

LEARN HOW TO BE HAPPIER AT WORK—TODAY

themuse

HUFF
POST

The Third Metric

Delivered straight
to your inbox

SIGN UP

FOR A FREE CLASS

June 12, 2014

HUFF
POST

MEDIA

Mainstream Media Downplay NRA's Close Ties to Gun Industry

Posted: 01/13/2013 4:53 pm

On its website, the National Rifle Association claims that it "is not affiliated with any firearm or ammunition manufacturers or with any businesses that deal in guns and ammunition." This is a lie, as a number of recent reports have documented.

In fact, the NRA is primarily a front group for the nation's gun manufacturers. But you wouldn't know it from reading the major media outlets.

In 2012, the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, and the *New York Daily News* published a total of 212 news stories that mentioned the NRA. An analysis of these articles reveals that these influential media outlets pay little attention to the close ties between the NRA and the gun makers. Among the 212 articles, only four (three in the *New York Times* and one in the *Washington Post*) note any link between the NRA and the \$12 billion-a-year firearms industry. The study looked only at news stories, eliminating editorials, columns, op-eds, book reviews, and letters to the editor.

Most of the 212 articles give readers no clue about the organization's corporate ties. The articles -- typically stories about gun violence, gun legislation, or elections -- simply mention the NRA's name without explanation, perhaps assuming that readers already know whom the organization speaks for. This was the case for 43 of the 64 articles (67 percent) in the *New York Times* (67 percent), 55 out of 65 stories (85 percent) in the *Washington Post*, 21 of 29 articles (72 percent) in *USA Today*, and 45 of the 54 articles (83 percent) in the *Daily News*.

In the few stories where the newspapers describe the NRA's mission, they typically refer to it as a "gun rights" organization or a "gun owners" group, with "gun lobby," "firearm group," "pro-gun group," and "gun advocacy group" among the other favorites. One-fifth of the stories (44 out of 212) -- 28 percent in the *Times*, 14 percent in the *Post*, 38 percent in *USA Today*, and 17 percent in the *Daily News* -- describe the NRA in these ways.

The NRA is actually a hybrid organization. It is primarily a corporate lobby group working on behalf of the gun and ammo manufacturers, similar to the trade associations that represent car manufacturers, chemical companies, banks, insurance companies, and other industries. All of them claim to do what's best for the consumers of their products -- indeed, for many years the tobacco lobby funded astro-turf "smokers' rights" groups -- but everyone knows that they primarily serve the interests of the corporations who fund and govern them.

Unlike these other trade associations, the NRA is also a membership organization of gun owners, which the media frequently point out. Reporters often quote NRA members or mention that political candidates and office-holders are NRA members, giving the impression that the organization speaks for Americans who own guns. For example, a May 5 *Times* piece said, "Teachers have the American Federation of Teachers. Gun owners have the N.R.A. The older population has AARP," emphasizing the NRA's role as a membership organization. Another *Times* story, from December 20, described the NRA as "a four-million-member group that has one of Washington's most powerful, well-financed lobbying arms." On December 21, the *Daily News* called the NRA a "4.3 million member gun owners group." In an April 1 article about CEO pay among lobby groups, the *Washington Post* reported that its "analysis was limited to trade organizations charged with representing the interests of industries, and excluded single companies or pressure groups backed by individual paid members, such as the National Rifle Association."

The *Post's* description is exactly what NRA officials want the public to believe. Wayne LaPierre, the NRA's combative \$970,000-a-year CEO, typically describes the organization as the voice of gun owners or as a "gun owners rights" organization that works to protect and defend the Second Amendment rights of Americans to buy and own guns.

But this is a misleading description of the NRA. Whereas almost every gun and ammo manufacturer has close ties to the NRA, only a tiny proportion of the nation's gun owners are NRA members. About 90 million Americans own guns. The NRA claims to have about four million members, although the media have never bothered to verify that figure. Even if this number is accurate, however, it represents only 4.4 percent of all gun owners.

