

Energy's Citizens: The Making of a Canadian Petro-Public

Tim Wood
New York University

ABSTRACT

Background Canada's fossil fuel industry has recently put citizen outreach at the centre of its political strategy. This is manifest in a public outreach campaign known as Canada's Energy Citizens (CEC), undertaken by the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP).

Analysis This article uses interviews with CEC organizers and members to demonstrate how participation subsidies are used to enlist members. While much scholarly literature assumes corporate grassroots campaigns will hide the use of professional public relations labour and industry ties, findings show instead that CEC foreground its members' professional backgrounds and connections to the oil sector.

Conclusions and implications Transparency does ideological work in the campaign, framing pro-oil advocacy as a licit social aim, and public relations labour as a normative model of citizen political participation.

Keywords Corporate communication; Public relations; Oil; Political communication; Social movements; Transparency

RÉSUMÉ

Contexte L'industrie des combustibles fossiles au Canada a récemment centré sa stratégie politique sur la sensibilisation des citoyens. Par exemple, l'Association canadienne des producteurs pétroliers (ACPP) a mené une campagne de sensibilisation publique du nom de « Canada's Energy Citizens » (CEC).

Analyse Cet article a recours à des entrevues avec des organisateurs et membres de CEC afin de démontrer dans quelle mesure cette campagne de sensibilisation utilise des subventions de participation afin de recruter ses membres. Plusieurs recherches savantes font la supposition que les campagnes locales menées par les entreprises ont tendance à cacher leurs liens avec l'industrie et leur recours aux services de relations publiques, mais les données de cette étude démontrent que CEC, au contraire, affiche les liens professionnels de ses membres au secteur pétrolier.

Conclusions et implications Cette transparence sert la campagne d'un point de vue idéologique, présentant l'appui à l'industrie pétrolière comme un objectif social légitime, et les relations publiques comme moyen d'encourager l'engagement politique des citoyens.

Mots clés Communication d'entreprise; Relations publiques; Pétrole; Communication politique; Mouvements sociaux; Transparence

Tim Wood is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Media, Culture, & Communication at New York University. Email: tim.wood@nyu.edu .

Introduction

In contemporary Canadian petro-politics, the voice of industry often speaks with a citizen's inflection, as oil corporations partner with civic allies to fight for common cause. Nowhere is this more evident than in the work of the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP), the nation's largest oil and gas trade association, which has recently made public outreach a key component of its mandate. In 2014, CAPP formalized its efforts, founding an entirely new entity to act as the face of its citizen mobilization campaign. Dubbed Canada's Energy Citizens (CEC), the freshly minted group arrived as a self-described, "movement of Canadians supporting the positive role Canada's Oil and Natural Gas industry plays in our lives" (Energy Citizens, "join the Conversation"). Enlisting members from across the nation, CEC promotes citizens as spokespeople, amplifying their voices in debates over Canada's energy future. CEC's most adamant backers are profiled on the group's website, featured in newspapers, and have their stories shared across social media. In an amalgam of corporate public relations and citizen political participation, supporters tout the benefits of a fossil fuel economy within an organizational structure crafted, funded, and entirely directed by CAPP.

Oil companies have long been powerful political actors in Canada. Since the 1970s, the industry has coordinated attempts to mould the nation's environmental regulations, traditionally relying on government lobbying (MacDonald, 2007). Historically, when CAPP and individual companies have entered the fray of mediated public politics, they have done so predominantly through advertising (Kim, 2012), news coverage (Raso & Neubauer, 2016), and other communicative forms that conceive of the public as an audience to be won over.¹ However, CAPP's new advocacy model treats the public—or at least the subsection CEC selectively convenes—as a resource, and one that can be marshalled to great political effect.

Edward T. Walker (2014) uses the apt term, "subsidized public" (p. 10), to describe this model of organizing, in which "corporations, trade associations, wealthy advocacy organizations, and campaign groups utilize the services of public affairs consultants to lower the costs of participation for targeted activist groups" (p. 10). Here institutional actors enlist allies by providing training, resources, or mediated forums to make advocacy less burdensome for supporters. Subsidizing a public is not without difficulties for companies and citizens alike, however. Businesses face potential blowback for intervening in civil sphere politics, as revelations concerning the corporate funding of citizen advocates may create a "boomerang" effect (Pfau, Haigh, Sims, & Wigley, 2007, p. 93), in which sponsors come under fire for presenting their own public relations (PR) efforts as a grassroots movement. This has been the case for Canada's Energy Citizens, to some extent, with opponents such as Greenpeace loudly deriding CEC as an "astroturf" organization, a term referring to the synthetic grass laid on sports fields, and indicating a faux-grassroots style of political organizing (McDermott, 2016). CEC's citizen members, meanwhile, are subjected not only to these barbs, but also to the same pressures on time, attention, and resources that generally keep people from becoming involved in political battles.

Participation subsidies are not a magic bullet. Companies may find them too risky to offer; citizens may deem them an insufficient incentive to get involved. When con-

fronted with a campaign such as Canada's Energy Citizens, the concept of a subsidized public is less a steadfast explanation for political organizing than an impetus for new questions: Why now, after decades of relying predominantly on lobbying, has the oil sector trudged into the messy world of citizen organizing? And if energy is building a citizenry of its own, who are these people and what are their reasons for forging political partnerships with the oil sector's main trade group? Answering these questions entails setting aside dismissive terms such as "astroturf organization"—at least momentarily—to examine the experiences of industry supporters as they participate in politics through a corporate campaign.

