

**Title: Amy Westervelt, How Does the Energy Industry Influence Universities?**  
**Episode: 81**  
**Podcast: Half Hour of Heterodoxy**

### Transcript

[Welcome to *Half Hour of Heterodoxy*, featuring conversations with scholars and authors and ideas from diverse perspectives. Here's your host Chris Martin.]

**Chris Martin:** Amy Westervelt is my guest today. She's an award-winning print and audio journalist. She contributes to *The Guardian*, the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Washington Post* and in 2015, she received a Rachel Carson Award and in 2016, an Edward R. Murrow Award for her environmental journalism.

She's the creator and host of the podcast *Drilled*, the first true-crime style podcast about climate change and also the most popular podcast about climate change. We will be talking about that podcast today.

The first season of the podcast traced the corporate-funded messages that promoted a positive view of the fossil fuel industry in the face of climate science. One episode included a segment on universities such as Stanford, Harvard and MIT that appeared to change their research agenda to continue receiving funds from the energy industry.

The current third season digs into the longer history of the American propaganda industry. Amy also founded a critical frequency network, a podcast network which she describes as a platform for independent creators and those who are often overlooked in mainstream media.

Your podcast *Drilled* is about how the energy industry has influenced the general public and influenced other industries. Since this is a higher ed podcast, I would like to talk about how the energy industry has influenced higher education. What do we know about those attempts so far?

**Amy Westervelt:** I know that the vast majority of climate research centers on kind of top two university campuses are majority funded by fossil fuel companies and have been for quite some time. I would say at least 10 years and possibly more.

In the vast majority of cases, they do have quite a bit of say over what gets funded and what doesn't and that's – you know, it's concerning. I don't think – I think there was some recent kind of social media beef — a lot of climate scientists and political scientists who study climate and things like that felt like people were saying that they were all in the pocket of fossil fuel and that's certainly not true.

I don't think that 100 percent of research is being influenced by fossil fuel money. But I do think it's interesting to look at where the sort of research agenda has been appointed, particularly on the solution side of things and how much funding has had to do with that. I think most of the –

most of the research on carbon capture and geoengineering and algae biofuels and all of that kind of stuff tends to come from fossil fuel companies.

There's definitely – they have an interest there, right? So carbon capture helps them kind of maintain the status quo. Algae biofuels, you don't have to replace the combustion engine. So it doesn't create this sort of massive overhaul of the systems that fossil fuel runs into. So yeah, there's definitely some stuff to look at there and I think it's good for people to be aware of just how much oil companies do try to direct the research agenda in the US.

**Chris Martin:** And on those two issues and other issues, do we have testimony from people within the energy industry or the fossil fuel industry that explicitly ties funding to the expectation that this will not affect the popularity of the combustion engine and fossil fuel –?

**Amy Westervelt:** There's not – I mean there's definitely some stuff about algae biofuels and the preference for that in the biofuels realm because of its – because it can be used in the combustion engine.

So we do have some documentation of that. There's not anything as far as I know of oil companies specifically saying in meetings, “Oh, let's fund this research center, so that we can get them to focus on carbon capture.”

You know, those meetings may or may not have happened. But we don't have documentation of that. So what we do know is that there has been sort of a steady increase in funding in these research centers and that you do see a correlation between fossil fuel funding and a research center's focus on solutions that don't require fossil fuels to stop being developed. You know, that don't require oil and gas companies to sort of get out of the fossil fuel business.

So yeah, which to me – like for me that's interesting on a couple of points. I mean I think that A, it definitely shapes the broader cultural conversation around climate. You know, I talk to a lot of people who kind of especially point to carbon – I think – I don't know. Carbon capture technology really seems to be this thing that people want to be valid and helpful.

It sounds like a huge relief if we could have this technology that just sucks all the carbon out because not only could we potentially stave off the more extreme impacts of climate change but there's even this sort of like we could reverse the clock kind of thinking on that, that's appealing to people.

