

Article

## Making Watergate “Look Like Child’s Play”: The Solyndra Discourse (2011–2012) as Flak

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### Abstract

In analyzing the distinction between flak and scandal, this investigation focuses on the discourse around Solyndra in 2011–2012 on two media platforms. Solyndra was a solar panel firm that went bankrupt after receiving American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (‘The Stimulus’) funds. The analysis shows that *National Review*—a rightwing journal of opinion that increasingly operates as an online platform—unswervingly utilized the Solyndra bankruptcy as an instrument of political combat. Following flak lines rehearsed by Republicans in congressional hearings, *National Review* narrated Solyndra as scandalous evidence of the Obama administration’s putative ineptitude and/or criminality that, moreover, discredited the efficacy of green energy. The performance of the mainstream newspaper *The Washington Post* presented a grab-bag mix as its objective methods insinuated flak packaged as scandal into stories when they followed Republican talking points. At the same time, *The Washington Post*’s discourse noted that no evidence of administration corruption was discovered despite extensive investigation and that government intervention into the economy is often highly beneficial.

### Keywords

Democrats; flak; *National Review*; political scandal; Republicans; Solyndra; *The Washington Post*

### Issue

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[Solyndra made] Watergate look like child’s play. (Republican Party Congresswoman Michelle Bachmann, as cited in Kamen, 2012, p. 28)

### 1. Introduction

During the 2012 U.S. presidential campaign, Republican candidate Mitt Romney made a pilgrimage to the “shuttered headquarters” of a firm in Fremont, California (Henderson, 2012, p. A4). Rather than extolling the company, “Romney and his allies are hoping that Solyndra,” the bankrupt firm that had manufactured solar panels, “will become a household name” (Henderson, 2012, p. A4): A one-word index of the Obama administration’s alleged corruption and ineptitude. Solyndra’s bankruptcy had previously triggered a series of Republican Party-led congressional hearings in 2011. The hearings’ purpose of pushing a spurious Solyndra storyline was, in turn, oriented toward impacting the 2012 election. When asked

how long investigations into Solyndra would continue, Republican Congressman Jim Jordan replied: “Ultimately we’ll stop it on Election Day” while U.S. voters “evaluate who they are going to vote for in November [2012]” (as cited in Theel, Fitzsimmons, & Greenberg, 2012, para. 18). Rightwing media, notably *Fox News*, framed Solyndra’s bankruptcy as both scandal and a presumptive synecdoche of the folly of the Obama administration’s support for the green economy (Theel et al., 2012).

The stakes are high in branding an event as scandal that, in this case, was better understood as a costly error. In examining the discourse around Solyndra, this investigation is structured around differentiating the political combat engendered in flak from genuine scandal. Herman and Chomsky (1988) proposed a concept of flak in reference to practices that condition news media behavior. In their ‘propaganda model,’ the authors identified flak with complaint and punitive action (from angry letters to the editor to lawsuits) intended to discipline

news media toward the U.S.'s prevailing ideologies of monopoly capitalism and nationalism. In the decades following Herman and Chomsky's seminal discussion, flak has become a far more widespread and potent sociopolitical force that is now invigorated by new digital media platforms.

In a series of investigations, I have characterized flak more broadly as political harassment that is mobilized to delegitimize, damage, or disable its targets (people, organizations, or causes). Flak campaigns extend far beyond legitimate, good faith criticism. Moreover, flak campaigns are backed by sociopolitical power toward consequential ends. Generously funded rightwing flak mills have waged ongoing campaigns against, for example, professional journalism, urban advocacy, voter registration and climate science (Goss, 2009, 2013, 2018, 2020). Flak need not be simply false, although it was in the case of Obama-era 'birtherism' intended to impugn the 44th president's legitimacy (Mikkelsen, 2011). However, as a strategy of irregular political combat, flak merchants operate in bad faith with, at least, indifference to truth. In a similar vein, the rightwing invention of the 'Obama-gate' election year gambit in spring 2020 that alleged (unspecified, amorphous) misconduct by Obama's administration has been characterized as "a hashtag in search of an actual scandal" (Page, 2020, para. 10); accusation does not wait for evidence in the sphere of flak.

Although it is tendentious and purposefully weaponized for sociopolitical effect, flak merchants camouflage their flak products as something distinctly different; to wit, flak merchants assay to disguise a flak episode as serious, sober scandal. John B. Thompson (2000) conceptualizes scandal as characterized by examination of suspected wrongdoing in order to establish the truth. While the process is often messy, Thompson posits that scandal vets the public sphere of bad actors and ascertains what happened in the scandal's narrative resolution.

