

Closing the Gap with Balanced Content Strategies on Environmental Topics

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Introduction

In May of 2020, the provincial government in Alberta announced it would be rescinding the 1976 Coal Policy, which had previously protected various areas of the province from industrial explorations. This policy originally introduced tiered protections for land in the province, which added area-restrictions before applications were reviewed by the Alberta Energy Regulator. With the policy rescindment, industrial exploration projects would go directly to the regulator to be approved or denied in areas that did not have the top protections available. This prompted a variety of news media outlets to investigate, interpret, and communicate what the consequences of this decision would be. An article by journalist, Bob Weber, on this environmental policy change was published and subsequently circulated by The Globe and Mail and The National Post. These newspapers have traditionally held opposing views on these types of environmental policies. With decades of politicization regarding environmental science (Lousley, C., 1999), it has been increasingly common for these news outlets to publish articles that oppose each other in their messages. For Bob Weber's article to be published on both of these outlets, is an especially unusual situation that may reveal ways that *content* can help bridge a polarizing gap.

Although there is a growing pressure for governments to take a more sustainable approach to environmental policies (Youdelis, M., 2020), there is still skepticism that governments are in agreement with the public on how to achieve sustainability goals. By summarizing environmental policies for the public, journalists are tasked with investigating the

differences between government and public sentiment on these serious issues. News outlets then publish and promote these articles, which is information used by the public to understand the alignment between government and public views. To reach the widest possible audience, journalists benefit from developing content that is attractive to all news outlets, regardless of preferred messages. More frequent circulation of this content will make it easier to bridge the gap between groups that have opposing views on these issues.

The province of Alberta has a long history of polarizing views on the relationship between coal mining and the environment. With a dramatic growth in coal mining in the province during the second half of the twentieth century, it has traditionally been an important industry for the provincial economy (Piper, L., & Green, H., 2017). Despite a government push to phase out coal to reach industrial emission targets, there is a noteworthy lobbying force to slow and or prevent this phase out (Vriens, L., 2018). The ensuing media coverage often involves dramatization by supporters and opponents of this type of government response, with both groups competing for the attention of the public (Bae, J. M. E., 2012). With numerous groups arguing over what the future of the coal industry should look like, it has been increasingly challenging for the public to come to an agreement on what direction the government should take.

This research project examines the major ideological stances on coal mining in Alberta, and how content can be structured to promote discourse across groups with opposing beliefs. Through this examination, it becomes possible to understand *how* and *why* articles may be more

frequently promoted by opposing news outlets. Having this understanding makes it easier to learn how environmental information may be more consistently published across the Canadian news media landscape. This research project is concerned with the following research question, **‘What ideological and environmental characteristics exist in the content of Bob Weber’s article on the 2020 UCP decision to rescind the 1976 Coal Policy?’** The goal of this research project is to deeply analyze the content within this selected article, and identify content strategies that create a more balanced presentation of different views..

Literature Review

Climate Change Discourse in a Canadian Context

With an incredibly wide variety of regions and unique climates across the country, Canada is affected by climate change differently depending on the area being analyzed. However, despite the effects of climate change differing across the country, the prevalence of online news media, social media, and other digital platforms has made it easier than ever to hear about these effects. This has allowed numerous Canadian agencies and actors to reach an entire country with their messages and beliefs surrounding this environmental phenomenon, as can be seen in the online media circulated by groups like the Friends of Science (Greenberg, J., Knight, G., 2011). In addition to the accessibility of online tools to communicate messages across vast geographic areas, the number of articles focusing on the topic of climate change in Canada has steadily increased over time (Russill, C., & Nyssa, Z., 2009). With the effects of climate change

