world of public broadcasting works the same way that all of the worlds that I'm familiar with do, I'd imagine that keeping the folks at Pew happy is pretty high on the to-do list of everyone connected with PBS and NPR, (diminishing) support by government and by viewers and listeners like me notwithstanding. And not at all surprisingly, whenever the latest Pew-supported "doom and gloom in the oceans because of commercial fishing" study is released by members of the Pew anti-fishing team, PBS and NPR are both Johnny on the spot, slavishly reporting it to their influential listeners and viewers.

Hitting close to home with those of you in the EU, in 2005 PBS aired "*Gutted*," a documentary about the tragedy of a multi-generational Scottish fishing family being forced to deliver their boat to a scrap yard in Denmark. Powerful in its own right, the film – and the ordeal that the West family was going through – was turned into yet another anti-fishing rant, both by radical PBS editing and by an "afterword" delivered by Mr. Panetta

In *Preservation Takes Priority, and the Fisherman Struggles* Virginia Heffernan wrote (also in the New York Times on August 23, 2005) "*the main insult of this American version is that the narration often contradicts the spirit of the original Scottish interviews. Tern Television, which provided all the images, does not seem to have intended to tell more than one side of the story of the Scottish Fleet's travails. And those travails are not 'depleted cod stocks' - as the European Union would have them, suggesting that the interests of environmentalists and fishermen are one and the same - so much as new regulations that demand not only that people stop fishing, but also that they destroy their beautiful boats. In its unadulterated form, 'Gutted' appears to have been the story of fathers and sons who love to fish suddenly confronted with decrees issued by wonks in Brussels.... What was not meant to be a plot here was the toll taken on the seabed by the nets of the cod trawlers. No images of this damage appear; no talking head comes to warn about it; no fisherman seems to give it a moment's thought. But the PBS-version voice-over, noting the damage done by cod nets, says, 'A 2004 report warned that Britain and its neighbors could soon be surrounded by a lifeless sea. (A connection between this alarming report and the use of cod nets is never made.)'*"

PBS adulterated (in Ms. Heffernan's fitting phraseology) the original version of the film to conform to Pew's "it's mostly the fault of the fishermen" perspective.

And afterwards, Mr. Panetta, in a startling display of his lack of knowledge about commercial fishing, particularly considering his tenure as Chairman of the Pew Oceans Commission and his claim that his grandfather was a commercial fisherman, continued the attack. He cited supposed fishing-induced problems that were due in larger part to other factors. He addressed technological advances in fishing, stating "*they have these huge nets that can basically go down and scrape the bottom of the ocean.... oh, they're huge.... they can go as far as eight miles in some instances.*" And he also squeezed in a reference to the highly controversial – though Pew supported – "research" claiming that 90% of the world's big fish were gone due to fishing.

There's an old expression about getting what you pay for. When it comes to Pew and public broadcasting, that appears to be right on target.

What else is Pew paying for relating to the print and broadcast media?

Columbia University in New York City, Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore and the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia are among the top journalism/communications schools in the U.S. Pew has given Columbia over \$35 million, with over \$20 million of that for various journalism projects. One of these, the Project for Excellence in Journalism, received over \$15 million from Pew while it was located at Columbia. Since 2006 it has been located at the Washington, DC based Pew Research Center and has received an additional \$8 million from Pew. Pew has given Johns Hopkins University over \$20 million, with about \$7.5 million of that for journalism grants including \$3.9 million for an International Journalism project and \$2.9 million for International Journalism fellowships. Pew has given the University of Pennsylvania over \$40 million, with over \$12 million for print, broadcast and internet communications and over \$5 million to the influential Annenberg School for Communications.

The Project for Excellence in Journalism, at well over \$20 million one of Pew's most expensive forays into the world of communications, is described on its website as "*a research organization that specializes in using empirical methods to evaluate and study the performance of the press. It is non partisan, non ideological and non political.*"

Pew has also funded the Pew Center for Civic Journalism at the Tides Center in San Francisco with over \$8 million. From its website, it *“helps print and broadcast news organizations experiment with ways to reconnect to their communities and engage their citizens in dialogue and problem solving.”* The Center for Civic Journalism spun off the Institute for Interactive Journalism at the University of Maryland, which has received over \$40 million in Pew grants. It *“helps news organizations and citizens use new information ideas and innovative computer technologies to develop new ways for people to engage in critical public policy issues.”*

Not only is Pew deeply financially entrenched in the crème de la crème of the U.S. universities where journalists receive their training and in the day-to-day operations and financing of the news media (including the internet), it also evaluates its performance.

And then there are the Pew connections with individual journalists.

Each year the Pew Fellows in Marine Conservation meet at apparently exclusive digs in various exotic locales. In 2002 the meeting was at the Plaza Resort in Bonaire. Cornelia Dean, then the Science Editor at the New York Times, was there, participating in the “Communicating for Results” session and listed as a “Presenter/trainer.” She was back at the 2004 meeting at the Ocean Reef Club in the Florida Keys. There she participated in the “optional” barside discussion, *“Oceans in the Balance: Is Science or Politics Tipping the Scales?”*

Ms. Dean seems to be a direct conduit between Pew-supported researchers and the Times’ 2 million or so subscribers, among whom are just about all of the shakers and thumpers on the domestic political scene. But on occasion her “reporting” seems to go a bit beyond objectivity. One can’t help but question whether this is due to the relationships that were formed barside in Key Largo and as a “trainer” of the Pew cadre in Bonaire.

Did this all come together due to happenstance? Douglas Jehl wrote in the New York Times (*Charity is New Force in Environmental Fight*, 06/28/01), *“from a suite of offices in a high-rise here, a \$4.8 billion foundation called the Pew Charitable Trusts has quietly become not only the largest grant maker to environmental causes, but also one that controls much more than the purse strings. Unlike many philanthropies that give to conservationist groups, Pew has been anything but hands-off, serving as the behind-the-scenes architect of highly visible recent campaigns to preserve national forests and combat global warming.”*

In a profile of Pew Trusts Board member and Executive Director Rebecca Rimel published in the Sunday (Philadelphia) Inquirer Magazine, Steve Goldstein wrote *“Pew, now beginning its 50th year, develops its own causes, creating and funding dozens of programs and independent organizations to carry out a vision -- Rimel's vision-- of social reengineering. The Rimel regime is not interested in merely supporting agencies and programs that maintain the status quo, but in championing high-profile, activist enterprises where the Pew impact can be felt --and seen.”*

“Reforming” fisheries, and not just U.S. fisheries, is now one of Pews’/Ms. Rimels “activist enterprises.”