So you're definitely seeing that make its way into a lot of conversations. But then of course it provides a whole foundation for policy and a lot of policy makers will point to academic research as their justification for proposing certain things.

So I don't think that it's any accident that oil and gas companies figured oh, hey, we should get into the research business. You know, and they've long had partnerships with universities and for a long time they had their own – I don't know. For a long time, oil and gas companies invested

more in their own sort of internal research departments and then there was this gradual shift kind of starting in the '90s to fund research elsewhere.

Again I don't think there's any documentation of that being particularly a strategic move done to lend credibility to research that they wanted done or anything like that, although I wouldn't be surprised if that's the case.

But there was this shift and they're not heavily invested in a lot of university research centers.

**Chris Martin:** And in season one of the podcast, you interviewed Ben Franta and Geoffrey Supran.

**Amy Westervelt:** Yeah.

**Chris Martin:** About a specific case at the Harvard Business School. Tell me a bit about that case and what we know about the research that Franta and Supran are doing.

**Amy Westervelt:** Yeah. Harvard is a really interesting case and at the time, when they first started working together, I think Ben was at Harvard and Geoffrey was at MIT and they looked at both of those campuses and found – I mean MIT has got just loads of fossil fuel funding and they both kind of said, you know, anecdotally that they noticed that there were certain ways that these companies were influencing what they were kind of allowed to talk about or research, which is weird for an academic, you know?

**Chris Martin:** Right.

**Amy Westervelt:** So like Geoffrey tells this story about going to like kind of an event that was hosted at MIT and there was a documentary that had been produced by Shell that was sort of like – you know, we need to look for solutions on climate and not regulation and all that kind of stuff. He asked a question about whether the – you know, whether there was a conflict of interest there and whether they should really be looking at this without any sort of input from the fossil fuel companies. He was sort of vaguely threatened that like if he wanted to continue doing research, he needed to stop asking those kinds of questions, you know.

**Chris Martin:** Yeah.

**Amy Westervelt:** And then Ben was at the Kennedy School at Harvard at the time and was told – he and several other post-docs were told not to answer any questions from press people about where their funding came from, which again is like a very weird thing for an academic to be told, you know, keep quiet about this funding...

**Chris Martin:** Yeah. In general, when you publish, you are supposed to report where you got funding from. That's a convention in academia.

**Amy Westervelt:** Yeah, yeah. So – and that – it’s sort of – there’s the Harvard Business School. There’s the political science kind of program. Harvard too has quite a few fossil fuel guys. In fact the president of the American Enterprise Institute has just left that organization, which is sort of a dark money-funded think tank that often pushes climate denial, to become a professor at Harvard. I believe in the Kennedy School.

So there’s a lot of – there’s definitely kind of a revolving door between the fossil fuel industry and Harvard. It’s unfortunate.

**Chris Martin:** Do we know which other universities – if the list isn’t too long – which other universities fossil fuel companies are donating money to with some expectation of reciprocity?

**Amy Westervelt:** Yeah. So actually there was a really good report that came out in 2010. So it’s pretty old now. But I was checking this morning to make sure that none of these universities have kind of changed their minds about taking oil money and in fact they have not.

So let’s see. This was from the Center for American Progress. I don’t know if you’ve seen this report called “Big Oil Goes to College”. Oh, it’s really good. I will send this to you after this because it’s totally worth checking out. It’s really well done.

But I know – I mean off the top of my head, I can tell you Stanford, MIT, Harvard, UC Berkeley, they all have big, 10 big ones. Arizona State University, University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign, University of California Davis, Colorado School of Mines, no surprise there, University of Colorado, Boulder, Colorado State University, Georgia Institute of Technology, Iowa State University and Texas A&M.