To provide such a grounded account of CEC's campaign this article relies on two complementary sources. The first is the CEC's own promotional materials, particularly the 36 biographical profiles of supporters currently featured on its website. These narratives, packaged to circulate in news coverage and social media, offer insight into the sorts of citizens CEC projects as its own idealized public. Secondly, findings are based on 15 semi-structured interviews with CEC's core organizers and its profiled backers, both past and present, conducted between September 2015 and August 2017. These interviews, lasting between 35 minutes and two-and-a-half hours, covered a range of topics about the campaign and the politics of oil in Canada. From these, the article presents an account of why CAPP ventured into grassroots political organizing, and why citizens have chosen to back their campaign.

Findings show that CEC's core supporters are brought into the campaign primarily through the personal and professional networks of CAPP's staff members, who attend industry events and comb their own lists of acquaintances in search of backers. As a result of this recruitment method, CEC's featured proponents disproportionately consist of communications professionals, executives, and workers with ties to oil production. Rather than attempting to hide the PR expertise or industry connections of its supporters, CEC foregrounds these as key elements of the campaign. Citizens' biographies on the group's website proudly identify supporters as, "public affairs professional," or, "industry advocate"; links to the oil sector are underscored, not covered up. By foregrounding the communicative expertise of its supporters, the campaign teaches citizens to fashion their advocacy after that of PR professionals. Oil's subsidized publics are not a means to hide PR work, but rather to reframe it as a model of legitimate political participation.

This article first explores how the concept of participation subsidies helps to address critical blind spots in the study of corporate political action. The lens then turns to the CEC campaign more directly, explicating the forces that propelled Canada's oil industry to forge a public of its own, and analyzing why citizens chose to undertake their political action alongside CAPP. The article concludes by discussing the ramifications of the oil sector's promotion of professionalized communications skills as a model of citizen politics.

Joining up: Corporate politics and subsidized publics

Edifice has been a recurrent theme in scholarship on corporations' grassroots political campaigns, especially those in which companies found or fund their own "activist" groups. An entire critical lexicon has evolved to stress the unseen side of such orga-

nizing. Researchers use the term “front group,” for instance, to insinuate that behind a civic façade, concealed forces are directing corporately sponsored activist groups (Apollonio & Bero, 2007; Pfau et al., 2007). The term “astroturf organization” similarly denotes a style of “fake grassroots” advocacy (Cho, Martens, Kim, & Rodrigue, 2011), signalling corporate organizing that is unethically covert (Greenberg, Knight, & Westersund, 2011; Lyon & Maxwell, 2004). Both terms have gained currency as shorthand critiques of corporate PR cloaked as citizen activism.

Terms such as “astroturf” and “front group” may be effective rhetorical weapons in public debate (Mayer, 2007) but give us little analytical purchase when trying to understand why citizens choose to undertake their political advocacy in alliance with businesses. By emphasizing falsity, this critical language frames citizen advocates as shams, dupes, or hired guns. There are, to be sure, cases in which companies falsify citizen support. More common, however, is a model of organizing in which real people enlist as members of corporately directed political coalitions. To the extent that groups such as Canada’s Energy Citizens rely on actual citizen backers, scholars require analytical tools capable of delving into these relationships between corporations and their civic allies.

Jen Schneider, Steve Schwarze, Peter K. Bsumek, and Jennifer Peeples (2016), through their study of political organizing in the U.S. coal industry, offer perhaps the most thoughtful and empirically grounded attempt to examine this dynamic. The authors argue that critics cannot simply “dismiss the use of front groups and astroturf movements by corporations as ‘inauthentic’” (p. 53), instead imploring scholars to attend to how voice is delegated between companies and their citizen backers. For their part, Schneider et al. (2016) construe this relationship as one of “corporate ventriloquism” in which “corporations transmit messages through other entities ... in order to construct and animate an alternative ethos, voice, or identity that advances their interests” (p. 53). Here the cooperation of everyday people “animates both the grassroots organization’s voice, and the industry’s voice, as voices of citizenship” (p. 53).

While their illuminating study treats citizen support as a vivifying force in corporate campaigns, Schneider et al. (2016) do not sufficiently explain why everyday people are drawn to participate. This is, in part, a response to the particularities of their case study, which saw coal trade associations falsify citizen support. When applied to CEC, however, the metaphor of corporate ventriloquism is less apt. It treats citizens as dummies, lumps of raw material that can be enlivened at a whim. Although granting that backers are not inherently “inauthentic,” the concept of corporate ventriloquism fails to account for why people with plenty of choices about how to do politics would select corporate partnerships as a means to have their voices heard.

When addressing why people join political battles, studies of social movements have found that ideological fire and felt grievances are only part of what motivate people to enter contentious struggles: would-be advocates are also spurred by new material resources that make a given fight seem winnable (McCarthy & Zald, 1973). To this end, those looking to shape public politics often provide subsidies that make participation less costly for potential backers. Companies might compose form letters to politicians and allow citizens to simply sign their names, sparing backers the effort of

crafting their own prose (Reader, 2008); alternatively, corporations may fly citizen supporters, all expenses paid, to meet with politicians face-to-face (Useem & Zald, 1982). The list of potential subsidies is as long as the list of possible advocacy tactics, but all are functionally similar insofar as they attempt ease the burden of participation.

