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## When Chevron Hires Ex-Reporter to Investigate Pollution, Chevron Looks Good

By [BRIAN STELTER](#)

What did [Chevron](#) do when it learned that “60 Minutes” was preparing a potentially damaging report about oil company contamination of the [Amazon rain forest](#) in Ecuador? It hired a former journalist to produce a mirror image of the report, from the corporation’s point of view.

As a demonstration of just how far companies will go to counteract negative publicity, the Chevron case is extraordinary. Gene Randall, a former CNN correspondent, spent about five months on the project, which was posted on the Internet in April, three weeks before the “60 Minutes” report was shown on May 3.

“Chevron hired me to tell its side of the story,” he said. “That’s what I did.”

The two videos — one by [CBS](#), the other by a corporation being scrutinized by CBS — run about 14 minutes long. They each discuss a class-action lawsuit filed by Ecuadoreans who accuse Texaco, a company acquired by Chevron in 2001, of poisoning the rain forest.

An Ecuadorean judge is expected to rule soon on whether Chevron owes up to \$27 billion in damages, which would make the case “the largest environmental lawsuit in history,” the “60 Minutes” correspondent, Scott Pelley, said.

Both videos start with a correspondent appearing on camera and calling it a “bitter” dispute. But from there, they diverge. The “60 Minutes” report visits the rain forest, talks to the Ecuadorean judge and interviews a Chevron manager. The Chevron video interviews the same Chevron manager, as well as five professors who are consultants to the oil company, but none of the plaintiffs.

The Chevron video never directly claims to be journalism. But a casual viewer could be swayed by the description — “Gene Randall reporting” — and the journalistic devices used, including file footage of the rain forest and over-the-shoulder interviews with experts. Chevron posted the video on [YouTube](#) as well as its own Web site devoted to the lawsuit.

Chevron declined to answer questions about the video. But in a statement, it said that “we produced this video in response to a campaign waged by trial lawyers. They’ve turned to Hollywood to tell a fictional story. We’ve turned to an award-winning, former journalist to tell a factual story.”

Mr. Randall, who has been a corporate consultant since leaving CNN in 2001, had worked with Chevron once before, as an interviewer of the company’s chief executive for a corporate Web video. When the company approached Mr. Randall late last year, he said he had researched the Ecuador lawsuit and

“became convinced that their side had not gotten out there.”

The first [Google](#) search result for the words “Chevron in Ecuador” shows a Web site created by Amazon Watch, an environmental activist group, that blames “Chevron’s negligence” for injuries and deaths in the country. Chevron has since bought Google ads so that its Web site about the lawsuit, which includes Mr. Randall’s video, appears as a sponsored link.

Mitch Anderson, a campaigner for Amazon Watch, said that Chevron had resorted to “embarrassing public relations tactics” because credible news sources had not sufficiently framed the report the way they would like, namely, to “to place all of the blame for Texaco’s environmental disaster in Ecuador on PetroEcuador,” Texaco’s former partner.

Mr. Randall’s video acknowledges the claims of the plaintiffs many times, primarily to set up Chevron’s response. “This is not a news report,” he said in an interview. “This is a client hiring a provider to tell its side of the story.” The video ends with a voiceover saying “Gene Randall reporting.”

Jeff Fager, the executive producer of “60 Minutes,” said his staff would have liked the same access that Mr. Randall had to Chevron. The oil company’s chief environmental scientist appears in the corporate video, but “they wouldn’t let us interview her,” Mr. Fager said.

Mr. Fager emphasized that the “60 Minutes” segment was “well-reported and fair.”

“I’m sure that Chevron preferred the story they told to the one we told, but that’s not journalism, that’s advocacy,” he said.

Their advocacy may not have had a serious effect. While the “60 Minutes” report reached at least 12 million viewers on television, the Chevron-sponsored effort has received only about 2,000 views on YouTube. Chevron would not say how many views it had counted on its own Web site.

“Most companies like their own advertising best, and this is not a whole lot different,” Mr. Fager said.

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