There’s also – oh, yeah, there’s this Advanced Energy Consortium that is University of Texas at Austin, Rice University and then 10 major energy companies. So there’s Baker Hughes, BP, Conoco Phillips, Halliburton, Marathon Oil, Occidental, Petroleo Brasileiro, Schlumberger, Royal Dutch Shell and Total are all part of that consortium.

The kind of interesting thing to me about this report was that they actually got a hold of the contracts between these universities and these companies and they wanted to look at kind of what – like what exactly are universities agreeing to here?

**Chris Martin:** When you say they, do you mean the people who wrote this report, the one that came out?

**Amy Westervelt:** The people who wrote this report, yeah, the Center for American Progress. So they got a hold of the contracts between the universities and these energy companies and it says in nine of the ten energy research agreements we analyzed, the university partners failed to retain majority academic control over the central governing body charged with directing the university industry alliance.

Four of the ten alliances actually gave the industry sponsors full governance control. That's outrageous to me. But like – and you know what? I've already talked to people about this. They're kind of like well, you know, universities are strapped for research funding and we don't want this funding to go away, especially if there's nothing to replace it, which of course I agree with and also there's this idea of like well, you know, oil companies should be the ones that are funding research into climate change solutions, which I also agree with.

The problem for me is that they don't give this money with no strings attached. If they were giving it to some sort of like fund and then the fund just did whatever they thought was best, I don't think we would even be talking about this.

But this thing of they're asking for input on the research agenda, that's what they're buying with this money. That's the part that I think is fairly concerning. The other thing that jumps out at me here is that none of the ten agreements requires faculty research proposals to be evaluated and awarded funding based on independent expert peer review. The traditional method for awarding academic and scientific research grants fairly and impartially based on scientific merit.

So they're not abiding by sort of the standard protocol of research funding and yeah, it's definitely concerning. I know when I talked to Stanford about this and sent several questions about their – they have – let's see. I'm going to have to look up – I can tell you also what their publicist said to me because I was kind of shocked by it.

Actually, I was talking to – this was in the context of I was doing some research for the episode of the podcast where I talked to Ben and Geoffrey. So let's see. It's called GCAP, the Global Climate and Energy Project.

So it says – the very first line of this note that she sent me, which is about their project selection process, says the Global Climate and Energy Project and its sponsors have worked together to create a project selection process.

So their sponsors have been involved in creating the entire process by which they evaluate proposals and then she sent me this flowchart that shows like the approval process and the sponsor management committee has final approval of every project.

**Chris Martin:** OK.

**Amy Westervelt:** And then let's see. She – oh, yeah, and then – so it's called the Global Climate and Energy Project. But she made a point of saying that GCAP does not do research on climate science or work on climate science communications. Instead the program is focused on conducting research to lower greenhouse gas emissions from energy use. So specifically targeted at lowering emissions from the existing kind of energy structure, which is super – it's just really – it's very interesting and they're – I forgot to mention. This is a center that was established by funding from ExxonMobil, which is still the majority funder of the center.

Very similar, very, very similar kind of setup at the Carbon Mitigation Initiative at Princeton, which is funded by BP. So there's another university that's involved.

**Chris Martin:** So one could argue that the goal here is to reduce emissions. So in a way, it's a benevolent goal. Do we know if there's any systemic problems if that's all we're focusing on?

**Amy Westervelt:** I don't know. This is actually something that I think Ben is looking into is sort of – you know, is this focus somehow kind of connected to extending the status quo? You know, and let's see. Oh, yeah. OK.

So Ben – actually I asked them about this and he said, “This framing, lowering greenhouse gas emissions from energy use is interesting. Who could argue with that? But it's a fossil fuel-friendly framing. It could include making oil and gas production more efficient, ramping up gas production in general and focusing on end-use energy efficiency, long a favorite of the fossil fuel energy, the energy equivalent of low-tar cigarettes. The program is not focused on reducing reliance on fossil fuels, accelerating clean energy development or anything directly inimical to the program's fossil fuel industry sponsors. This influence of/on our program mission is an important element of industry funding.”