becoming more evident across the country, so has the rate at which prominent and influential individuals have spoken out regarding the phenomenon (Boykoff, M. T., & Goodman, M. K., 2009). An increased access to this circulation of climate change-related media, has also influenced the value it has to many Canadians — with a significant proportion of Canadians turning to news media for information on the phenomenon (Boulianne, S., & Belland, S., 2019). While many Canadians may turn to news media for information, so do many bureaucrats and policy makers, who carefully monitor the reception of certain ideas surrounding climate change from the public (Boykoff, M. T., & Roberts, J. T., 2007). Cumulatively, news media plays a significant role as a key source of technical and summative information for both the public and policy makers in Canada (Anne DiFrancesco, D., & Young, N., 2011). Some have argued that there has been a deliberate effort by some groups to position society and the environment as two separate entities (Smith, H. A., 2016). These views contrast with the notion that society and the environment are not separate, which is a more holistic perspective on climate change. Much of the discourse circulated that may be contributing to separation, at least as seen in Alberta, is likely a product of corporations and agencies promoting limited action needed in the form of innovation to reach ‘environmentally sustainable practices’ (Adkin, L. E., 2019). That, corporations deeply connected to the environment as part of resource collection, have lobbied to frame their efforts as being more than satisfactory as per the government’s requirements. This type of language involves promoting the notion that there are organizations responsible for mediating and handling climate change, that actionable efforts are to be done *in response to*

rather than *within the* environment. Within the context of Alberta, the province also has a deep educational history of promoting individualism and career-orientated thinking in schools (Chambers, J. M., 2011). More specifically, many Albertans have traditionally been taught to focus on being a ‘good citizen’ through creating growth in the economy, rather than creating improvements in environmental sustainability (2011).

Comparing The Globe and Mail & The National Post

To better understand the types of views and beliefs circulated by The Globe and Mail & The National Post it is important to examine what type of content they promote. There is thematic evidence that this type of examination does reveal certain content preferences, as seen with the portrayal of seniors by The Globe and Mail (Rozanova, J., Northcott, H. C., & McDaniel, S. A., 2006). Additionally, these news outlets have openly admitted that competition between outlets and news aggregation sites affects what content they promote (Vujnovic, M., Singer, J. B., Paulussen, S., Heinonen, 2010). These two particular news outlets have a history of competing with each other, choosing to feature articles that focus on different topics and issues (Trimble, L., & Sampert, S., 2004). This difference in content being circulated can be attributed to different editorial standards and values by The Globe and Mail & The National Post (2004). Over time, these differences have made it easier to identify that The Globe and Mail & The National Post are aligned with liberal-centrist and conservative ideologies respectively (Stoddart, M. C., Haluza-DeLay, R., & Tindall, D. B., 2016). On environmental news coverage, both news outlets have traditionally focused their content on the topic of government responsibility, with

significantly less content focused on other topics (2016). The content differences on governmental responsibility are noteworthy, as this appears to be a key topic that both outlets believe is especially important to cover. Both outlets have typically focused on different information within this topic, with The Globe and Mail & The National Post highlighting the role of the government and economic costs (Stoddart, M. C., & Tindall, D. B., 2015). When it comes to resolving environmental issues, both outlets have traditionally differed in what content they put in front of readers (2015). This may be a result of the sources that The Globe and Mail & The National Post uses for these articles. A unique difference between these outlets is that The Globe and Mail has put a greater emphasis on using environmental representative sources, while The National Post has typically relied more on business & industry representative sources in comparison (Garrison, L., 2011). The difference between sources, and subsequently the content, has been observed to influence what types of actionable responses are promoted in regards to climate change (Murphy, R., 2015). What may drive these outlets to choose certain sources, is a motivation to retain their audiences by promoting content *the audience wants to hear* (2015). This motivation highlights an important distinction between both outlets, that they are interested in growing and retaining different audiences. The content promoted by The Globe and Mail & The National Post, creates a situation where these news audiences discuss different topics (Stoddart, M. C., Tindall, D. B., Smith, J., & Haluza-Delay, R., 2017). Readers of The Globe and Mail can be expected to be interested in talking about different parts of an environmental issue than readers of The National Post (2017). These content differences between both outlets

indicates clear ideological preferences, which has added to the polarization of environmental discussions in Canada.