For Walker (2014), this ease is likely to be unequally distributed, as institutional advocates tend to “encourage only select groups of citizens to voice their opinions” (p. 10). A group such as CEC will selectively mete out its resources, aiming to maximize their impact. Some voices will receive corporate subsidization, others will not. To understand the grassroots turn in Canadian petro-politics, then, it is necessary to examine the aims of the Canada Energy Citizen’s campaign, and investigate who is included in the public CEC convenes.

Oil’s citizen turn

The Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers officially came into existence in 1992, but its recent founding shrouds a longer history of mergers and renamings. The organization traces its lineage to the creation of the Alberta Oil Operator’s Association in 1927, beginning as a relatively circumscribed group of regional companies banding together to provide financial information to the oil-investing public (Gow, 2005). By 1952 the group had rebranded itself as the Canadian Petroleum Association, opening its first offices in Ottawa in 1958 to more directly liaise with Canada’s federal government. The CAPP of today, then, is only the most recent iteration in almost a century of formalized oil sector cooperation, and about 60 years of routinized lobbying in the nation’s capital.

While embroiled in a long history of Canadian oil politics, CAPP and its predecessors have traditionally undertaken very little public outreach. Their role, and one CAPP still plays, has been as technical advisor and industry advocate in interactions with government. Public advocacy has until recently been viewed as outside the purview of the organization, as well as beyond its expertise. The leadership of CAPP and its predecessors has historically been drawn from the technical side of the industry, elevating those with little formal training in public outreach. From the perspective of these oil experts, speaking directly to citizens has often seemed both unnecessary and risky. This inherited wisdom has taken on an inertial quality over the years, as Canada’s fossil fuel industry has flourished into the nation’s leading economic sector without a major commitment to grassroots political outreach.

This status quo was rendered untenable by two recent shifts in the politics of Canadian oil production. First, and most noticeable to those outside the industry, the early 2000s saw nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and activists forming increasingly well-organized campaigns against climate change, often directing their ire at fossil fuel companies. While resistance had been mounting for decades, the Alberta tar sands have recently become a key target for activists (Bradshaw, 2015; Le Billon & Carter 2012).² The notoriety of Canada’s bitumen industry only increased as the Keystone XL pipeline became a politicized issue in the United States, leading to massive protests and high media salience. During this time, news coverage tended to feature adamant citizen resistance to pipelines, with an almost wholesale omission of citizen voices in favour of oil infrastructure (Wood, 2017). This imbalance, from the industry’s perspective, was troubling and an impetus to rally its own citizen supporters.

Second, and closer to home for many of Canada's oil companies, the government of Alberta undertook a full-scale reassessment of the industry's economic relationship with the province in 2007. This "royalty review" concluded Albertans were receiving unacceptably low returns from the province's immense fossil fuel wealth (Alberta Royalty Review Panel, 2007), leading the government to alter its royalty structure, much to the consternation of many oil sector businesses.³ For oil companies, the royalty review and the public dissatisfaction it unearthed were a call for introspection. As CAPP's Vice President of Communications notes, "it was a big of ringing of the bell for the industry, that what had worked maybe in the prior 20 years was no longer where we're at. We don't do business and policy here by just calling up the minister and going for a meeting."⁴ Lobbying was no longer enough; public outreach would need to be a more central component of CAPP's mission.

The impetus for grassroots politics only deepened in 2015 with sweeping changes in the makeup of Canadian government. In Alberta, the notably left-leaning New Democratic Party ousted the Progressive Conservative Party, who had been in power since 1971. At the federal level, Justin Trudeau was sworn in as prime minister, heading a Liberal Party majority in the House of Commons. Both new governments were rhetorically supportive of Canada's fossil fuel industry, viewing resource wealth as a means to fund their proposed social programs. Their discourses mirror what Eduardo Gudynas (2010) has called "progressive neo-extractivism," wherein ostensibly leftist governments justify the appropriation of nature by touting a more equitable distribution of surplus earnings. In the Canadian case, new left-leaning governments have also rationalized the further exploitation of resources by committing—in rhetoric if not policy—to tighter environmental controls than previous Conservative parties had enforced. The potential for regulatory shakeup would only deepen the sense within CAPP that the fossil fuel sector was in need of credible civil society backers.

The Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers responded to the initial 2007 royalty review by undertaking a series of public opinion polls, designed to give them a more nuanced understanding of how to improve the industry's reputation. Amid these, CAPP encountered surprising results: employees of oil companies, whom they had assumed would possess a deep knowledge of energy issues and a willingness to speak up for the sector, were not participating in public debate. The complexity of oil production meant employees tended to be relatively siloed. While experts in their particular fields of drilling, finance, or environmental review, few could cogently articulate how these fit together to benefit Canadians. As a former member of CAPP's Communications team remembers, "we, CAPP, and the industry folks were pretty surprised at the lack of support from employees. That was a light bulb that went on: if these people aren't ambassadors for the industry, what are we doing wrong?" CAPP's problem was not simply resistance from environmentalists but the fact that their own base of citizen support was so taciturn.

From CAPP's perspective, its core problem was one of silence rather than belief. CAPP's own data indicated widespread support for Canadian oil production, yet people were unwilling to espouse those convictions publicly. As a CAPP's Vice President of Communications noted, in a statement echoed almost word-for-word by many other

interviewees, people who might be tempted to support the fossil fuel industry, “felt it was like smoking. You were socially stigmatized to stand up and defend the oil sands or natural gas or pipelines.” This is akin to what Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (1993) terms a, “spiral of silence,” in which the lack of visible support for one’s political position makes one feel isolated, and less willing to speak up. This in turn makes support less visible to others, creating a cycle in which a belief finds little expression in the public sphere. CAPP quickly set to finding ways to make extant but unseen backing more discernable in mainstream politics.