By contrast, rather than arriving at the truth about suspected wrongdoing, a flak episode collapses accusation into conviction. Moreover, rather than being driven by evidence toward a resolution, flak can thrive on an endless regress of suspicion. Indeed, in a head-spinning paradox, evidence against flak campaigns (for example, the existence of Obama's birth certificate) can be incorporated into the flak narrative as a further sign of wrongdoing that extends ineffably deeper than previously supposed. Flak depends not on solid evidence, but on sheer repetition of claims to acquire the veneer of truth (Pennycook, Cannon, & Rand, 2018); repetition that lends itself to the echo chambers of the current digital media environment.

To analyze the distinction between flak and scandal with its further implications for digital versus mainstream legacy media, this investigation revolves around an analysis of 150 articles from two distinctly different sources. In particular, I will analyze *The Washington Post* (here-

after, *TWP*), a pillar of high-reputation mainstream journalism, alongside the long-established rightwing journal of opinion *National Review* (hereafter *NR*) that is regarded as a seminal intellectual organ of the right. 100 articles from *TWP* were identified by searching the Nexis University database using the term 'Solyndra,' sorted by Nexis for salience and published between 1 September 2011 and 31 December 2012. 50 articles were harvested for analysis from *NR* within the same 2011–2012 timeline. The articles were identified by using the *NR* web site's search function that sorts results by relevance.

In the analysis that follows, I will differentiate between rightwing *NR*'s scandal-mongering flak and the legacy-media *TWP*'s commitment to objectivity. In turn, *TWP*'s pursuit of objectivity generated a chimerical discourse. Objective reporting enabled tendentious flak claims to circulate and to gain elaboration in *TWP*'s discourses when journalists followed their Republican Party sources. At the same time, *TWP* also published material that extensively contradicted flak premises.

Thus, an important stake of this investigation implicates revision of widely held views of the rise of new platforms vis-à-vis mainstream objective journalism. Examination of the recent past should disabuse scholars and the wider public of wistful nostalgia about news media prior to the entrenchment of new media platforms. Earlier phases of what constitutes news in the U.S. were deeply flawed in systematic ways; for example, the degree to which flak-driven scandal-mongering is at least partially compatible with the objectivity doctrine in practice. Careful study of the tendentious, flak-intensive discourses of *NR* makes a legacy-media news organ such as *TWP* look more hard-nosed than it is at conveying the textures of reality. This impression of hard-nosed reporting may, in turn, be construed an unearned victory for mainstream journalism that needs to better capture the contours of reality—and not to simply out-perform tendentious, partisan flak-mills. Prior to examining *NR*'s and *TWP*'s discourses, I will sketch the Solyndra's backstory and Republicans' congressional hearings about the firm that attempted to conjure scandal through flak.

## 2. Solyndra Backstory

Solyndra did not become the electoral game-change narrative that Republicans contrived it to be. That said, the company also never realized its promise. In 2010, *The Wall Street Journal* rated Solyndra as the top clean energy firm in the U.S. while the *MIT Technology Review* fingered the company as one of the world's top 50 innovative firms (Fong & Theel, 2011). Solyndra's solar panels had the advantage of being easy to install and bet on copper indium gallium selenide over the industry preference for polysilicon materials; a design feature that fatally negated Solyndra's competitive advantages when the cost of silicon underwent a steep and abrupt decline.

The Department of Energy (DoE) program that granted Solyndra a \$535 million loan guarantee in 2009

originated with the Bush-era Energy Policy Act of 2005, a law designed to cultivate promising alternative energy projects. Following the 2008 financial crisis, the program was expanded through the Obama administration's American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (i.e., 'The Stimulus'). As Bush's term wound down, Solyndra's application for a loan guarantee advanced into the final 16 candidates among 143 firms. Solyndra had also attracted almost a billion dollars of private financing. The Bush administration's DoE established a timeline to complete Solyndra's review, and the department's credit committee, staffed by career employees, approved Solyndra's application in March 2009 during the opening weeks of the Obama administration. Following further due diligence, Solyndra's loan guarantee was finalized in September 2009 (Fong & Theel, 2011).

All was not as it seemed with Solyndra as the firm was subsequently investigated for giving false information to the government (Stern & Snyder, 2011)—although Solyndra's subterfuge has, for rightwing flak purposes, been enduringly reverse-engineered to imply that the Obama government engaged in fraud (Diaz, 2019). By February 2011, an agreement between DoE, Solyndra and private investors Argonaut Ventures and Madrone Capital Partners pumped new private financing into the company. New financing was conditioned on the provision that private investors' money would be treated as senior—i.e., paid off before DoE—in the event of bankruptcy prior to 2013 (Fong & Theel, 2011).