Polarization through Simplification

A recurring trend across academic literature in this area involves studying how news outlets simplify the anthropogenic relationships between society and the environment. This simplification is important to examine, because it shows how content can be presented to support certain beliefs. A notable theme across academic literature on media portrayal of this science, is that it is often connected to other societal issues, like food and energy production (Ahchong, K., & Dodds, R., 2012). When the effects of climate change are presented in relation to other societal issues, it makes it easier for individuals to understand the consequences. A specific example of how these connections are presented, is the increasing occurrence of ‘adaption’ within various industries in regards to climate change (Ford, J. D., & King, D., 2015). Much of the information published by news media on environmental science is typically on *what can be* or *what is being* done across other societal issues in regards to climate change (2015). There is also a documented history of environmental science being increasingly oversimplified in news media (Boykoff, M. T., & Yulsman, T., 2013). With this being attributed to a decline in resources available to journalists, it has become more difficult to conduct a more detailed investigation of environmental science (2013). Environmental science covered by news media is increasingly used in context of mainstream ideas and beliefs surrounding topics like climate

change (Luedecke, G., & T. Boykoff, M., 2016). Rather than presenting the science by itself, news media often associates it as information that either challenges or supports popularly held beliefs surrounding topics like anthropogenic connections between humans and the environment (2016). This relationship between science and beliefs has contributed to the politicization of environmental science over time (Boykoff, M. T., & Rajan, S. R., 2007). The increasing use of science as a support or counter to commonly held beliefs on topics like climate change, has changed how the public sees the value in the conclusions drawn from environmental science (2007).

This intersection of political stances and environmental science has created expectations from the public that science is to be used to explain how individuals should perceive specific stances on how to respond to environmental change. Another notable consideration is the promotion of climate change skeptics by some news outlets, who have circulated scientific information that has created an inflated sense of disagreement among environmental scientists (Liu, X., Vedlitz, A., & Alston, L., 2008). There are some news outlets that have promoted exaggerated ideas of disagreement among the scientific community (2008). This presentation of scientific information poses a serious challenge to the public, as it creates uncertainty regarding the value and consensus of the information they need to understand complex environmental topics. Similarly, the economic stakes of environmental policies have played a role in the language and framing of anthropogenic environmental science by the news media (Boykoff, M. T., 2007). This relationship between science and how industries are affected, has created a

‘strategic battlefield’ of language surrounding the science in order to promote certain beliefs over others (2007). With so many industries directly affected by environmental policies, which are based on some level of environmental science, how that information is translated through news media is highly deliberate in most scenarios.

Similar Studies

The following studies are examples of research approaches pertaining to the topic of studying themes amongst literature involving climate change discourse.

In 2009, A. Nichols, V. Maynard, B. Goodman and J. Richardson conducted a thematic analysis of literature regarding the effects of climate change on health care services (Nichols, A., Maynard, V., Goodman, 2009). They used systematic searches to map academic articles regarding their topic, categorizing the articles before studying them individually. Upon identifying themes present across the articles that met their research criteria, they discovered a lack of discourse pertaining to actionable strategizing for health care policy makers. Their research project is a good reference for considering thematic analysis approaches, and is a useful example of climate change-specific coding.

In 2016, Farrell, J., conducted a thematic analysis of various communications put out over time by differently-funded agencies publishing literature on the responsibilities of corporations in regards to climate change (Farrell, J., (2016). Using an incredible amount of publicly accessible literature, Farrell employed the use of computer assisted coding to help identify ‘topics’ throughout different periods of time, which could be more easily coded

manually into themes. Among Farrell's observations noted in his discussion, was the apparent causation of corporately funded agencies perpetuating ideological polarization regarding climate change. On the subject of ideological polarization, Farrell's research provides a useful reference for considering the effects of publicly promoted messages on climate change.

A 2012 study conducted by Ojala, M., attempted to study the coping strategies of Swedish youth regarding the effects of climate change, through a thematic analysis of a provided questionnaire created by Ojala (Ojala, M., 2012). Cross-examining results with two older groups, Ojala circulated a questionnaire that was intended to understand how the younger group used coping strategies and trust in response to climate change. Within the findings, was a correlation between younger individuals trusting researchers and technological advances as a coping strategy for the effects of climate change, significantly more so than the older groups. Ojala's research is a useful reference for noting the importance of demographic, when considering and documenting the portrayal of climate change-related subject matter.