Alongside this new emphasis on citizen outreach, CAPP was concurrently undertaking a shift in its internal structure. Typically, the organization’s advocacy is funded through membership dues, which oil companies pay in proportion to their production levels: top producers pay more, small independent companies pay less. This means, however, that businesses with rival investments must agree on advocacy rhetoric. Finding messaging that appeases oil companies and natural gas producers (whose fuels often compete), or multinationals and regional independents (whose policy interest often collide) is an ongoing balancing act for CAPP. Disagreements are often economically irreducible. Thus even amid intensifying external critiques of tar sands production, it was difficult for CAPP to reach tactical consensus. To address this, a new splinter group was formed, known as the Oil Sands CEO Council. While run under CAPP’s auspices, the Council had a separate budget: it was “pay to play,” charging interested companies separate dues to join and direct the new enterprise. Here firms with stakes in the tar sands, such as Suncor, ConocoPhillips, and Cenovus could strategize about how to promote their products.⁵ This structural shift allowed for new messaging and targeted spending. As a former CAPP employee recalls, “all of a sudden you did have room to start hiring people to engage with the grassroots, and expanding the communications team.” By organizing industry around a niche issue, CAPP was able to pursue new campaign goals with a fresh influx of staff and funding.

The Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers’ initial forays into communication with citizens were somewhat tentative, a reaction to the reservations of its membership. To calm company CEOs worried about the risks of a more public profile, CAPP began by reaching for what one former staff member termed “low-hanging fruit”: middle-aged white conservative men and employees of the oil industry. After early success in attracting support from these demographics, CAPP’s strategists were able to offer evidence of their campaign’s efficacy to board members, earning the go-ahead for a broader program. This would be the Canada’s Energy Citizens campaign.

CEC first formally appeared in 2014. Online, it exists as a website, Facebook page, and Twitter account. CEC acts with varying degrees of transparency on these forums: the Energy Citizens’ homepage prominently displays CAPP’s logo, but mention of CAPP’s control of the organization is omitted on both Facebook and Twitter. It is easy, in other words, for those wishing to join Energy Citizens to see who sponsors the organization; when CEC’s messages and memes are circulated through social networking sites, however, attribution is tougher to trace.

The Canada’s Energy Citizens campaign operates both as grassroots outreach and as a traditional publicity campaign. Its Facebook and Twitter accounts are used pri-

marily for the latter, set to three main tasks: reposting news coverage favourable to industry, redirecting audiences to the Energy Citizens website, and providing written and photographic accounts of the group's face-to-face outreach efforts. The remaining content that CEC circulates is often intended as an entertaining entrée into their work, rather than as an immediate call to action. On Valentine's Day 2017, for instance, CEC's Facebook account posted a card proclaiming, "You have the Keystone to my XL heart." Users could share it, or print it out to send to their bitumen-loving lovers. The aim was not to rally firebrands but rather to playfully integrate support for industry into the festivities of the day. In a more sustained messaging attempt, CAPP launched a nationwide advertising campaign entitled "Raise Your Hand," featuring images of ostensibly everyday Canadians with their hands held aloft, the outline of a maple leaf traced around their palms. Deemed an "awareness campaign" by CAPP, the messages prompted audiences to speak up in favour of the oil sector, and to visit the Raise Your Hand website, which now redirects visitors to CEC's home page.

By driving traffic to the Energy Citizens homepage, the campaign exposed potential supporters to more overt calls to action. The group's site prominently features an "advocacy toolkit," with planning materials to host events, information on how to set one-on-one meetings with legislators, instructions on how to start campus clubs, and detailed advice on how to grow a personal network of pro-industry collaborators (Canada's Energy Citizens, "Welcome"). Unlike the posts circulated on social media, the advocacy toolkit lays out concrete steps for action, also providing step-by-step recommendations on how to tweet, write an op-ed, comment on news articles, and directly contact journalists.

Via the toolkit, CAPP urges advocates to adhere to the norms of public relations practice, rather than the more conflictual style that often characterizes political debate online. In this spirit, Canada's Energy Citizens reminds social media advocates to "be positive," "avoid arguments," and "make sure to proofread all social content carefully before publishing" (Canada's Energy Citizens, "Join the Conversation"). This relatively professionalized approach is echoed in its advice for commenting on online news articles, where the CEC recommends, "you should treat online comments the same way that you would treat a letter to the editor. Strive to get one or two relevant points across as succinctly as possible. Keep in mind that most publications moderate online comments based on certain standards, so focus on building your credibility" (Canada's Energy Citizens, "Join the Conversation"). Whether via news or social media, Canada's Energy Citizens are implored to mimic the style of professional communicators rather than rabble rousing.

The Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers' online campaign accompanies a face-to-face recruitment strategy targeting key communities across Canada. In practice this has meant sending CAPP personnel to business events, campus clubs, town hall meetings, and other sites to interact directly with potential supporters. The online and offline components of CEC are designed to dovetail, united in the goal of providing what CAPP terms "social cover" for continued fossil fuel extraction. Within CAPP's vocabulary, social cover is what breaks the spiral of silence—to provide cover is to create a widespread sense that speaking positively about the oil sector is a permissible act. The Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers has laid out its strategy in its

self-published industry magazine, *Context: Energy Examined*, in a passage worth quoting at length:

You can point to almost any social movement to see how social cover works—seatbelts, smoking, impaired driving and yes, even the anti-oil and gas campaign. Most of these movements started small, with a motivated and vocal core group of individuals facing a larger societal unwillingness or indifference to change. But as that group talked, provided evidence to support the validity of their position and appealed to people's emotional ideals and community values, this gave legitimacy for others to speak up. CAPP and industry's engagement strategy aims to start things rolling by providing tools and resources to help its strongest supporters—for example, employees of member companies and the oil and gas supply chain, as well as members of trade unions, chambers of commerce and passionate individuals who believe in Canada's oil and gas industry—to start engaging publicly and to tell their own stories. (Stanfield, 2015, p. 10)

Here social cover is depicted as pure strategy, equally available to multinational oil interests and opponents of drunk driving. This view presumes an actually existing support base of “others” who have yet to “speak up,” an approach that shapes the entire CEC campaign.

Conforming to the model of participation subsidies laid out by Walker (2014), Canada's Energy Citizens is not meant to change the hearts and mind of industry critics, or even sway more indifferent members of the public; its aim is to make previously invisible citizen support more legible in public debates. The industry's self-given task is not one of ideological persuasion, but of “providing tools and resources to help its strongest supporters.” These tools are unevenly allocated, however. For CEC's claimed membership of over 100,000 people, subsidies consist primarily of pre-packaged media content (memes, form letters, and news releases) that can be easily circulated online; for those with a penchant for deeper involvement, online toolkits offer recommendations for expressing the citizen voice in a professionalized manner.

Others among Canada's Energy Citizens are given more substantial subsidies to bolster their public voice. A select cadre of citizens is profiled on the organization's webpage, acting as the faces of the campaign. Here their photos sit, accompanied by brief blurbs detailing why they endorse the Canadian oil and gas industry. In some cases, these profiles have been accompanied by interviews posted to YouTube where supporters expand on their reasons for championing the sector (e.g. Canada's Energy Citizens, 2015); in other instances, profiles have found a second life as news content via CAPP's partnership with the Postmedia Network (Aronczyk, 2015, p. 2017). As part of this arrangement, CAPP publishes Energy Citizens profiles in major newspapers, such as the *National Post*, granting them a mainstream audience.

Canada's Energy Citizens offers tiered subsidies: one set to everyday members, and a more significant set to handpicked backers who act as spokespeople for the campaign. In orchestrating this latter group, CEC projects an idealized version of its petro-public. This “citizenry” is populated by real people, but discerningly vetted to promote

an imagined, rather than empirically representative, reflection of the kind of citizens who support the oil and gas sector.

Who are energy's citizens? Projecting a public

The individual profiles on Canada's Energy Citizens' homepage are intentionally diverse, displaying Canadians from differing regions, ethnicities, and walks of life (see Table 1). This heterogeneity, however, belies underlying patterns in who is afforded a voice. The citizens featured by CAPP are largely pulled from the oil and gas sector, with 36 percent of CEC profiles explicitly noting work in these fields. One supporter, for instance, is introduced as an "Industry Veteran" who took up work in Alberta's petroleum sector after "growing up in an oil and gas family" (Canada's Energy Citizens, "Sam Handy"). Many profiles bear similar phrasing, referring to engineers, sales executives, and geologists who earn their living from petroleum. In addition to the fossil fuel industry, CAPP's Energy Citizens tend to find employ in the nonprofit sector, with a third of all profiles noting work for a charity or advocacy organization. The remaining profiles predominantly feature people who do not draw paychecks from oil production, but whose work nonetheless claims some relationship with the industry. A city transit driver espouses the necessity of petroleum tax dollars for improving road safety; a mayor in rural Alberta extolls the economic benefits of oil and gas development for her town. These citizens do not have jobs in the industry, but present the sector as beneficial for their own vocations. The final few Citizens dotting the campaign's profile page are university students or union members, showcasing CAPP's organizing on the nation's campuses and among its labour base.

Table 1: Employment and volunteer positions of the CEC's profiled supporters

Oil and gas	NGO	Executive	Communications	Government	Student	Other business	Union
36%	33%	25%	22%	19%	17%	17%	5%

Note: The above categories are not mutually exclusive, so cumulatively add up to more than 100 percent.

The CEC's "citizens" show commonality not only in the economic sectors in which they ply their trades but in the organizational roles they fill. A quarter of profiled citizens are identified as founders or executives of NGOs or businesses. Twenty-two percent of profiles note that the advocate has made a career—or in some cases has a consistent volunteer position—as a communications specialist.⁶ One CEC supporter, for instance does community outreach for a privately owned energy utility; another acts as the regional head of the Canadian Federation of Independent Business (CFIB); a third is the founder of a campus group created to counter his university's growing fossil fuel divestment movement. While diverse, the profiles show that CAPP's citizens are uncommonly experienced public communicators.

The professional skills of CEC's advocates are not presented as ancillary facts but instead narrativized as an impetus for supporting oil development. In a representative example, one past profile begins, "I have been working directly in Canada's energy industry since 2008 and it wasn't until I moved into a communications role in Public Affairs over a year ago, where I felt any sort of pride for the industry." (Canada's Energy

Citizens, Alishia Klein). From there the advocate delivers a tale of burgeoning awareness, steadily accrued from working within the oil sector, of the significance the industry holds for the nation. Corporately backed citizens advocacy groups are often accused of hiding both their business connections and their reliance on public relations labour; in this profile, however, as across the campaign more broadly, both are foregrounded.