New investments taking priority over the public stake present bad optics, even as it is a recognized practice for 'new funds' to gain seniority during loan restructuring. Given a difficult choice, DoE's considered position was that if Solyndra were to go prematurely bankrupt, it would be game over for the investment—and less would be recovered than a restructure that gave the company a "fighting chance" to continue, an opportunity that would also maintain employment (Silver, 2011, para. 19). If the firm nevertheless failed, its collateral could also become more valuable as a result of restructure, thus enabling more funds to be recovered even in the event of bankruptcy. Following proper procedures that included dialogue with financial consultants and Office of Management and Budget approval, DoE signed off on the restructure.

Nonetheless, congressional Republicans performed a make-over on the bad optics to craft accusations of criminal crony capitalism with concomitant demands for investigatory zeal. In this vein, Republican Congressman (and fossil fuel fundamentalist) Lamar Smith demanded that a special independent examiner be appointed by the Department of Justice to scrutinize Solyndra (Graves, 2011)—thereby piling on to ongoing inquiries by Republicans in Congress. Notice that the Republican caucus' commitment to vigorous scrutiny of the executive branch would be abruptly cancelled, come what may, when a Republican administration was installed in January 2017.

### 3. Chewing over Chu: A Congressional Hearing to Seed Scandal

I will briefly characterize one of the hearings by the Committee on Energy and Commerce's Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations in order to trace some of the flak talking points that were, with some success, insinuated into the news hole. Regardless of whether wrongdoing is found in Congressional investigations, the mere fact of an officially convened inquiry generates the appearance of scandal in objective news reports, day-by-day in headlines—smoke that implies that there must be a bonfire of wrongdoing.

The hearing that I will characterize occurred on 17 November 2011 and featured Secretary of Energy Steven Chu. Republican flak performances around Solyndra at the hearing were notably redundant in repeating flak talking points and assertions of wrongdoing, garnished with indignant demands for apologies with sound-bite potential. In this vein, Republican Marsha Blackburn grandstanded as follows in an apparent reach for sound-bite gravitas: "The hearing today is about the possible abuse of Executive power and of the taxpayers' money" (Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, 2011, p. 57).

Republican Cliff Stearns began the oversight subcommittee hearing in the manner of the hanging judge assuming wrongdoing, with Obama in his sights:

While our investigation continues, it is readily apparent that senior officials in the administration put politics before the stewardship of taxpayers' dollars....Our goal is to determine why the Department of Energy and the administration tied themselves so closely to Solyndra and why they were so desperate to repeatedly prop up this company. (Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, 2011, pp. 1–2)

Republican Joe Barton (who would later leave congress in disgrace following a tawdry scandal; Livingston & Allbright, 2017) similarly assayed to tie Solyndra directly to Obama. Against the evidence of the Solyndra application timeline, Barton's "first question...is why did the Obama Department of Energy reverse the Bush Department of Energy" vis-à-vis Solyndra (Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, 2011, p. 14). Later in the hearing, Democrat Jan Schakowsky addressed the internal record that shows that Solyndra was one of the Energy Department's top priorities for a loan guarantee as time ran out on the Bush administration (Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, 2011, pp. 52–53): A rebuttal to Barton's effort to narrate Solyndra's loan guarantee as exclusively an Obama administration creation. Nonetheless, in discourse, the startling accusation can often be better remembered than the measured correction.

Democrat Henry Waxman, made the most assertive efforts to present a countervailing storyline to the

Republican-organized hearing's frame as an ostensible examination of wrongdoing. While "oversight...is part of our job," Waxman claimed that committee Republicans denied Democratic requests for witnesses and suppressed "release of exculpatory documents" in favor of "cherry-picked emails that were contradicted by other documents" (Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, 2011, p. 17). Waxman flagged a flak strategy, although he did not employ the term to describe Republicans' resort to political combat: "House Republicans and their coal and oil industry allies are manufacturing a scandal, trying to discredit you [Chu], President Obama, [and] the clean energy companies" (Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, 2011, p. 32). The bid for scandal needed to be contrived, Waxman posited, because Solyndra was a "decision that was made on the merits," based on the "voluminous records" before the committee (Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, 2011, p. 32). Waxman further characterized alternate energy as implicating "economic growth" while "our national security will be determined by whether we succeed in building these new industries" (Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, 2011, p. 17). It is important to notice that, despite a prominent congressman's meta-critique of the hearings as a flak exercise, Waxman's analysis was not considered in either *NR*'s or *TWP*'s coverage. What then constituted the coverage of Solyndra in these two sources during 2011–2012?

