

## Editorial

### **Communicating Power: Energy, Canada, and the Field(s) of Communication**

The communications systems that grew up alongside the fossil fuel cultures of the twentieth century helped spread the word about the wonders of a world awash in energy (at least, that is, in a global North made wealthy through its control over energy resources). In the twenty-first century, our systems and processes of communication are at the centre of a struggle over whether we continue with our energy fantasies or begin to tear them down. How we understand the significance and consequences of the production, distribution, and use of energy matters deeply; how we understand energy in relation to communication matters even more, since our capacity to understand energy—as both problem and possibility—depends entirely on how we communicate about the capacities it affords, the damages it can cause, and our potential to shape the energy futures that lie ahead.

This special issue of the *Canadian Journal of Communication* explores the communication of energy in Canada. Questions of energy dominate Canada's contemporary political, economic, and cultural landscape. Governments at all levels have, to varying degrees, recognized climate change as a political priority. Yet many also continue to champion carbon extraction and export as essential to Canadian economic growth and prosperity. Some in the oil and gas sector admit that regimes of energy regulation and governance need to be modified to address global warming (through, for instance, the imposition of carbon taxes), but many also insist upon the long-term viability of the fossil fuel industry, and our continuing dependence upon it in everyday life. In Canada, as in other countries rich in fossil fuels, there is a concerted struggle over energy, one that pits industry and government against First Nations, environmental groups, and local communities. Industry and government proposals to expand carbon infrastructure—even in the face of the decline of global energy prices, the extraordinary growth of renewables, and the scale, pace, and intensity of climate change—have generated a stiff resistance to “extractivism.” This resistance is more than simply a defensive struggle to protect local ecosystems, economies, communities and ways of life. Rather, what is now taking place is a struggle over alternative views of the public good in Canada, based in part around visions of how transformations in the production, distribution, governance, and use of energy can ground new forms of social, cultural, and political life.

Historically, critical engagement around questions of energy has been sparse in the humanities and social sciences, and the field of communication is no exception. In recent years, however, scholars from a wide range of disciplines have devoted in-

creasing attention to the social, cultural, and political dimensions of energy, and, in turn, have explored the often-invisible influence that historically specific energy formations exercise upon a variety of disparate phenomena, including habits, values, ethics, ideologies, and institutions. It is to this growing body of literature—often dubbed the “energy humanities”—the articles collected in this issue contribute. As the variety of perspectives collected here attest, communication and media studies are well situated to engage with the discipline of energy humanities, adding insight into the political economy of Canadian communication systems; the changing role of energy discourse in Canadian national identity and popular culture; the operations of news and journalism in relation to our engagement with energy development; the transformation of promotional and/or oppositional communications as a result of social media; and more. Collectively, these articles provide greater insight into the role played by the forms and forces of communication in shaping the cultural, social, and political imaginaries of energy in Canada.

No discussion of energy in Canada today can avoid addressing the gigantic—as in slightly larger than England—fossil fuel extraction site located in Northern Alberta. The Alberta oil sands occupy a prominent place in contemporary Canadian politics and economics, and their animation of strong emotional investments by both industry supporters and oppositional groups have made them a site of communicative battles. In an era of growing environmental consciousness, the oil sands have emerged as that rare space of resource extraction that routinely makes front-page news, whether as a result of its economic import and ecological impact, or the consequences of oil extraction and transport on First Nations and other communities—both in Alberta and, due to pipeline proposals, across Canada. The struggle over how those in and outside of Canada should understand the oil sands is marked in the very name given this fossil fuel: the moniker “oil sands” was developed and dispersed by industry as a way to offset the powerful descriptor “tar sands” circulated by environmental groups and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). In Canada, private companies undertake fuel extraction for the sake of profit; and yet, companies, government, NGOs, and individuals will frequently connect the expansion or elimination of extraction to national aims, ambitions, or goals. A full understanding of just what is at stake in contemporary Canadian politics in relation to fossil fuels and other practices of extraction demands that we grapple with these insistent and ongoing struggles over their public framing and representation.