Being an energy citizen is explicitly predicated on employment. Ninety-seven percent of Canada's Energy Citizen profiles mention the profession or affiliation of the supporter. CEC subsidizes a public, then, who claim to experience benefits, directly or indirectly, from the largesse of Canada's oil sector. CEC's choice to stress prosperity is at odds with the recent economic tribulations the industry has faced, which have led to massive layoffs, especially in and around the Albertan tar sands. Unemployment in Alberta—the industry's de facto home province—nearly doubled between July, 2014, and July, 2016, jumping from 4.5 percent to 8.6 percent (Statistics Canada, 2017). The Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers' citizens do not reflect this: no profile depicts an advocate as unemployed, or a victim of recent layoffs. Only a single profile even alludes to job losses or financial downturn in the fossil fuel sector. Its citizens, then, do not epitomize the financial hardships of industry workers. Instead, profiles present those who, through the supposed gifts of the energy economy, have kept steadily employed through a period of economic decline.

Why do we witness such dissonance between the empirical reality of job cuts and the consistent foregrounding of one's career as a central component of identity in a subsidized petro-public? It is not as though CEC's backers are unaware of the industry's financial turmoil. Nearly every supporter interviewed steered conversation toward the industry's economic woes. They had seen friends fired, worried about losing their own jobs, or simply emphasized the perceived human consequences of the sector's economic hardships. Within the campaign, however, these concerns were expressed only in prefigurative terms. Rather than bemoan the industry's downturn, backers were depicted as making future-oriented arguments about the necessity of fossil fuels to Canadian financial wellbeing (see Table 2). Thirty-nine percent of profiles highlighted the centrality of oil to Canada's economy; the same number discussed the benefits such financial prosperity brought to communities, charities, or social services. Without mentioning recent layoffs, twenty-two percent of profiles spoke of the industry's potential as a job creator. In interviews, CEC's core advocates were aware of the industry's financial downturn, and often quite critical of the purported role of government policies, environmental activists, or foreign nations in exacerbating its impacts. In profiles, however, their complaints were expressed only as more sanitized claims about the future of oil and the economy.

Table 2: Topics addressed in CEC profiles

Environment	Community benefit	Economic benefit	Job creation	Specific infrastructure projects	Economic downturn or layoffs
53%	39%	39%	22%	6%	3%

Note: Many profiles contained more than one topic, so categories cumulatively add up to more than 100 percent.

This is explained, in part, by the undisputed central theme of the CEC profiles: the capacity for Canada to produce sustainable and ecologically safe energy. Fifty-three percent of profiles lauded the environmental bona fides of the oil industry, often by comparing Canada's high regulatory standards to the relatively weaker rules enforced by other nations. In so doing, CEC aligns itself with the "progressive-neo extractivism" espoused by the current federal and Alberta governments (Gudynas, 2010). While the oil industry writ large has long stoked skepticism over climate change (Dunlap & McCright, 2010), CAPP's citizen-centred politics chart a different course, recognizing carbon emissions as a concern, but touting Canadian fossil fuels as a relatively clean means to generate much-needed resource wealth. To emphasize this neo-extractivist discourse, however, CEC profiles largely omitted mention of the industry's past layoffs or the critiques, often evident in interviews for this article, backers had of governments' regulatory regimes.

Growing the grassroots

CEC's featured spokespeople consist largely of communicative professionals, executives, and those with ties to the oil industry. How, then, did such a public come into being? Interviews for this article indicate that most of those profiled in the Energy Citizens campaign joined because of existing personal relationships with CAPP's staff, or after meeting CAPP employees at industry events.

At conferences and panel discussions, face-to-face interactions with participants let CAPP identify particularly eager supporters, and draw them into the campaign. One member recalls his initial encounter with the campaign:

I think the starting point for the dialogue was just sort of seeing CAPP at events and going up to them, and engaging them with discussions, just out of personal interest. ... I think I just popped up on their radar and I think it just makes sense that, well he's got a great story to tell, he's enthusiastic, let's reach out to him.

This account is telling, in that it shows CAPP's ability to recruit at two levels. CEC attended events to sign up new subscribers to its mailing list. These would be included in the 100,000 members CEC claims as its base of support. When organizers encountered someone with a "great story," however, they could request that the person become more deeply involved. Face-to-face encounters allowed CAPP to screen for the supporters most fitting of their citizen vision.

Energy Citizens were also identified through the social connections of organizers. One supporter, in an oft-echoed account, recalled, "I got involved because I knew one of the people who was organizing it in town. Or I knew someone who knew the person who was organizing it. And they kind of knew me through politics and reached out to me and said, 'hey, do you want to be profiled on this,' and I said, 'sure, why not?'" Here the exchange is not a zealous ideological recruitment but an amicable request between acquaintances.

While CAPP staff scoured their personal networks for supporters, they did so selectively, looking for acquaintances whose backgrounds made them particularly useful propagators of the narrative CEC aimed to tell. One member, in a quintessential ex-

ample, is the CEO of a notable cancer care organization she founded in 1994. As she recalls, her relationship with Canada's Energy Citizens was sparked during a casual conversation with a friend who worked at CAPP. The two were chatting about the cancer charity's first donation, which came from a local oil company, when the CAPP employee asked the charity's head if she might be interested in being profiled by CEC. The latter readily agreed, viewing it as an opportunity to tout the value of oil sector giving for nonprofits, such as her own.