#### 4. *NR*: Flak in Search of Scandal

*NR* was established in 1955 by flamboyant right-winger William F. Buckley. 30 years old at the time of *NR*'s launch, Buckley had already established himself as a polemicist who targeted putatively 'liberal' institutions (media, academics) through writings such as *God and Man at Yale* (1951). In a funding appeal to its readers in 2020, *NR* continues to assay Buckleyan erudition through a farrago of military allusions, anti-government ideology and nationalism:

Bayonets sharpened, loins girded, the charge sounded, for 65 years *National Review* has been at the forefront of the fight to push back the leftist ideologues and their schemes, aimed at aggrandizing government while crushing liberty and tradition. Our fight is your fight—critical for the sake of Justice and of our Nation, this last best hope of earth. ("Stand with *NR*," 2020, para. 1)

Like its media-savvy founder, *NR* asserts a confident profile as a journal that fortifies what it regards as a rightwing intellectual elite: "The hallmark of *NR*'s reliable reporting, its informed analysis, its intelligent commentary, its truth and sanity. What we accomplish is profoundly impactful" ("Stand with *NR*," 2020, para. 2). *NR* has generally long eschewed "cranky or vicious"

rightwing movements as a byproduct of the publication's intellectual pretensions (Burner & West, 1988, p. 13). Nonetheless, at the publication's origins in the 1950s, *NR* defended Joseph McCarthy's infamous anti-communist cause and argued for racial segregation. As Burner and West observe (1988, p. 13): "It is the West itself that is under siege, warned essays in *NR* from its beginnings," peril asserted to be due to "the forces of secularism and socialism." Into the present, *NR* pursues a Manichean, anti-left vision of politics in the U.S.: "The Left knows your generosity, combined with our journalism, is a serious threat. Truth...has that effect" ("Stand with *NR*," 2020, para. 3).

Notwithstanding its high appraisals of its standards, *NR*'s Solyndra discourse marshaled exaggeration and wild speculation to force the conclusion that the firm's fate was a scandalous residue of Obama. Toward this end, *NR* problematized all aspects of the Solyndra story with drip-by-drip 'revelations' of details and punditry that incrementally advanced the ongoing flak narrative. Rather than being a commonplace in a market milieu, Solyndra's bankruptcy in a fledgling industry is "shocking" for *NR*'s Andrew McCarthy (2011b, para. 3). *NR* fashions "Solyndra Questions for Obama" as he must be personally blamed for punchy flak purposes and beseeched to answer endlessly (Stiles, 2011a). Andrew Stiles (2011a, para. 4) asserts that "the most pressing question" is "the extent to which the White House was involved" in approval of the Solyndra loan guarantee that was indeed made, properly, at the department level. Stiles does not merely interrogate, he also answers; the executive branch was, he claims, "aggressive" in its drive to extend a loan guarantee to Solyndra (Stiles, 2011a, para. 4). Stiles announces the flak-forced conclusion that the "Obama administration" is "consciously corrupt" (Stiles, 2011c, para. 12) via actions that are "almost certainly a violation of federal statute" (Stiles, 2011c, para. 9)—insistence that rests on insinuation, while naming no statutes.

The stakes in asserting Solyndra as a scandal are evident in the title of an *NR* article with an obligatory Obama possessive, i.e., "Obama's Solar Scandal." Michael Barone (2011, paras. 1–3) intones:

One factor favoring President Obama's reelection, according to a recent article by political scientist Alan Lichtman, is the absence of scandal in his administration. Lichtman may have spoken too soon. The reason can be encapsulated in a single word: Solyndra.

Here and elsewhere, *NR* posits an iron chain of associations: Solyndra is coterminous with Obama and Solyndra is asserted to equal scandal. Toward this end, Barone theatrically poses ostensible 'questions' that are hysterical flak indictments: "Did somebody slip somebody a bribe?" (Barone, 2011, para. 12)

*NR* editor Rich Lowry (2011) brands Solyndra as "Obama's Enron." In Lowry's semiotic construction,

Obama ‘owns’ Solyndra which is, in turn, asserted to be equivalent with Enron. Except in point of fact: Enron’s implosion in 2001 was the biggest bankruptcy in history when it occurred, triggered new regulations on corporate governance, and engendered fines and jail sentences. In the register of collateral damage, the scandal also brought down Enron’s once formidable accounting firm, Arthur Anderson, for its part in the cascades of fraud (Segal, 2020). Nonetheless, flak narratives need not be characterized by proportionality as they may correspond with other flak narratives rather than material reality. Thus, under the headline “Solyndra and the Obama Administration,” Stiles’ avers that the “investigation into the Solyndra scandal continue [sic] to *unearth disturbing evidence* about the *Obama administration’s role*” in the loan guarantee (Stiles, 2011b, para. 1, emphasis added). While deficient in evidence of its claims, the article nonetheless joined forces with the rest of *NR*’s flak discourse in air dropping Solyndra squarely into Obama’s lap.

For flak purposes, Solyndra was transformed from a costly error to a crime. McCarthy thunders: “The Solyndra debacle is not just Obama-style crony socialism as usual. It is criminal fraud” (McCarthy, 2011b, para. 1). McCarthy envisions 30-year sentences for the perpetrators, citing his *NR* colleague Stiles in the course of a speculative exercise in connecting dots. McCarthy reasons by analogy that Obama is, somehow, like Martha Stewart, as he conjures “illegal” acts (McCarthy, 2011b, para. 2) embedded within “deep and suspect involvement of the Obama administration” (para. 4) in “fraud” (para. 5). McCarthy (2011a) returned to the flak battlefield a day later under a headline “Solyndra Scandal Widening” that doubled down on previous assertions.