In 2012, Dotson, D., Jacobson, S., Kaid, L., & Carlton, J., conducted a content analysis research project on the differences between conservative and liberal newspapers in Chile regarding climate change (Dotson, D., Jacobson, S., Kaid, L., 2012). Using stratified purposive sampling, the researchers collected articles publicly available in each newspaper's respective online archive, then using a content analysis approach to understand the trends that exist in both groups. Focusing on quantitative highlights, they noted that the more liberal newspapers published significantly more, longer, and more detailed articles on climate change than the

conservative grouping. This research project is a very relevant reference for understanding how one may approach analyzing news coverage of climate change, with ideological groupings as a key variable.

A 2016 study done by Stoddart, M., Haluza-DeLay, R., & Tindall, D., analyzed the differences in Canadian news coverage of climate change, by examining relevant articles published by the Globe and Mail and the National Post (Stoddart, M., Haluza-DeLay, R., & Tindall, D., 2016). Using a mixed method approach, the researchers looked to answer several quantitative and qualitative questions regarding climate change coverage from 1997 to 2010. They observed that international factors played a significant role in creating spikes of climate change-related articles, as well as noting recurring thematic trends of policy-making and mitigation. This research project is a great reference for noting how Canadian news articles on climate change may be coded to develop themes.

Among the insights gained from examining these similar studies, is the value of thematic analysis with understanding ideological views surrounding climate change. There are recurring examples of how mapping content among sources can reveal ideological preferences to certain ideas and beliefs. Examining these studies reinforces the value in analyzing content to study ideological preferences.

Identifying Key Group Perspectives on Climate Change

The polarization of climate change in Canada can be represented by two distinct groups that have a fundamental difference in beliefs on whether society and the environment are a single

entity or separate entities. For those who argue that society and the environment are a single entity, the priority is on the public holding the government accountable for reaching environmental sustainability goals. This deep anthropogenic connection is supported by the content promoted by The Globe and Mail, and represents a non-traditional view in areas like Alberta. Conversely, content promoted by The National Post supports beliefs shared in the society-environment separation group. Those in this group have a greater interest in economic prosperity, believing that is where government attention should be directed. The following table represents a summarization of the characteristics of these two groups (Table 1).

Table 1
What Group Perspectives The Globe and Mail & The National Post Represent

Group Perspective	Characteristic Examples
Society and the environment are one entity (The Globe and Mail)	<p>Is supported by liberal-centrist beliefs (Stoddart, M. C., Haluza-DeLay, R., & Tindall, D. B., 2016).</p> <p>Human activity has direct and immediate environmental consequences (Garrison, L., 2011).</p> <p>Supports non-traditional views of being a good citizen through promoting environmental sustainability (Chambers, J. M., 2011).</p> <p>Government responsibility in reaching sustainable goals is a top focus (Stoddart, M. C., & Tindall, D. B., 2015).</p> <p>The public should be discussing environmental impacts of industry (Stoddart, M. C., Tindall, D. B., Smith, J., & Haluza-Delay, R., 2017).</p>
Society and the environment are separate entities (The National Post)	Is supported by conservative beliefs (Stoddart, M. C., Haluza-DeLay, R., & Tindall, D. B., 2016).

Human activity indirectly affects the environment (Smith, H. A., 2016).

Economic goals are put above environmental sustainable goals (Adkin, L. E., 2019).

The government should be focused on creating economic prosperity as a top focus (Stoddart, M. C., & Tindall, D. B., 2015).

The public should be discussing the economic impacts of environmental policies (Stoddart, M. C., Tindall, D. B., Smith, J., & Haluza-Delay, R., 2017).

Research Methodology & Design

Research Methodology

With the following research question, ‘What ideological and environmental characteristics exist in the content of Bob Weber’s article on the 2020 UCP decision to rescind the 1976 Coal Policy?’, a qualitative approach will be taken to study this topic. Due to the framing of this question, it fits within the scope of the qualitative approach of thematic analysis; this research focuses on identifying themes & patterns across text. Using a thematic analysis approach, the goal involves conducting a content-analysis of this article to help identify manually coded themes. These themes are intended to help explain why two prominent news outlets with opposing environmental views would promote the same article. Bob Weber’s article, published May 22, 2020 (one week after the decision was made public), was notably published on both The Globe and Mail and The National Post’s online outlets. This article also appeared to be neither in

favour or against the decision taken by the UCP government. This scenario is particularly unique, as these outlets have traditionally promoted content that supports opposing beliefs on anthropogenic climate change. Because this research question involves searching in text, thematic analysis is appropriate. Identifying themes and patterns allows for detailed analysis. This allows for a more concrete understanding of the themes that exist within the text sampling. The research goals are to understand what ideological and environmental content characteristics exist in the selected article, as a way of understanding how journalists can structure the content of their articles to be promoted across ideologically opposed news outlets.