And, according to recent surveys -- including one by Republican pollster Frank Luntz -- very few NRA members agree with the organization's stances on gun control. According to Luntz's survey, for example, 82 percent of gun owners -- and 74 percent of NRA members -- said they support requiring criminal background checks for gun purchasers, contrary to the NRA's position on the issue.

Despite the NRA's best efforts, gun ownership has been declining. The media has reported that gun sales have increased

since the Newtown shooting, and that some gun owners have been stockpiling guns and ammunition out of fear, stoked by the NRA, that the Obama administration and Congress might soon pass tougher gun control laws. But these short-term trends mask a wider reality. The number of American households that own guns declined from almost 50 percent in 1973 to just over 32 percent in 2010, according to a 2011 study by National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago.

Moreover, gun ownership is highly concentrated. Twenty percent of gun owners possess about 65 percent of the nation's guns. The NRA is able to mobilize a small but very rabid and vocal group of gun owners -- as well as owners of gun shops -- to attend rallies, write letters to newspapers and comments on blog sites, and contact elected officials. Josh Sugarman, executive director of the nonprofit Violence Policy Center who has written extensively about the NRA, says that the organization's most vocal members -- the NRA's "public face" -- are a small proportion of its members for whom "guns are their life."

But when the NRA has had to choose between the interests of its corporate sponsors and the safety of its gun-owning members, its loyalty to the gunmakers reveals its true colors. In 2005, the NRA and the firearms manufacturers successfully lobbied for a law that provided gun manufacturers and distributors immunity from lawsuits from victims of gun violence -- legislation sponsored by GOP Sen. Larry Craig of Idaho, an NRA board member, and signed by President George W. Bush in October of that year. Little remembered, however, is that the NRA also lobbied for an amendment to that bill to limit the liability of firearm manufacturers for injuries to consumers caused by defective guns, a provision (which ultimately didn't pass) that would make it impossible for gun owners to sue the manufacturers.

This is not surprising. Rank-and-file NRA members have no significant voice in the organization's decision-making, which is the province of its highly-paid staff and board. They don't decide which candidates the NRA should endorse or what legislation it should support or oppose. In fact, the NRA has disenfranchised its rank-and-file by limiting the right to vote for board members to those who have been NRA members for at least five years or who are lifetime members, a fraction of its overall membership.

There are few rank-and-file gun owners on the NRA 75-member board, which is dominated by representatives of gun and ammunition makers, staffpersons for industry-affiliated organizations and publications, and lobbyists, politicians, and ex-politicians with links to the industry. (The board also includes such celebrities as actors Tom Selleck, and Church Norris, radio host Oliver North, former NBA star Karl Malone, and singer Ted Nugent). For example NRA board member Steve Hornady is President of Hornady Ammunition, which manufactures "FMJ" armor piercing bullets for sale on the civilian market. Board member Ronnie Barrett is founder and CEO of Barrett Firearms Manufacturing Inc., and designer of the .50 caliber sniper rifle. Pete Brownell, president of Brownells, Inc., the world's largest supplier of firearm parts, gunsmithing tools, equipment and accessories, also sits on the NRA board.

Over the past decade, the NRA has increasingly relied on contributions from "corporate partners" to fund its political activities, which are designed to elect politicians who oppose restrictions on gun sales and use and scare gun owners that the government may soon restrict sales of, or even confiscate, weapons, hoping to mobilize them to buy more guns, donate to the NRA, and vote for the "pro-gun" candidates its leaders decide to endorse. Among the NRA's "corporate partners" are both large and small gun and ammunition manufacturers, including Arsenal, Inc., Benelli, Beretta USA, Corporation, Browning, Freedom Group (making of the Bushmaster rifle used in the Newtown, CT massacre), Glock Inc., Marlin Firearms, Midway USA (distributor of high-capacity magazine clips), Remington Arms Co., Smith & Wesson Corporation, Springfield Armory, and, Sturm, Ruger & Co.