A story becomes scandal—or, more pointedly, flak impersonating scandal—when the story is repeated often enough to seem newsworthy and true by virtue of the very fact of its repetition. *NR* preempts forensic evaluation of whether the events around Solyndra constitute a scandal—or a costly mistake, incubated across two administrations and exacerbated by shifts in the market terrain. That is, Solyndra’s rejection of the industry’s preference for polysilicon materials for solar panels turned into a losing bet when the price of polysilicon suddenly crashed. Nevertheless, flak opportunity superseded good faith judgements in the Republican-led hearings and in the resultant *NR* discourse.

Turning to the election year of 2012, Republican National Committee chairman Reince Preibus reinforces the flak campaign around Solyndra for *NR*’s readers. Preibus positions Solyndra as the centerpiece of Obama’s first term, with questions-cum-accusations that begin with the article’s subtitle: “How can Americans trust a president who created such a mess?” apparently single-handedly, while *NR* disavows the extent to which Obama’s administration largely remedied the crises that it inherited from its Republican predecessor. Preibus continues to his flak punchline: Obama “created the

Solyndra mess” (Preibus, 2012, para. 18)—once again, apparently as a solo act—because he is “hostile to the private sector” (Preibus, 2012, para. 19). Aside from denying the stimulus’ part in saving U.S. capitalism from itself, Preibus displays characteristic rightwing agnosia toward the consistent historical pattern of decisive government intervention to nurture and strengthen the market (Polanyi, 2001). Similarly, in Stiles’ earlier flak contention, the Obama administration amassed an “extensive portfolio of failed investments” (Stiles, 2011d, para. 1). Outside *NR*’s flak discourses, the loan program, and the larger stimulus project, registered substantial success in aggregate (Lewis, 2018, pp. 60–63) in pulling the battered U.S. economy from the brink of collapse after 2008’s financial crisis.

Flak need not make sense, nor need it be even minimally consistent, since indignant accusation in a quest to exact reputational damage presents a central flak tactic. Flak also need not be accurate since it is engineered to meet the lower standard of corresponding with other flak tropes. In the long game before the 2012 elections, Republican flak messaging pushed Solyndra as the epitome of scandal with almost parodic determination. By September 2011, Congressional Republicans seized on Solyndra to argue against bills for worker retraining benefits, disaster relief, cancer treatment and autism research. Dana Milbank reports that “the government faced the prospect of a shutdown because House Republicans added a provision to the spending bill to draw more attention to....Solyndra” (Milbank, 2011, p. A8).

## 5. Chimerical Coverage in *TWP*

Whereas *NR* has long positioned itself as an intellectually formidable insurgent battling a dominant but decidedly wrong liberal power structure, *TWP* can be characterized as part of the same mainstream ‘establishment’ against which *NR* rails. Along with the prestige that comes with its status as the hometown newspaper of the nation’s federal district, the paper has been ensconced in mythology as a pillar of liberalism in the U.S. *TWP*’s central part in the 1970s Watergate investigations have long nourished the paper’s reputation. Even as *TWP* listed toward the U.S.’s political center across decades, it retained its aura as an oppositional tribune of the professional left (Goss, 2003). The paper’s status as an exemplar of quality, mainstream journalism is underscored by its haul of 65 Pulitzer prizes as of 2018 (Watson, 2019). *TWP*’s Pulitzer award case includes prizes in 2018 for having unmasked rightwing flak mill Project Veritas’ attempt to plant a false story in *TWP* as part of its shambolic effort to discredit the paper (Goss, 2020, pp. 117–121).

*TWP*’s coverage of Solyndra is far more polyvalent than that of *NR* in which all mentions of Solyndra collapse into condemnations of Obama. By contrast, one moment of *TWP*’s Solyndra discourse observes that “as much as \$60 billion in U.S. funds has been lost to waste and fraud in Iraq and Afghanistan over the past decade



through lax oversight of contractors, poor planning, and payoffs to warlords and insurgents” (Rhea, 2011, p. A13). While expressly putting Solyndra into perspective as a news story, the author claims “a waste of 120 times as much taxpayers’ money” in failed war-making “should get, oh, twice as much attention” as failed solar panel-making (Rhea, 2011, p. A13). Nonetheless, even as *TWP* printed this observation, the proposed measure of proportionality did not characterize the newspaper’s discourse. Indeed, the above-quoted comparison between ‘war waste’ and Solyndra was entertained only briefly in *TWP*—and it was drawn from reader Tina Rhea’s “Letter to the Editor” (Rhea, 2013)!