The focus on thematic data lends this research to be done qualitatively, as opposed to taking a more-quantitative approach.

Due to the complexities and politicization of climate change discourse, identifying themes in news articles is an important area of understanding public perception of the phenomenon. Digital sources of information, such as news articles available online, are commonly used by the public to understand scientific concepts (Takahashi, B., 2016). **How that information is presented, affects the way the public perceives and understands those concepts. For this reason, it is valuable to identify themes that present relationships between certain ideas and beliefs to the public regarding environmental policy decisions.**

Another important area within this topic, is the application of critical theory to identify possible power structures that can be revealed by critically examining communication. This is particularly relevant when examining topics or areas pertaining to political systems, such as capitalism, which influences the direction of policy making (Kincheloe, J., 2011). Within the subject of environmental and economic policy making, a critical theory perspective helps connect identified characteristics in text to underlying power structures in society.

Finally, another key area within the framing of this research question is the politicization of this policy decision. This makes it easier to identify more detailed themes that exist within certain ideological perspectives, which can be further discussed within the context of the province of Alberta's media landscape & climate change.

Research Design

This research project uses content-analysis to determine what characteristics exist within a sampled article that was published on two news outlets that promote opposing environmental beliefs. The selection of an article published on two news outlets that typically differ on media coverage allows for a unique opportunity to explore themes that may highlight the similarities between different media agendas. A manually coding approach was used, involving coding sections of text, categorizing them, and then compiling them into appropriate themes. This approach allowed for a well-organized presentation of identifiable themes that exist, providing useful data on how this policy decision has been portrayed across news outlets with opposing ideological beliefs.

The thematic analysis components of this design involves manually assigned codes to an analyzed text, reviewing any patterns discovered, then finally listing definitive themes that exist within the selected article. An important consideration was organizing the coded texts throughout the analysis, so it could be more easily referred back to during the discussion component of this research project.

The source sampling focused on two national Canadian news outlets: The Globe and Mail, and The National Post. With large newsreader audiences, these outlets have the ability to reach a significant number of Canadians relative to smaller news outlets. The accessibility of the article makes it more relevant as a body of text that may have influenced the understanding Canadians had regarding the Government's policy decision. Additionally, the online presence of both outlets increases the likelihood that the article was easy to circulate and share across social media platforms outside of the outlet websites.

Findings & Discussion

Findings

This article manages to balance the two group perspectives towards governmental policy on coal mining & export. It reflects a balanced approach to this otherwise polarized approach by news outlets. The following table provides a detailed view of how the content has been structured by the author to present this balanced approach.

Table 2***Detailed Content Breakdown Illustrating a Balanced Approach***

Theme	Codes	Article Contents
Policy changes were needed to grow the coal industry	Policy changes	The Alberta government is changing its coal policies in a move it says is intended to make it easier to develop open-pit mines in one of the province's most sensitive areas.
	Less restrictions for industrial exploration	
	Promoting coal industry growth	"Government is placing a strong focus on creating the necessary conditions for the growth of export coal production," says a news release dated May 15.
Previous policy had been in place for a significant period of time	Removing a long-lasting policy	The changes, to come into effect June 1, abolish graduated protections that have been in place since 1976 for land in Alberta's southwestern foothills.
	A variety of environmental areas affected	The vast area of mountains, streams and meadows is home to threatened species such as grizzly bears and contains the headwaters for much of the fresh water in the southern prairies.
	Existing industrial activity and exploration	
	Non-energy production	It has also been logged and mined for decades. The region produces coal for steel-making, not power generation.
Top protected areas are still unaffected	Most sensitive areas are still protected	Under the old rules, top protection was applied to the most sensitive land where no development was allowed. That classification remains.
	Less sensitive areas are open to industrial exploration	Three lower levels allowed progressively more activity in proportion to the environmental value of the land. Those regulations were applied in advance of any assessment by the Alberta Energy Regulator.
The policy rescindment is a significant change for the the environment and coal industry	Previous policy had a positive economic and environmental outcome	Nissa Petterson of the Alberta Wilderness Association said it was an attempt to handle overall land management on a busy landscape.
	Policy changes are significant	"It operated at a higher level than a project-by-project basis," she said. "It was a high-tier, overarching policy." Now, all coal mine applications are to go straight to the regulator for a case-by-case assessment.
Changes were needed to an otherwise inefficient coal application process	Policy changes are not significant	The regulator will apply the same standards as before, said Alberta Energy spokesman Kavi Bal.
	Focus is on industrial proposals being reviewed	"None of the rules have changed," he said Thursday. The intent was to bring coal assessments in line with those the