Significantly, the charity's founder recognized the characteristics that rendered her valuable to the CEC campaign. As she colourfully put it, the fact she runs programs for children with cancer makes her "freaking Mother Teresa" in the eyes of the public; she was uniquely positioned to garner positive attention. She also has decades of experience speaking to journalists, and could be counted on to persuasively articulate the oil industry's contribution to Canada's nonprofit sector. Although CAPP's organizers turn to acquaintances to support CEC, they search for people whose skillsets make them effective mediated communicators.

While many official Energy Citizens profiles mentioned their respective jobs, they were often depicted as stand-alone individuals, speaking only for themselves. For others, this line was blurred. One profiled citizen, an employee of a business advocacy group, approached CEC as "just another channel to promote our membership's perspective"; another advocate noted that while she was personally a strong supporter of the Canada's Energy Citizens campaign, she "spoke on behalf of" a local NGO in her CEC profile, attempting to represent the group's interests rather than simply her own.

Whether representing themselves or a larger cause, CEC supporters emphasized the latitude organizers gave them in creating a profiles. This process was a back-and-forth, wherein CAPP's staff assisted in paring personal expressions down to a website-friendly format. As one supporter recalled, "I sent them off my thoughts on a couple of pages and we worked together to edit the content down to the bite-sized piece that you see on the website." Other citizens echoed this, underscoring that despite constraints on form, they were granted liberty in content.

Although touting this rhetorical freedom, many of Canada's Energy Citizens worried that their profiles lacked a personal touch, and seemed too polished to resonate with a public already skeptical of public relations messaging. One advocate suggested that the campaign "comes across as very professional and organized. Which is good. That's what we need ... but it can be hard when it feels like you're not fighting fire with fire." In this case the initial "fire," refers to the more confrontational arguments made by the oil industry's detractors. While interviewees almost invariably lauded CEC's attempts to "put a human face" on the industry, many doubted the success of this messaging, and considered the savvy public relations style of the campaign a hindrance in opposing the rhetoric of anti-oil activists.

Some attributed cautious messaging to the uphill battle facing the industry in its framing contest against environmentalists, who were often viewed as spreading misinformation or preying on the public's emotions. Several participants, however, felt the campaign had simply acted more as a bullhorn than a forum for dialogue. One supporter summed this up, suggesting,

I think it has to be more of a conversation. Whether you're an elite or an industry expert or just an individual, I think canned messaging feels fake. You're human. I think Energy Citizens is humanizing by picking people, but really they pick the executive director or somebody whose life's work right now is to support [employees in the energy] sector. You didn't exactly pick somebody off the street.

Many participants—even those who were themselves executives or PR professionals—believed that the selection of relative elites and the polished packaging of the campaign made it less than convincing to the broader publics at which was ostensibly aimed.

Part of this concern stemmed from the separation supporters felt from the unfolding campaign. Not only did they have no role in plotting the trajectory of the “movement” CEC was trying to create, many did not understand the basic nuts and bolts of their own participation. One supporter, in an admission shared by several respondents, said, “I honestly didn't realize my profile was on Canada's Energy Citizens [website].” Another questioned how the profiles fit into CEC's larger vision, stating, “I don't think the Energy Citizens campaign was part of a broader campaign push. I don't think it was ever part of a public recognition campaign or anything like that.” While each of these respondents still adamantly supported CEC, their self-described role was as a featured face, not an involved participant. While the campaign many have centred on citizens, its citizens did not feel at the centre.

From these interviews, it should be clear that CEC was no mere fake. It called upon real people to volunteer their authentic viewpoints. The effort was, however, top-down, controlled by CAPP's staff. Participants had little say in strategy, and were sometimes unaware of how their words or images were being used. This is not to say they were deceived. They were earnest supporters of the campaign, but had simply never followed up on the particularities of how their voices were being amplified. They were largely savvy communicators themselves, however, carefully diagnosing perceived shortcomings of CEC's overall strategy. Despite some misgivings on tactics, they uniformly remained supporters of the campaign, believing in the importance of its message.

Office/politics: Mitigating the risks of participation

Many of Canada's Energy Citizens worried about the risks inherent in making political statements on behalf of oil. Ambivalence structured several of the interviews, with supporters adamant about the need for public conversation on energy—what CAPP would call social cover—but concerned this might damage their prospects for career advancement. As one supporter put it:

I'm currently employed in the resource sector, but you know, I'm not yet at the midpoint of my career. Somewhere down the line is being an advocate for the oil sands ... is that going to limit my job prospects going forward? Is that going to limit my ability to do different things?

The “ability to do different things” was pressing for many interviewees, given the shaky economic footing of Canada's oil and gas sector. Amid massive layoffs, many had contemplated searching for jobs in other fields. Their worry was that such a move would be difficult if they were to become the political face of oil.

For some, advocacy became a source of anxiety due to the possibility of performing poorly, and thus losing the respect of their colleagues. If they were confronted publicly by environmental activists, and lost a rhetorical battle, how might this affect their stature at their job? One respondent recounted attempts to steer clear of protests or public engagement, saying, "I think reputation is a big deal. ... I'm not willing to put my reputation on the line." Political involvement was often seen as risky, forcing supporters to weigh the consequences of their advocacy.