So that's interesting. I mean that's – again, it's like this is just Ben's kind of take on it. So I don't have like a document that says “Ha-ha-ha! Like we're doing this to keep oil production going.” But – yeah.

**Chris Martin:** Yeah.

**Amy Westervelt:** I think – I don't know. It has been a while since I looked at this too. So I would be interested to go back and see what they've funded from 2018 to now and see if there's any kind of trend there in terms of the stuff that they seem to have a preference for.

**Chris Martin:** So the goal here is to produce research that does ultimately get published in peer-reviewed journals. So there is some degree checking at that end. Is that correct?

**Amy Westervelt:** Yes, that's correct. But there again, that's also kind of – you know, there is – I don't know. This is such a thorny area because there's a long history of doing totally legitimate research that also derails progress on climate action. You saw it in tobacco too. Like there was a bunch of tobacco funding that went towards cancer research, into all the various other causes of cancer. That research was totally valid. But it did also help the industry continue to say, “Well, it might not just be tobacco.”

**Chris Martin:** So it was useful for the continuation of that industry.

**Amy Westervelt:** Exactly, yeah. And I think you're kind of seeing a similar thing here where it's like it's not bad to research carbon capture or emissions reductions or algae biofuels or anything like that. It's just a little bit questionable as to, “Are we researching the things that

would most quickly move the needle or are we researching the things that are the most comfortable for the oil industry?”

**Chris Martin:** So is there now a countermovement with environmental foundations donating money to universities, to promote other types of research?

**Amy Westervelt:** Well, I think there’s just a huge money mismatch there. I mean environmental organizations, yes, like they want to donate too but they don’t have the kind of money that oil and gas industry has.

**Chris Martin:** Right.

**Amy Westervelt:** They’re outspent I think ten to one on this sort of communications and advertising front and I would imagine it’s probably similar on the research side. So you sort of just have this David and Goliath problem and it is unfortunate that there is not another constituency that has the kind of money to provide this kind of funding, if it were to go away. One thing that has been talked about is that as part of a lot of – sort of climate liability cases that are ongoing and various other kind of climate litigation efforts and/or as a policy move that the oil and gas companies could be required to provide funding that they don’t have control over.

So that is something that has been discussed. But I think that – I mean that would pretty much only happen if it was kind of like a legal requirement or a policy requirement. I don’t think they’re going to make that – I don’t think they’re going to make that decision on their own.

**Chris Martin:** Right. So stepping away from higher ed, you’ve written a really popular article called *How the Fossil Fuel Industry Got the Media to Think Climate Change Was Debatable*, which is also sort of the gist of a big part of season one and I think season three to be fair as well.

**Amy Westervelt:** Yeah.

**Chris Martin:** So can you talk a bit about what we now – I mean it’s hard to – I know it’s hard to summarize because you’ve got 10 hours of podcast there. But what’s the gist of what we know about that?

**Amy Westervelt:** Well, there’s really – it is – I would say also – yeah, season one and season three and that’s an interesting – it’s kind of an interesting scenario where basically the industry has all of these different tactics, one of which is science denial. But they have lots of other tactics too and they sort of lean on one or the other depending on what is playing well.

So as you’re sort of seeing the science denial thing not really working anymore, that you’re seeing them – that you’re seeing sort of a resurgence of these kind of old propaganda efforts that they’ve been deploying for decades. So there is – as far as getting the media to think that climate change is debatable, there is a specific guy. His name was Herb Schmertz. He worked for Mobil Oil and he kind of created this whole idea that if you didn’t like how your company is being covered, you could sort of bully journalists into overcorrecting in your favor. So he talks about

this in a book that he wrote. We also found some old footage of him doing an interview after he had left Mobil. So he might have been feeling a bit more – like he could share this information, I don't know.