	Previous policy had little impact	regulator uses for oil and gas proposals, Mr. Bal said. “(The previous policy) didn’t line up with anything else we do.” Those assessments have often been criticized as leading to piecemeal decision-making. It is also extremely rare for the regulator to turn a proposal down.
Key variable in this change involves a queue of coal applications in sensitive areas	Context of existing coal applications	Kevin Van Tighem, spokesman for area landowners, points out the regulator is currently considering a number of coal applications.
	Suspicious timing by the Government	“The timing couldn’t be more obvious,” he said. “Right when we have a series of major strip-mine proposals waiting for approval, suddenly this policy complication is quietly moved out of the way.”
	Environmental areas are already under a lot of pressure	Mr. Van Tighem said the Oldman River, which springs from the area, is a crucial water source for the southern plains as far east as Saskatoon. He points out there’s already a moratorium on new water licences in southern Alberta because of demands on the Oldman.
	Coal exploration numerous negative consequences on the environment	“All that water comes from a headwaters landscape. It all depends on having a landscape that’s porous and vegetated. And we’re proposing to strip-mine it.”
Government is out of touch with the consequences and public sentiment	Examples exist of major environmental issues occurring	Mr. Van Tighem noted that coal mining can create serious environmental problems. In British Columbia, Teck Resources’ Elk Valley mines have produced contamination so severe it’s raising concerns downstream in the United States.
	Government appears to act without public consultation	Mr. Van Tighem and Ms. Petterson point out the changes were made without any public consultation.
Previous policy did little to help economic growth or prevent environmental issues	Previous policy had little to no value	Mr. Bal said the regulator already considers land-use planning and called the old categories “an empty shell.” He said new rules will provide more clarity to industry.
	Changes will improve industrial exploration	

Content Structuring

There are several important structural elements to the content that create a balanced representation of the different perspectives on this policy change. The content is presented by

references to both government and non-government sources. There is added contextual information to explain the stances taken by the different sources. And, there are clearly identifiable interests by the different sources on what they believe is important to discuss. This presentation of the content makes it possible for readers to understand the gaps that exist between the government and non-government sources.

The inclusion of both government and non-government sources is done by dividing the article into two halves. Government perspective is introduced and examined in the first half, with non-government sources being featured in the second half. This clear division of the contents makes it possible for readers to examine the similarities and differences between government and non-government perspectives.

Throughout the content, are numerous author-provided messages that provide context on the 1976 Coal Policy. This has been added by the author to help explain the context behind the stances taken by the different sources in the article. Adding this information makes it possible for readers to understand the rationalization behind the different views examined.

All of the sources featured in the article have their interests clearly visible, with there being a distinguishable gap between what the various sources are interested in. Government source content is fixated on economic considerations, while non-government source content is fixated on environmental considerations. Clearly visible interests make it possible for readers to understand why there are conflicting views on this change, with different perspectives arguing over what should be discussed.

This overall presentation of the content creates a balanced representation of the conflict that exists between the government and non-government groups. There are no clearly favoured or highlighted perspectives, and each group is given approximately equal representation throughout the article. The structure used for this content encourages readers to consider different perspectives, rather than to identify which group has a stronger argument on whether the change is positive or negative.

