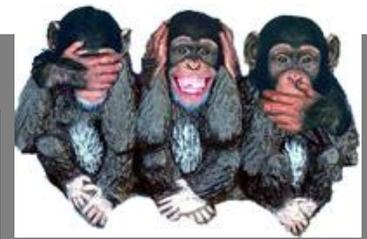


Unconventional Gas and Ethics

Unconventional Gas produces money for some people and risks and harms for others. People are confronted with difficult choices between immediate personal interests and obligations to the wider society and to the environment. There is a great temptation to deny these dilemmas exist.



Yes, fracking "is safe" – in an ideal world, where you don't look for contrary evidence, refuse to hear anything to the contrary and keep your mouth shut....

Ethical Dilemmas confronting the Gas Industry

When your job, income and ability to pay the mortgage, in order to support your partner and children, depend on drilling there will be a great reluctance to admit that things go regularly wrong in gas fields. One might not want to admit that what one does might damage other people's lives. Perhaps a long training in geology or engineering has been all about proving one's skills and competence and the last thing one wants to admit is that the processes fail, that you are fallible and that communities can get hurt. The professional peer group develops a protective "consensus trance", a common interpretation that communities have exaggerated fears because they are uninformed – and when damage to communities becomes too evident to ignore, it is justified as "collateral damage" – unfortunate but someone has to pay the cost for natural gas.

The ethical issues are therefore played down, minimised, denied. The psychological mechanisms involve looking the other way and/or rationalisation. Now and then though, gas industry insiders are personally affected and must take a decision. Ask Rex Tillerson, CEO of Exxon...

Ethical Dilemmas for Planners and Regulators

The British government has said that fracking can be made safe because we have the best regulatory system in the world so the officials working in local authority planning or in the Environment Agency or the Health and Safety Executive are supposed to keep us safe....while the government is busily undermining them. Many of them cannot fail to recognise that they have been set up - for them being unable to tell this truth and that the dangers are real and they have little time, resources and power to do enough - is the big ethical dilemma that the government has put them under.

Politicians.

As decision makers on every conceivable issue politicians are principally concerned to be seen to be competent, active and, above all, the centre of attention. With little time to consider any issue in depth they may live and work in a bubble in which powerful people and corporations who are well connected, well resourced, well represented, well publicised, and, when needed, well protected and well hidden, often get their way. There are few more powerful lobbyists than the energy companies who provide the fuel to power all the devices of a technological society. In politics ethical considerations rarely come into play – politicians think instead using economic criteria in the belief that money measures benefits and costs – whereas of course it really measures what the most powerful players think are important and how much political support they can get.



Members of Local Communities

Members of local communities are faced with ethical dilemmas too. As landowners should they take the money offered by the gas companies? Would their business suffer? Should people get involved in campaigning – it takes time in a busy life and the controversy might upset neighbours and powerful people. Local newspapers might mock and misrepresent opposition. Getting friends and neighbours to look at difficult issues can involve being the bearer of bad news and that might not be welcome. It might involve struggling to understand unfamiliar ideas and getting to know unfamiliar people.



7 Rationalisations

- (1) Denial of responsibility – 'safety is the job of the regulators, if they allow us then it's OK'.
 - (2) Denial of injury – 'there has never been a case of damage to health'.
 - (3) Denial of victim – 'it's collateral damage, there's only a few people live there'.
 - (4) Condemnation of critics – 'they would say that, they're extremists'.
 - (5) Appeal to higher loyalties – 'the country needs the gas'.
 - (6) 'If we don't drill another company would'.
 - (7) Entitlement – 'We've trained to do this and we're risking our money, its so far underground you have no right to stop us'.
- (Derived from Joseph Heath's 7 rationalisations for unethical action)



Faith Communities

Even faith communities might find the ethical issues of fracking challenging. These issues are new for them and there is a lack of previous precedent for judging the ethical questions. Won't taking up fracking divide communities? Bewildered by a seemingly complicated question the temptation is to stand on the sidelines and claim to be 'neutral'.