But when reporters use adjectives to describe the NRA, they don't call it an "industry-backed" or "gun manufacturers-funded" group. Instead, they describe the NRA in terms of its political clout, calling it "powerful," "influential," "deep pocketed and widely feared" (*Daily News*, December 17) and, in a December 25 *USA Today* article, a "powerful gun rights organization," that "maintains its powerful chokehold on legislators in Washington (*USA Today*, December 13), but with no reference to the sources of its influence.

Although that's another description that the NRA likes the public to believe, it, too, is misleading. The NRA contributed \$17.4 million to presidential and congressional candidates in the last election cycle, according to the Center for Responsive Politics. But a new report by the Sunlight Foundation discovered that the NRA's political influence is wildly exaggerated. Besides failing to defeat Barack Obama in November -- its top priority -- the NRA supported the losing Senate candidate in six out of seven races where it spent more than \$100,000. Over two-thirds of House incumbents who lost their seats in November were endorsed by the NRA. Less than one percent of \$10.5 million spent by NRA Political Victory Fund went to races where the NRA-backed candidate won).

Throughout 2012, only four articles mentioned the link between the NRA and gun manufacturers, all of them after the Newtown, Connecticut massacre in December. A December 18 story by Fredrick Kunkle in the *Post*, reporting a demonstration by gun control groups at the NRA's headquarters, quoted Becky Bond, political director of CREDO, an activist group, saying that the NRA "purports to represent gun owners" but "in reality, it represents the deadly interests of arms dealers and gun manufacturers." That same day, a *Times* article by Nicholas Confessore, Michael Cooper, and Michael Lu reported that the NRA "has formed close partnerships with gun makers and business organizations around the country, working to protect manufacturers from liability and introduce model bills in state legislatures." A December 25 *Times* story by Barry Meier and Andrew Martin that explored the close ties between the gun producers and the video game industry pointed out that "[m]any of the same producers of firearms and related equipment are also financial backers of the N.R.A."

Times reporters Ray Rivera and Alison Leigh Cowan began their December 24 story: "Gun owners packed a hearing room in the Connecticut capital, vowing to oppose a bill that would require new markers on guns so that they are easier to trace." They then noted that three gun makers with factories in Connecticut -- Colt Manufacturing, Sturm, Ruger & Company, and Mossberg & Sons, who employ about 2,000 workers in the state -- threatened to leave if the legislature enacted the proposed law. In the story's 15th paragraph, they reported that "Financially, the gun companies and their employees in Connecticut

have exerted influence by donating to national groups, especially the National Rifle Association, which have in turn helped Connecticut gun rights groups, according to interviews and financial records."

A few columnists and editorial writers exposed the NRA's close links to the gun industry. "The NRA represents gun manufacturers, end of story," wrote Michael McNulty, a Tucson attorney who chaired former Cong. Gabrielle Giffords' campaigns, in a *Washington Post* op-ed column on July 29. On March 22, soon after the killing of Trayvon Martin in Florida, *Times* columnist Gail Collins observed: "This is big business. The N.R.A. takes in more than \$200 million a year, which is a heck of a lot more than it made back in the old days, when its principal activity was running marksmanship classes. A considerable chunk of the cash comes from gun manufacturers and gun sellers." In a damning editorial on December 21 (a week after the Newtown, Connecticut massacre), entitled "National Rifle (Selling) Association," the *Times* wrote: "The association presents itself as a grass-roots organization, but it has become increasingly clear in recent years that it represents gun makers. Its chief aim has been to help their businesses by increasing the spread of firearms throughout American society."

But in its news stories, the media downplays the reality that the NRA is essentially a corporate lobby group on behalf of gun manufacturers. In doing so, the media misleads the public about the NRA's core mission -- selling guns and making profits, not protecting rights.

Follow Peter Dreier on Twitter: www.twitter.com/peterdreier