In analyzing the panorama of *TWP*’s Solyndra discourse, I begin with the series of reports by Carol D. Leonnig and Joe Stephens. Hereafter, I will generically refer to them as ‘Leonnig and Stephens’ for clarity, although they also published articles alone, in the reverse order of authorship, as well as with other *TWP* journalists. Their presence in bylines constituted about one-third of *TWP* articles on Solyndra in 2011–2012 that inform this investigation. Both reporters have achieved high professional reputations, including a Pulitzer Prize in 2015 in Leonnig’s case.

As concerns Solyndra coverage, Leonnig and Stephen’s narratives often chimed with the Republican-led House Energy and Commerce Committee’s investigation. Leonnig and Stephens’ 15 November 2011 article (Leonnig & Stephens, 2011) was indeed introduced as an exhibit in the Chu hearing (Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, 2011, pp. 84–85). The article reads as largely structured by Committee Republican briefing points, prior to being laundered into the congressional record as an ‘independent’ *TWP* article; that is, the Republican talking points inform the news report subsequently brandished as the proof of the talking points. In this manner, reporting that abides by formal objective procedures may nevertheless be skewed to sources who are themselves partial—in this case by contriving hearings for flak effect that masquerade as scandal in motion.

Nevertheless, in sharp contrast with *NR*’s narrative in which flak accusation is alpha and omega, Leonnig and Stephens at times shade Obama’s government as more apprehensive than Machiavellian. Due to internal disagreements, the journalists report that the administration convened “tense discussions among officials at the White House, its Office of Management and Budget, and the Energy Department” around Solyndra as the firm floundered (Stephens & Leonnig, 2011b, p. A1). Their reports regularly cite loose facts that complicate the scandal premise that they otherwise engage. At the same time, Leonnig and Stephens often insinuate compromised competence and perhaps knowing wrongdoing on the Obama administration’s part around Solyndra—even as they do not play on the word scandal and follow the formally ‘objective’ idiom. When Leonnig and Stephens co-authored articles with other *TWP* reporters, shadings of scandal narrative were notably less evident.

In drip-by-drip suggestions of scandal, Leonnig and Stephens’ narration often dwells on oil magnate George Kaiser. As the reporters acknowledge—albeit, in passing—Kaiser had no direct investments in Solyndra (Stephens & Leonnig, 2011a). Argonaut Ventures, a subsidiary of the Kaiser Foundation, was Solyndra’s leading investor. The second leading investor that participated in Solyndra’s loan restructure, Madrone Capital, is linked to the Walton (Wal\*Mart) family (Fong & Theel, 2011). Solyndra’s investment ties to the Republican-leaning Waltons were mentioned neither in Republican discourse nor in Leonnig’s and Stephens’ reporting. As for the structuring of Argonaut, George Kaiser would not personally benefit or lose money with respect to Argonaut’s activities as its investments were beyond his reach (Theel et al., 2012); gains or losses would impact instead on the Kaiser Foundation (Fong & Theel, 2011).

During the Chu hearing, Waxman rattles off a series of figures who were pivotal in the loan guarantee program who did not know who Kaiser was and/or had no idea he was a campaign contributor for Obama, according to evidence obtained by the oversight subcommittee (Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, 2011, p. 90). Elsewhere in *TWP*’s discourse, Steven Mufson reports that when Chu approved the ill-starred Solyndra loan guarantee, he claimed before the House committee that he did not know who Kaiser was. Moreover, Chu stated that no political pressure from the White House was exerted on him over the Solyndra loan guarantee that “was absolutely made only on the merits” (as cited in Mufson, 2011, p. A18). However mistaken the appraisal of those merits proved to be, Chu’s statements were delivered under oath.

Nevertheless, Leonnig and Stephens frequently air-drop Kaiser into their reports as an apparition of ill-defined ‘scandal,’ even when he seems tangential to the story at hand. In an article on the Obama White House’s alleged unwillingness to furnish documents to the House committee, Leonnig writes, “Solyndra’s largest investor was the family foundation of George Kaiser, a major Obama fundraising bundler” (Leonnig, 2012). As there is no further mention of Kaiser in the article, here as elsewhere, the reader is led toward the inference that the spectral figure of Kaiser somehow looms large.