Notable Messages

Throughout the contents of the article, are notable messages that help support a more-balanced presentation of the perspectives on this policy change. Within the government sources featured, are clear indicators that the government is focused on economic sustainability and growth. Non-government sources have a clear preference to focus on highlighting environmental consequences that may occur from this policy rescindment. The author simplifies this disconnect by identifying the differences between what topics both groups are interested in introducing to public discourse.

There are several key government messages that note a fixation on economic growth & sustainability. This is immediately presented in introductory content, summarizing what the government is striving to accomplish:

“Government is placing a strong focus on creating the necessary conditions for the growth of export coal production,”...

This quote highlights *why* this change is occurring, that the government believes it is responsible for introducing policy changes that create ‘the necessary conditions’ for economic growth.

Despite the positive framing of the actions being taken, much of the accompanying messages by the government source appears to be focused on downplaying the significance of the change:

“The regulator will apply the same standards as before, said Alberta Energy spokesman Kavi Bal. ‘None of the rules have changed,’ he said Thursday. The intent was to bring coal assessments in line with those the regulator uses for oil and gas proposals, Mr. Bal said.”

The above example notably identifies ‘standards’ and ‘rules’ involved with coal applications, which are unaffected by this rescindment. Interestingly, the government source featured in the article does not clearly address that the policy change adjusts the *process* that allows applications to directly be reviewed by the Alberta Regulator. This view is accompanied by more explanatory messaging by the government source:

“ ‘(The previous policy) didn’t line up with anything else we do.’ Those assessments have often been criticized as leading to piecemeal decision-making. It is also extremely rare for the regulator to turn a proposal down.”

This particular quote references the application process, but does not address the restrictions in place by the previous policy that may have stopped an application *from reaching* the regulator. These environmental restrictions are indirectly referenced once, but are not accompanied with any detailed examples by the government source:

“Mr. Bal said the regulator already considers land-use planning and called the old categories “an empty shell.” He said new rules will provide more clarity to industry.”

The mention of ‘land-use planning’ and ‘old categories’ refer to the tiered environmental protections, and are featured as blatantly ineffective by this source. Throughout the article, the government source content features recurring themes of needed policy changes, economic growth, and government responsibility.

When examining the non-government source content, the topics featured focus on environmental considerations and consequences. However, these are introduced after non-government praise over the value of the 1976 Coal Policy:

“It operated at a higher level than a project-by-project basis,” she said. “It was a high-tier, overarching policy.”

Provided by the Alberta Wilderness Association, the above quote clearly identifies *why* the policy was introduced — to introduce rules that would help improve the *overall* application process for coal explorations. Unlike the government source, there is a variable identified that helps explain the timing of the rescindment:

“Kevin Van Tighem, spokesman for area landowners, points out the regulator is currently considering a number of coal applications. ‘The timing couldn’t be more obvious,’ he said. ‘Right when we have a series of major strip-mine proposals waiting for approval, suddenly this policy complication is quietly moved out of the way.’ ”

In addition to noting the queue of coal applications, the tone featured is cynical of the government action taken. This phrasing also includes specifying the industries affected, strip-mining, which had been previously generalized by the government source featured. After identifying the applications and industrial activity, this non-government source addresses the environmental impacts of the change:

“All that water comes from a headwaters landscape. It all depends on having a landscape that’s porous and vegetated. And we’re proposing to strip-mine it.”

The above quote notably highlights the sensitive nature of environmental systems, which are deeply interconnected to each other. Strip-mining introduces pressures on these systems that can cause them to collapse if the conditions change too much. The final views expressed by the non-government sources note a lack of public awareness that this policy change would be made:

“Mr. Van Tighem and Ms. Petterson point out the changes were made without any public consultation.”

The inclusion of this fact suggests that these non-government sources believe that the amount of public consultation is an important consideration in understanding this change. Non-government source content in the article is focused on a critique of the actions taken by the government on rescinding the 1976 Coal Policy.

Discussion

Bridging the Gap

We can see by looking at the nature of the polarization, and by the approach, that there are a number of ways content developers can shape their messages in order to bridge, if not resolve, some of the contentious issues represented by the polarized views of government policy on coal mining.