Several contributions offer up analyses of distinct (if related) dimensions of this struggle over the representation of energy in relation to the public good. In “From Public Relations to Mob Rule: Media Framing of Social Licence in Canada,” **Shane Gunster** and **Robert Neubauer** undertake a careful and nuanced examination of the history of “social licence” as it has circulated in Canadian news media. They focus their analysis on four Canadian newspapers: the *National Post*, *The Globe and Mail*, the *Calgary Herald*, and the *Vancouver Sun*. The common view of “social licence to operate” is that it is the outcome of ongoing pressure on business and government by community stakeholders who have an opposition to specific projects or to an entire industry. In this narrative, social licence is framed as the way in which businesses slowly become

aware of the necessity of attending to their impact on communities and on society as a whole, and so ameliorate their practices and actions. Gunster and Neubauer show that in Canada the discourse of “social licence” has in fact *always* been a tool of industry—first, as a mechanism to highlight the (supposed) accommodations of industry to a range of public stakeholders; then as a way of involving governments as partners with industry in the promotion and celebration of extraction practices as good for the nation; and, finally, once the power of the idea began to wane, as a term assigned to what industry saw as the illegitimate, anti-democratic opposition of radical environmentalists to their practices. Beyond offering a powerful challenge to the ongoing use of this idea by the extractive industries, this exposé of the life and times of social licence in Canada serves as a damning indictment of how media commentators led the charge to denounce the idea when it started to threaten state and corporate legitimacy: at precisely the moment when social licence was emerging as an indictment of industry, it was used to critique the presumptions of those who would dare imagine that there was a problem with the energy *status quo* in Canada.

Social licence to operate has been a rhetorical tool used in news reporting and editorials to affirm the necessity and import of oil extraction in Canada. An equally significant tool has been the industry use of visual advertising to skew public opinion. In “From the Natural to the Manmade Environment: The Shifting Advertising Practices of Canada’s Oil Sands Industry,” **Patrick McCurdy** shows the shift that has taken place in industry advertising in the oil sands over a relatively short period of time. Originally, industry produced advertising that emphasized its practices of “preserving, reclaiming, and restoring the natural environment.” More recently, as exemplified by Cenovus Energy’s “More than fuel” and Enbridge’s “Life takes energy” campaigns, oil companies have attempted to use advertising to “sell oil sands without oil sands,” setting aside appeals to nature in favour of a focus on the role played by oil in shaping consumer culture and, indeed, in modern life writ large. The first set of ads is easy for consumers to see for what they are: gestures designed to set minds at ease about the environmental consequences of oil sands extraction through appeals to nature. The second set of ads never show extraction or name the natural environment, but gain the complicity of their viewers by drawing attention to the ways their everyday lives require the use of fossil fuels. As with the concept of social licence to operate, these ads attempt to reframe the terrain of challenges and disputes over extraction in order to insist on the absolute necessity of the life of the oil industry in Canada.

Austerity, neoliberal governance, and a growing deficit of investment in public services has provided additional opportunities to position the oil industry as essential to the well-being and ability to flourish of Canadians, especially those living in resource-dependent communities hit hard by the retreat of the welfare state. Oil industry investments in community services, from the essential—hospitals, fire, and ambulance services, schools—to the recreational—hockey arenas and baseball diamonds—have seen local communities come to rely upon corporate investment for certain basic infrastructural needs. In “Oil’s Rural Reach: Social Licence in Saskatchewan’s Oil-Producing Communities,” **Emily Eaton** and **Simon Enoch** find that these investments serve ideological—not simply infrastructural—ends, as the dislocation of government

by private capital, and the insinuation of energy producers into government services, is reproduced at the cultural level of community discourse. Eaton and Enoch show that the de facto privatization of government responsibilities has encouraged robust identification with local energy firms in three Saskatchewan oil-producing municipalities, in which “social licence to operate” does not adequately describe the prevailing ideological formation. Through documentary research and interviews with 25 stakeholders, they find that community members perceive a “mutuality of interests” with producers, in which the philanthropic model of corporate social responsibility and industry-supported discourse supports industry hegemony by fabricating the dominant frame through which communities understand oil extraction.

Such perceptions of common interest have provided an ideal opportunity for industry to cultivate and politicize its own network of supporters, which can be mobilized to signify popular, democratic enthusiasm for extractivism. Among the most prominent examples of this “grassroots turn” is Canada’s Energy Citizens (CEC), an initiative spearheaded by the Canadian Association for Petroleum Producers (CAPP). Rather than simply dismiss such efforts as “astro-turfing,” **Tim Wood** argues that we need to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the emerging production of “subsidized publics,” in which corporate resources and expertise are applied to solicit, coordinate, and amplify the voices of those who support the fossil fuel industry. In “Energy’s Citizens: The Making of a Canadian Petro-Public,” he draws upon CEC campaign materials as well as interviews with key CAPP officials, CEC organizers, and profiled “energy citizens” to discuss the program’s rationale, design, and recruitment practices. His detailed analysis of the campaign illustrates that rather than representing a broad cross-section of the Canadian public, the individuals in the campaign tend to resemble CAPP’s own employees in terms of their background as professional communicators and executives, and their close affiliation with oil and gas production. However, rather than disguise these affinities, the CEC campaign celebrates them as exemplary of engaged citizens speaking out on issues that matter to them. Such transparency, Wood argues, requires us to rethink conventional critiques of public relations (which tend to rely upon exposing the secret machinations of corporate power) in favour of a critical analysis of how the profusion of openly subsidized publics is transforming the conditions of democratic, public discourse.

