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## Lockheed's Nova sponsorship violates underwriting rules



The **PBS Nova** broadcast ["Rise of the Drones"](#) was sponsored by drone manufacturer Lockheed Martin--a clear violation of **PBS's** underwriting guidelines.

As Kevin Gosztola reported (**FireDogLake**, [1/24/13](#)), the January 23 broadcast was a mostly upbeat look at surveillance and weaponized drones. "Discover the cutting edge technologies that are propelling us toward a new chapter in aviation history,"

**PBS** urged, promising to reveal "the amazing technologies that make drones so powerful."

Some of that technology, unbeknownst to viewers, was created by the company described as giving Nova "additional funding" at the beginning of the broadcast. Lockheed Martin, a major military contractor with \$46 billion in 2011 sales, is a [manufacturer of drones](#) used in warfare and intelligence, including the

[Desert Hawk](#)

, the

[Falcon](#)

, the

[Stalker](#)

and the

[Tracer](#)

. In December 2012, Lockheed bought AME Unmanned Air Systems, maker of the Fury drone ( **New Times**

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[12/19/12](#)

).

**Nova's** history of unmanned flight technology included comments from Abe Karem, dubbed the "father of the Predator" drone. His current company, **FireDogLake's** Gosztola noted, has a business relationship with Lockheed Martin.

The show did not entirely skirt the controversies over drones. A section of the broadcast dealt with drone pilots firing on targets in countries like Afghanistan or Pakistan. Viewers, though, are told that drone pilots have distinct advantage over conventional pilots. One drone operator talks about how, after a strike, a drone can "stick around for another few hours to watch what happens afterwards." A more critical look at drone wars might have mentioned these are the same circumstances under which U.S. drones have attacked rescue workers and funeral processions (**Bureau of Investigative Journalism**, [6/4/12](#)).

The show does not ignore the question of civilian deaths--though it says "the facts are hard to come by" and that "there are not fully reliable counts of civilian deaths." **Nova** does mention that some estimates are that 30 percent of those killed are civilians, and talks about one attack that killed 23 civilians in Pakistan.

But, in keeping with the generally upbeat tone, **Nova** tells viewers that technology will help turn things around. "Drones can strike with pinpoint precision," the programs explains, "but their visual sensors are limited in ways that can lead pilots to make mistakes." Not to worry, though; "engineers are working to create new sensors that can see more in greater detail than ever before."

The program's sponsorship tie to the drone industry were never mentioned--though there were opportunities to disclose that relationship. In addition to Lockheed Martin's connection to one of the interview subjects, the show discussed a U.S. drone that was captured by Iran--without mentioning that it was manufactured by **Nova's** underwriter. And when Nova discusses the drones of the future, it's talking about the kind of miniature drones Lockheed Martin is developing to provide "constant surveillance capabilities" (

**TPM IdeaLab**

,  
[7/4/12](#))

Though the broadcast included an underwriting announcement at the beginning ("Additional funding from Lockheed Martin: Inspiring tomorrow's engineers and technologists"), that credit

was removed from the webcast, and the company is not credited on the Nova website for the episode.

So can a corporation really provide "additional funding" for public TV journalism that discusses its own interests? **PBS** rules would seem to say no. The network has three tests that "are applied to every proposed funding arrangement in order to determine its acceptability":

- \* Editorial Control Test: Has the underwriter exercised editorial control? Could it?
- \* Perception Test: Might the public perceive that the underwriter has exercised editorial control?
- \* Commercialism Test: Might the public conclude the program is on **PBS** principally because it promotes the underwriter's products, services or other business interests?

On the perception test, **PBS** explains:

When there exists a clear and direct connection between the interests or products or services of a proposed funder and the subject matter of the program, the proposed funding will be deemed unacceptable regardless of the funder's actual compliance with the editorial control provisions of this policy.

On commercialism:

The policy is intended to prohibit any funding arrangement where the primary emphasis of the program is on products or services that are identical or similar to those of the underwriter.

It is difficult to see how **PBS** could argue that the **Nova** special does not violate these rules. And **PBS** wants you to believe they take such matters seriously:

Should a significant number of reasonable viewers conclude that PBS has sold its professionalism and independence to its program funders, whether or not their conclusions are justified, then the entire program service of public television will be suspect and the goal of serving the public will be unachievable.

If **PBS** really believe these words, why did they allow the Lockheed-funded "Rise of the Drones" to air?

**ACTION:**

Ask **PBS** ombud Michael Getler to investigate whether Nova's "Rise of the Drones" violates PBS underwriting guidelines.

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