But he said, you know, I – yeah. Well, I would attack them because I wanted them to cover Mobil's point of view. Unfortunately, it worked really well. Journalists weren't necessarily used to this at the time and they were a little bit more sensitive to being accused of – he would often accuse them of either bias or he would find some like small inaccuracy in the story and use that as sort of leverage to make them feel bad about the story in general and kind of overcorrect.

Then the papers that did try to stand up to him, he went totally nuclear on. Like he – there's this interesting kind of meeting that he talks about in his book where he met with the editorial board of the Wall Street Journal because he felt like they had been unfair to Mobil and their coverage.

He got like five minutes into the conversation and the executive editor just told him, "Everything you're saying is bullshit." So the meeting was over but he went on to – I mean he pulled all advertising from the Wall Street Journal. But he also removed all access for Wall Street Journal reporters.

So he took them off of any press release list. He wouldn't answer any questions from Wall Street Journal reporters. He wouldn't even give like earnings numbers to them. So it made it hard for them to do their jobs and within a couple of years, that editor was gone and Mobil was advertising in the Wall Street Journal again and the Wall Street Journal was running slightly more Mobil-friendly stories.

So yeah, I mean at that time, the Wall Street Journal wasn't run by Rupert Murdoch. Now it's like of course they're running Mobil-friendly stories.

**Chris Martin:** Right, right.

**Amy Westervelt:** But yeah, so you definitely – there is this sort of history of the industry really sort of creating and then leveraging false equivalents and it took – I mean it really took the media a long time to get over that. The print media really just stopped kind of doing this, you know, the last three to five years I would say and then the cable news guys are still doing it. They're still kind of engaging in this – well, we need to hear the other side kind of thinking. So yeah, we're not done with it yet.

**Chris Martin:** And there is a debate now about divesting from fossil fuels. So one story earlier this month was that Georgetown University pledged to divest from them and then I think you did an episode about how The Guardian, the newspaper, is also not running ads by them.

Have you received feedback from listeners of the *Drilled* podcast who have tried to work to get their institution to divest from fossil fuels and do you have a sense of whether they've succeeded or not?

**Amy Westervelt:** Yeah. Actually, I think you're seeing a real resurgence of divestment again. You know, the UC System just announced that they were going to entirely divest. But the thing that's interesting is I'm not sure – I'm not sure how that intersects with this research divestment piece because I know that there have been – I think there have been campuses where their sort of stock portfolios have – and their retirement and pension funds have divested from fossil fuels. But they're still taking money for research.

I do kind of think that like – that the divestment movement in general needs to include this research component and actually Ben and Geoffrey both started out in the campus divestment movement and I think that's why they've been kind of focused on this research thing for a while because they've seen how – you know, OK, even when we get a campus to divest, there's still this whole research component.

I've heard from a couple of people who have tried to raise the question and generally the answer is basically well, where – like do you have suggestions for replacing this funding? Because it's either we take this money or we shut this program down.

So I think it is kind of a tough situation because at this point, in a lot of these cases, the majority of the funding is coming from the fossil fuel industry. So you're really looking at if we get rid of this funding, then we have to shut down this whole research center. So yeah, I don't know.

**Chris Martin:** I could imagine if the focus of a university is engineering. So if it's a polytechnic institute or engineering university ...

**Amy Westervelt:** Right, or like the School of Mining.

**Chris Martin:** Yeah.

**Amy Westervelt:** Yeah, like how are they – that's not going to happen, you know, and I think MIT has actually made several public comments about this because they actually – I think they might take the most money from fossil fuel companies. So they've been pretty open about saying, you know, like yeah, we're not going to stop taking money from fossil fuel companies.

These companies need the technology to act on climate and we think it's like good that we're working with them to supply that and they kind of – I think a lot of it too is like they don't want to appear – it's very similar to the journalism realm really. They don't want to appear biased and they don't want to appear political.