The corporate sponsorship of innovative practices of supporter engagement does not, of course, mark the end of the more conventional approaches that industry has long relied upon to influence the regulation and governance of the energy sector. **Gwendolyn Blue, Shannon Daub, Zoë Yunker, and Lise Rajewicz** position corporate policy discourse as exemplary of ecological modernization, which insists that environmental protection is best pursued through the efficacy of existing markets, improving industry efficiency, and maintaining economic growth. “In the Corporate Interest: Fossil Fuel Industry Input into Alberta and British Columbia’s Climate Leadership Plans” analyzes how industry submissions to recent consultations on climate policy by Alberta and British Columbia converge in four key areas to demarcate the terrain of reasonable political action (i.e., acceptable to business) to address climate change: “leadership” (urging provincial governments to position climate policies as a means

of securing access to export markets); “balance” (ensuring that climate policy does not compromise the pursuit of economic growth); “competitiveness” (securing the ability of regional industries and corporations to compete in global markets); and “regulate demand” (positioning the reduction of demand, rather than the constraint of supply, as the governing principle of climate policy). Based on a review of the evolution of environmental policy in these two jurisdictions, Blue and her co-authors posit that these discursive strategies have been remarkably successful in aligning public policy with corporate priorities: governments claim the mantle of climate leadership, while industry pursues increased carbon extraction and export. Attention to the intersection of corporate priorities and policy discourse has become all the more important given recent revelations about CAPP’s extraordinary influence on the drafting of BC climate policy under the leadership of former BC Premier Christy Clark.

Such interventions into the place of oil in Canadian political and cultural imaginaries have a long history. In “Fuelling the Nation: Imaginaries of Western Oil in Canadian Nontheatrical Film,” **Rachel Webb Jekanowski** explores post-World War II petrofilms produced by Imperial Oil and by the National Film Board (NFB). The films on which she concentrates—*The Story of Oil* (1946), *A Mile Below the Wheat* (1949), and *Underground East* (1953)—are examples of the huge number of non-theatrical oil industry films created to sell their viewers on the importance of oil for Canadian nation-building and prosperity. In a manner not dissimilar to Enbridge’s “Life takes energy” ad campaign, these short films insist on the necessity of oil development to modern life, and insist, too, on the close connection between extraction and progress: if Canada is going to be a modern nation, the films argue, it will need to accept this modern industry. Jekanowski outlines the visual and narrative choices made in these films in their attempts to explain and legitimize extraction to their audiences. One of the key ways in which they did so was to make analogies between oil and those existing resource industries that had already positioned themselves at the heart of Canadian self-identity: cattle ranching, wheat agriculture, and other aspects of the country’s staples industry. These films are also careful to highlight that oil will add to these other staples rather than displace them, creating (for instance) mutually prosperous relations between oilmen (working below ground) and wheat farmers (working above). In the immediate years after the oil strike at Leduc, Alberta, it appears that Canada’s oil industry was already facing the challenge of shaping and controlling how publics understood fossil fuels; this shaping of public perception has remained important to the Canadian extractive industries throughout their existence.

Attention to this long history of legitimation also informs **Patricia Audette-Longo’s** “‘Fighting the Same Old Battle’: Obscured Oil Sands Entanglements in Press Coverage of Indigenous Resistance in the Winter of 1983.” As a case study of a 1983 blockade of logging trucks initiated by members of Alberta’s Fort McKay First Nations and Métis community, the article provides important insights into how media institutions often fail to account for the complex relationships linking Indigenous peoples with Canada’s energy industry. Audette-Longo draws on the concept of “entanglement” to explore connections between the blockade and local concerns about the environmental and social externalities of nearby tar sands development. A discourse