Solyndra never took off as a major scandal despite congressional hearings, devoted attention from rightwing opinion, and sustained attention on *TWP*’s high-profile, mainstream platform. In what reads like a valedictory address and final stand on the topic, the reporters’ page one report on 26 December 2011 extends for more than 2,700 words. They characterize the documents that informed their reporting as having achieved “an unprecedented glimpse into the high-level maneuvering by politically connected green technology investors” (Stephens & Leonnig, 2011a, p. A1). Stephens and Leonnig acknowledge that “the record does not establish that anyone pressured the Energy Department to approve the Solyndra loan to benefit

political contributor”—even as their report drops teasers of scandal and improper influence. The article mainly reprises Stephens and Leonnig’s previous reporting but adds a further titillating set piece. To wit, Kaiser sat next to Obama at a Reno, Nevada fundraiser for Senator Harry Reid. The 26 December 2011 front-page article cites Kaiser’s private emails that claim that he discussed China’s ‘dumping’ of underpriced solar panels and what Obama said to Kaiser about Reid’s reelection chances; gossip that presumably signifies the reporters’ capacity to conjure panoptic detail.

Leonnig and Stephen’s implicit assumption of scandal at least suggests a news media watch-dog function, in contrast with carnival barking from *NR* that directly serves a partisan flak narrative. Nonetheless, Mufson’s less frequent reporting on Solyndra presents more explicit (less ‘objective’) judgements about the Solyndra spectacle—and arguably conveys more substantive truth for doing so. In covering Chu’s five-hours of testimony before the House Energy and Commerce Committee, Mufson notes: “The emails fail to support GOP [Republican] lawmakers’ worst accusations, but many have been embarrassing to the Obama administration” (Mufson, 2011, p. A18)—a judgement, for certain, but one that presents more judicious parsing of truth than objective reporting’s ritualistic exercise of convening an endless regress of claim/counterclaim. Moreover, cherry-picked emails that may be embarrassing when read by a broader public do not rise to the level of wrongdoing, even if such leaked emails have often been highly serviceable to flak narratives (Goss, 2020).

### 5.1. Backstory and Context in *TWP*

In making characterizations around Solyndra, *NR* does not furnish substantive backstory beyond what served flak-driven narratives propelled by animus toward the Obama administration. By contrast, for being less overtly driven by ideology and more committed to professional codes than *NR*’s unbridled indulgence of opinion, *TWP* assays some textured characterizations. Mufson’s portrait of Chu, for example, presents the Energy secretary as an “unorthodox” cabinet officer: A Noble Laureate who is more comfortable with arcane paradoxes of physics than politics (Mufson, 2011, p. A1). Along with detailing the bureaucratic particularities and conflicts at DoE, Mufson’s portrait of Chu channels the strengths and weaknesses of journalistic objectivity. That is, Chu may be interpreted as a visionary cabinet appointment or as a fish-out-of-water, depending on what a reader highlights in Mufson’s objective account.

Mufson and Leonnig’s (2011) report on 27 September also embeds Solyndra in backstory, without the shadings of scandal that color Leonnig’s collaborations with Stephens. Mufson and Leonnig (2011, p. A1) observe that the U.S. economy was “in crisis” when Obama and Chu arrived in Washington at the start of 2009; non-normal times called for exceptional measures.

In turn, the sum of stimulus money to be allocated as grants and loan guarantees was greater than the DoE’s previous budget, signaling sharp intensification of the department’s workload. Despite the parlous circumstances under which the Obama administration stimulus was implemented, Mufson and Leonnig report that the loan guarantee program registered notable successes in seeding economic expansion and employment. In another Mufson and Leonnig collaboration, the reporters are attentive to the economic multipliers that occur with a successfully funded firm. That is, a successful firm does not simply employ people, but also synergizes the economic health of its supply chain partners and their employees (Leonnig & Mufson, 2011), part-and-parcel to the economic rationale for economic stimulus.

By 2012, *TWP*’s reporting further bears out the Obama administration’s positive intervention through economic stimulus: “Top economic forecasters estimate that the stimulus produced about 2.5 million jobs and added between 2.1 percent and 3.8 percent to our gross domestic product,” as a result of the government’s push to set virtuous cycles of economic multipliers in motion (Grunwald, 2012, p. B2). On *TWP*’s Business pages, Michael Grunwald observes that although the sum lost on Solyndra’s loan guarantee was substantial, “Independent reviewers have found that the overall [clean energy loan] portfolio is in fine shape” (Grunwald, 2012, p. B2). Moreover, “Republican investigators have found no evidence that cronyism drove the Solyndra loan” despite sustained attention to the issue and hearing room histrionics (Grunwald, 2012, p. B2).

### 5.2. *TWP*’s Editorials

All of *NR*’s discourse can be construed as editorial, including the ostensible ‘beat’ reporting of Stiles. By contrast, *TWP* follows the traditional distinction between reporting and editorial content that are labelled as such. *TWP*’s first unsigned editorial on Solyndra chastises Obama, positing that he should be “more upset” about the loss of government funds around Solyndra’s bankruptcy (“The Solyndra syndrome,” 2011, p. A20). The editorial approvingly repeats Treasury Secretary Lawrence Summers’ conviction that “government is a crappy vc [venture capitalist]” (“The Solyndra syndrome,” 2011, p. A20); a claim that overstates the scope of government action as the loan guarantees and grants were not simply ‘ventures’ but flowed to projects that were beyond initial stages of development. *TWP* doubles down a month later when it claims that government investment in new technologies is overly risk-laden and leaves taxpayers exposed (“No fun in the sun,” 2011).