One of the ways CAPP mitigated these anxieties was by prompting supporters to voice very general messages about the oil industry rather than championing particular projects. Despite the high media salience of the Keystone XL, Trans Mountain, and Northern Gateway pipelines in recent years, only a single CEC profile mentioned any particular infrastructure project (see Table 2). All others generalized about the oil and gas sector, avoiding reference to potentially controversial pipeline proposals. This was, it seems, a tradeoff for CEC: the group lessened risks for its members, but simultaneously committed to non-confrontational messaging that many of those same members judged to be ineffectual.

CEC also made participation less worrisome for supporters by framing politics as a conversation rather than a fight. Terms such as "discussion," "dialogue," and "exchange" pepper Energy Citizens' messaging, while emphasis on debate, disagreement, and controversy is almost wholly absent. The campaign construes politics as a civil marketplace of ideas, allowing supporters to feel as though their commitment is to open discourse, rather than a particular policy goal. Echoing the entreaties of CEC's online toolkit, citizen profiles stress decorum and avoid confrontational rhetoric.

Discussion

The "grassroots" style of public relations used by CEC has resulted in a subsidized public whose backgrounds largely reflect those of CAPP's own staff: professional communicators, executives, and those with a close affiliation to oil and gas production. On its face, this finding is at odds with dominant explanations for why corporations mobilize public allies. Andrew Austin (2002), for instance, argues that fossil fuel corporations form "astroturf" groups in an effort at "concealing corporate activities beneath the appearance of a popular front" (p. 91). If oil companies are trying to hide the industry's self-interest, a campaign featuring the sector's employees is a strange way to do it. Furthermore, against assumptions that citizens are used to conceal the machinations of PR labor, CEC explicitly identifies many of its core backers as trained communications practitioners. The Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers' own campaign staff remains decidedly behind the scenes, yet the communicative expertise of profiled citizens is fully on display. In essence, the campaign introduces many profiled supporters as professional persuaders or people with industry ties, and then asks us to listen to their pitch.

In the context of CEC's larger campaign, however, this transparency does ideological work. It tacitly proposes that effective citizen political participation requires adopting the norms of public relations work. In the same way that CEC's online toolkits school members in professionalized modes of self-presentation, citizen profiles are used to hold up elite communicators as exemplars of citizen speech. In all cases, CEC construes the core practices of public relations not as a supplement to the public's

voice but as its ideal, a template of skills everyday people may use to guide their own political involvement.

When oil's subsidized public puts industry interests and communicative professionalism front and centre, the critical lexicon of "front groups" and "astroturf organizations" loses its cutting edge. The supposedly hidden business interests and PR work these terms allude to are no longer backstage: they are used as grist for promotional texts. So how is critique to proceed? What new approaches can scholars turn to in analyzing corporate/citizen advocacy? First, rather than viewing businesses as all-powerful ventriloquists capable of speaking through citizens, researchers must examine the tactics companies use to earn the consent of their allies. CEC's model is not without its limits. To lessen the reputational risks for participants, CEC profiles conspicuously avoid mention of contentious oil projects. In so doing, the industry's most visible citizen supporters are rendered mute—at least within the campaign—on the industry's most salient issues. The strategies CEC uses to entice citizens, in other words, place constraints on the sorts of rhetoric they deploy. Elaborating the limits of corporations' grassroots outreach campaigns is a fruitful line for future research.

Second, critical scholarship must attend to patterns in oil industry PR practice. This article analyzes CEC, but its campaign is hardly an anomaly. Similar efforts dot the landscape of energy politics. The Canadian Association of Oilwell Drilling Contractors (CAODC), for instance, runs Oil Respect, another citizen-centred advocacy effort. In the U.S., the American Petroleum Institute, the nation's largest trade association, runs its own "Energy Citizens" campaign. In all instances, citizen outreach is increasingly conceived by the oil sector as an indispensable political tool. While dismissing these corporate/citizen partnerships as, "front groups," may be politically potent in moments, researchers must commit to the more nuanced task of comparing how these campaigns coordinate, overlap, differ, contradict, and ultimately shape the emergence of new publics in North American petro-politics.

Notes

1. For a comprehensive overview of the industry's advertising campaigns see McCurdy & Viktor's (n.d.) *Mediatoil* project.
2. The term "tar sands" is used in this article because this has historically been the terminology shared by both the fossil fuel sector and its critics. "Oil sands," the more popular phrase within the contemporary industry, came to prominence mainly through oil companies' conscious rebranding.
3. Reactions to the royalty review were by no means uniform among fossil fuel businesses. Many companies with light natural gas (LNG) holdings found the revamped royalty rates following the review to be to their benefit.
4. Unless otherwise attributed, quoted communications are from interviews conducted with the author.
5. This strategy was replicated when CAPP formed the British Columbia Light and Natural Gas Developers Alliance (BC LNGDA), allowing a separate set of regional interests to coalesce around a different fuel.
6. Communications professional is defined broadly as those whose core task is liaising with publics outside their organization. This includes public affairs specialists, media spokespeople, activists, community outreach specialists, professional bloggers, and others who dedicate their time primarily to external communication.

Websites

American Petroleum Institute, <http://www.api.org/>

Canada's Energy Citizens, <http://www.energycitizens.ca/>

Canadian Federation of Independent Business, <http://www.cfib-fcei.ca/english/index.html>

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