analysis of two regional newspapers—*Fort McMurray Today* and the *Edmonton Journal*—is then used to demonstrate how such concerns were systematically obscured by coverage and commentary framing Indigenous political voices as irrational or indecorous. The media framing thereby reinforced dominant settler-colonial narratives by positioning continued extractivist development and colonial encroachment as rational, pragmatic, and inevitable, and the motives and actions of the Fort McKay community as inscrutable, unreasonable, and corrosive to the rule of law. The article concludes with important considerations for contemporary journalistic practices, advocating for better engagement with the complex antagonisms and interdependencies linking energy development, environmental politics, and Indigenous resistance. This is a timely intervention, as industry supporters leverage ongoing political support for oil sands development by Fort Mackay's current political leadership (some of whom Audette-Longo identifies as key actors in the 1983 blockade) to undermine the symbolic authority of contemporary Indigenous opposition to new energy projects in other areas of the country.

Resistance and opposition to extractivism, and especially to pipelines, has become a driving force in the discourse and politics of energy in Canada. Social media platforms have emerged as prominent venues for not only the sharing of information and opinions, but also as catalysts for new forms of collective identity and agency that expand the horizons and practices of political engagement. In "Framing the Pipeline Problem: Civic Claimsmakers and Social Media," **Maria Bakardjieva, Mylynn Felt, and Rhon Teruelle** examine how Facebook enabled those opposed to the proposed expansion of Kinder Morgan's Trans Mountain pipeline to come together through the generation of an interdependent set of collective action frames. While most research on such frames distinguishes between their diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational components, Bakardjieva and her co-authors make the case for a more fine-grained framework that distinguishes between broad solutions (prognostic) and movement strategies and tactics that they define as "activational" framing. For the anti-pipeline groups they examine, this is where the real action lies, as participants engage in the collective conceptual, affective, and discursive labour of generating and refining scripts of activism and resistance. Drawing upon a dramaturgical framework, they analyze posts and comments as a performative space in which primary and secondary characters engage with each other, as well with as an active audience. The authors foreground the tension, oscillation, and resonance that ultimately binds together expressions of individual and collective agency. The key contribution of social media, they argue, involves stitching together meanings and activities across time and space, such that individual acts of resistance only assume significance in the shared context of collective action and identity.

In "Power From the North: The Energized Trajectory of Indigenous Sovereignty Movements," **Shirley Roburn** reminds us that "Blockadia" is not only about challenging destructive projects but also that struggle from below holds the potential to transform deliberative processes around energy governance toward more democratic means and ends. Roburn explores the materialization of Indigenous legal orders in the proceedings of several energy projects. Through detailed analyses of the Mackenzie Valley

Pipeline Inquiry (MVPI) and the Great Whale hydroelectric project, Roburn shows that opposition from Indigenous groups augmented hearings concerning proposed resource developments, transforming deliberative spaces for the approval of energy projects by the inclusion of alternative cosmologies, narratives, and social practices. In doing so, Indigenous groups asserted self-determination within formal structures of colonial governments. Opposition to the official structure of the MVPI proceedings, to borrow one example, inscribed Indigenous traditions into its deliberations by altering the framework of the hearings and including additional dialogue between different communities and nations. In addition to providing compelling historical narratives of political intervention, Roburn's article invites us to question whether the ultimate consequences of approval processes are found in decisions of government-sponsored actors. The revitalization of this radical history is especially important given recent efforts to limit stakeholder participation in regulatory hearings and consolidate and constrain project reviews in industry-oriented venues such as the National Energy Board.

From one perspective, the encounter of communication studies with energy in Canada is hardly new. Though it is rarely remarked upon, two of the most important theorists in the field suggested innovative theories of fuel in their work on transportation. Harold Innis' (1971, 1995, 2007) transportation-oriented approach to communication implies the centrality of energy and fuel to Canadian development. Where Innis found unity in infrastructural projects of nation and empire, Karl Marx's (1991, 1992, 1998) work on transportation uncovered the disjunctures in social class at the heart of capitalist and mercantile transportation, producing more antagonistic ideas of transportation and social change. Yet the stakes surrounding energy in Canada today are distinct extensions from the concerns of Innis and Marx, even if today's extractivism remains within the political and economic logics that each explored. As these articles map out, energy today is a site of struggle, conflict, and the pursuit of power in Canada; because Canadian identity and the country's legitimacy as a state have been shaped by industry and government in relation to practices of resource extraction, challenges to existing energy regimes are seen by elites as threats—threats to which they respond, via various modes of communication, with deliberative force. We hope this special issue initiates a more intense interrogation of communication and energy in Canada, and hope that readers will find ideas and inspiration in the rich and varied articles collected here.

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