Despite the unsigned editorials’ line, two editorials published in *TWP* by outside contributors give strong support to government intervention into clean energy industries. California’s Republican governor (2003–2011) Arnold Schwarzenegger (2011) observes that the government already massively intervenes in energy indus-

tries via subsidies. However, he continues, it does so for the established players in fossil fuels, with 10-times as much subsidy as is devoted to renewable energy. Schwarzenegger claims that, in California, green energy had grown 10 times faster than other economic sectors since 2005 and emerged as a significant source of investment and employment. The former governor expressly dismisses the “simplistic and misleading one-word argument against clean energy—Solyndra!” (Schwarzenegger, 2011, p. A19).

In *TWP*'s pages, the chairman of the National Small Business Association, also editorializes against Solyndra flak hysteria with arguments for the government to continue to make interventions on behalf of renewable energy. Larry Nannis laments that the harsh discourse around Solyndra could disable action for the green economy: “Companies seeking loan guarantees might resist applying for them for fear of being part of a congressional hearing” (Nannis, 2011, p. G2). Nannis rebuts the “government is a crappy vc” line, noting that private sector could readily be called a ‘crappy venture’ capitalist; failure for as many as 19 in 20 venture capitalist projects is typical, while a success rate of one in three is “a home run” (Nannis, 2011, p. G2). Rather than throwing money around, Nannis calls for “complete due diligence process and the understanding that risk is part of what we do” in seeding the successful industries of the future.

In other words, *TWP* presents a ‘something for everyone’ grab-bag in its discussion of Solyndra and the larger market system. This approach may not nail down the truth but, in contrast with flak, professional procedures of reporting are at least enacted in good faith.

## 6. Conclusion

To reiterate, despite furious efforts at *NR* and on the right more generally, the Solyndra flak narrative did not gain flight as a full-blown scandal storyline. This was due to the ‘business-as-usual’ character of a firm failing in an emerging industry as well as the irreducible absence of evidence of government malfeasance to nourish a scandal narrative. Nevertheless, Solyndra has continued to function as a scandal-signifier for the political right. In this vein, *Fox News* sensationalizes and contentiously narrates a 10-year commemoration of Solyndra’s loan guarantee (Diaz, 2019). *Fox News*’s report concludes with unqualified denunciations of government intervention into the economy from a Trump factotum, in spite of the favorable record of government intervention to steer markets as needed. In this view, the Solyndra flak campaign was one episode in the political right’s highly regimented, long game campaign to degrade the public’s perception of government efficacy vis-à-vis management of the capitalist economy in pursuit of an unrestrained, deregulated market (Mayer, 2016; McLean, 2017). The flak campaign that rallied to Solyndra can also be interpreted as part-and-parcel to other arm-waving efforts to tarnish Obama’s adminis-

tration between election cycles (for example, the risible ‘birtherism’ flak narrative).

As concerns the two publications in relation to their platforms, both *NR* and *TWP* were long-established print publications prior to the rise of the Internet. At present, *NR* can be construed as the more digitally oriented media organ. *NR* is largely open to any reader with an Internet connection while *TWP* has substantially retreated behind pay walls. In this investigation, the more traditionalist publication performs better as a news organ with a stronger, if flawed, commitment to good faith reporting. Nonetheless, *TWP*’s commitment to objectivity and elite sources (congressional Republicans) also enabled flak to circulate in its discourses.

At the same time, in this investigation’s comparison, the digital platform *NR* falls far short of the relatively paleo-news *TWP*’s standards since *NR* is devoted in the first instance to ideologically driven partisanship that is readily compatible with flak campaigns. *NR* may have always been a flak mill surveilling political opponents from its origins in 1955 (Goss, 1996), but the seductions of the deregulated and unfiltered online ecosystem readily intensify tendencies toward flak.

Along with critical assessments of news performance, constructive prescriptions for the future of mainstream journalism are in play in this investigation. A better model of reporting prioritizes truth over the techniques of “indiscriminant objectivity” (Boorstin, 1987, p. 22) and further implicates educating the public over merely informing it. Solyndra hearings were ‘pseudo-events,’ in Daniel J. Boorstin (1987)’s terminology. Yet, the hearings were still covered straight-up in *TWP*—even as one congressperson flagged the hearings’ flak purpose to contrive scandal. When a political faction and the events it convenes are designed to fake even their context for flak purposes, news that ceases to merely transcribe—indeed, news that calls out and labels flak as such while refusing to engage or humor its narratives—is vital to the cause of truth.

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The author declares no conflict of interests.



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