So that gets – which you know, is valid in some ways but it definitely gets used kind of to industry's benefit sometimes.

**Chris Martin:** So what do you expect to see happening over the next decade in terms of movement here?

**Amy Westervelt:** I'm not sure really. I think you're starting to see some more attention on it really in large part due to Ben and Geoffrey's work. I know that they're working on another study about this stuff. So it will be interesting to see what they turn up. I think what they were looking at was really pulling together kind of a comprehensive review of what the universities that do have a lot of fossil fuel funding have been researching to see if they can draw out any trends in that realm, you know, and see like is this really shifting the focus and is that focus not necessarily what the science is telling us is the best way to go.

So that should be interesting and then – I don't know. I do think we might see the sort of campus divestment movement starting to take this on. You know, really starting to see activists looking at areas that they just weren't looking at before.

So like I think this research piece is part of that. But you're even seeing stuff like people kind of going after the tech industry for just – for like supplying software to these companies, which is something I hadn't even really thought about and it almost seems like initially I'm kind of like, "Well, come on, you know. What are they supposed to like not be allowed to use? Microsoft Word or something?"

**Chris Martin:** Right.

**Amy Westervelt:** But it's an interesting approach, you know, that like – like I talked –

**Chris Martin:** Was Microsoft one of the companies they were going after?

**Amy Westervelt:** It actually wasn't. It was - Autodesk is one of the companies. So Amazon and Autodesk are the two that I've seen kind of become targets in this way and with Amazon, of course there's like the shipping emissions and all that. But there's also their server emissions and then, you know, they're like the web hosting platform for like almost every company at this point. So there's that and part of that was also that they do business with the oil and gas companies and they provide oil and gas companies with technology services too.

So part of the ask from the Amazon employees for climate for example was that they stop doing business with fossil fuel companies and then on the Autodesk side, there's a guy in Belgium who lives near the largest mine in Europe and had kind of been looking into how that mine operates and whatever and realized that they use Autodesk software for all of their kind of operations and mine planning and all that kind of stuff, which Autodesk has long positioned itself as sort of a company that's aligned with sustainability and it's like enabling sustainable building and all of this kind of stuff.

So he has been kind of waging a one-man game that's starting to get some traction and he's sort of like – you know, Autodesk should not be supplying software that basically enables more efficient mining. So I don't know. It's interesting. I'm not – I haven't really – I don't know what I think about that yet. But it's definitely an interesting development in sort of how the next wave of activists are attacking the issue.

**Chris Martin:** And this is my last question. What are your plans for season four and future seasons of *Drilled*?

**Amy Westervelt:** Well, I have – actually, you know, when I first started *Drilled*, it was going to be a limited release one-season thing. Then when I started doing the research, I was like, wow, there are actually so many stories contained in just sort of the climate accountability space and what are the things that have stopped us from acting on the climate.

So I do have several stories planned for the future. One is about a particular case. Another is about an egregious and crazy pipeline project. I'm doing – I can't say too much because I'm doing some ongoing reporting around the automotive industry, some other oil companies that haven't been in the press so much and building some future seasons around those too.

**Chris Martin:** Right. Well, Amy, it has been great having you on the show. Thanks for joining us.

**Amy Westervelt:** Thank you so much for having me and thank you so much for your patience with this [0:33:43] [*Indiscernible*].

**Chris Martin:** Oh, you're welcome.

**Amy Westervelt:** I appreciate it.

**Chris Martin:** You can follow Amy at @AmyWestervelt on Twitter. You can also find her podcast and other podcasts in the Critical Frequency Network at [www.criticalfrequency.org](http://www.criticalfrequency.org). If you enjoyed listening to the show, please leave us a review on iTunes because it helps spread the word about the show and as always, you can reach me at [podcast@heterodoxacademy.org](mailto:podcast@heterodoxacademy.org) and follow me on Twitter at @Chrismartin76. Thanks for listening.

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