Table 3
Content Strategies on Bridging a Polarizing Gap

Strategy	How it Works
Divide content by the number of group perspectives.	This division puts the focus on examining the views presented by each group, and not which group has the most to say or longest argument.
Identify the main interests of each group.	This makes it possible for readers to spot the differences in what topics are most important to each group. Helping understand what each group thinks is important to address or discuss.
Provide context alongside an opinion or argument by a source	Adding this information helps readers understand the rationalization that supports the beliefs held by different groups.

The strategies noted in the above table are actionable ways content can be structured to bridge an otherwise polarizing gap between multiple groups. In this article, there are two identifiable groups that the author believes represent the two opposing viewpoints. The government sources represent more conservative beliefs, that changes made for economic prosperity have indirect consequences on the environment. While non-government sources hold more liberal-centrist beliefs, that every action in society has a direct effect on the state of the environment. All three of the strategies noted demonstrate an example of how both of these groups can be represented equally.

Dividing content by the number of group perspectives shows readers that each set of beliefs has been given fair representation. Disproportionately representing one group over the

other, may suggest to readers that there is a bias by the author to focus on the arguments or beliefs of one group. Without that issue, it becomes easier to examine all of the topics that each group is addressing in regards to a change. The focus then becomes less about what group has the most to say, but what views each group has on a variety of topics.

Identifying the main interests of each group alerts readers to the key differences that distinguish each group from each other. The similarities and differences between groups helps showcase why there is conflict, and how polarizing the different beliefs are. Readers are provided with a greater insight into how complex the conflict is, instead of oversimplifying the issue to focus on a single topic of interest.

Providing context alongside an opinion or argument by a source is essential in ensuring a source's views can be empathized with by readers. Without this information, it is difficult for readers to understand the rationalization behind the stances or beliefs taken by sources. This context creates a more fair representation of each group.

How this Might Influence Public Discourse

By adhering to a more balanced presentation of content, journalists can make their articles appear to different groups with opposing beliefs on a topic. It has been observed that news outlets prefer circulating content that aligns with the views and beliefs of their audience (Murphy, R., 2015). Balancing the content then makes it easier for opposing news outlets like The Globe and Mail & The National Post to circulate the same information. This increases the likelihood of audiences in different groups discussing the same topics, which would otherwise

have been a polarizing difference in discourse (Stoddart, M. C., Tindall, D. B., Smith, J., & Haluza-Delay, R., 2017). If multiple groups read about different topics, it is expected that there would be a lack of inter-group discourse on the same topics (2017). The assumption is that structuring the content to be more balanced would make it easier to encounter and encourage inter-group discourse. A fair representation of multiple perspectives may also make it more challenging for one group to dismiss the views of another. This is why adding contextual information is an important content strategy, as that helps groups understand opposing ideas. By adhering to these strategies in balancing content, it can be expected that some contentious issues can be resolved that create polarization on government policy making in public discourse.

Conclusion

Environmental discourse in Canada is highly polarized, with there being clear gaps between conservative and liberal-centrist content circulated. These gaps have reduced the likelihood that individuals with opposing views discuss the same topics, increasing the gaps that exist between groups with different beliefs. In Canada, a key difference between these two ideological groups are the views on how connected society is to the environment. This difference directly affects the rationalization that each group makes to support their beliefs on government policy changes that impact the economy and the environment. When groups do not have access to the rationalization of the other group, they can not be expected to fully understand why another group holds an opposing viewpoint.

The analysis done in this project identified multiple content strategies journalists can take to close this gap. By dividing content equally by groups, journalists reduce the likelihood that readers believe the author is biased towards a certain group. Identifying the main interests of each group is then used to help readers understand what each group is most concerned about. The addition of contextual information alongside sources makes it possible for readers to empathize for views they may not necessarily agree with. When used, these content strategies create more appealing articles for all news outlets to promote, regardless of opposing editorial values. News outlet preference would then have less impact on the polarization of environmental discourse in Canada. With a less significant gap, it becomes increasingly more likely that groups with opposing viewpoints may engage with each other on the same topics in public discourse.

Much of the academic literature on this area has identified the factors that have contributed to this polarizing landscape. Little investigation has been done on how content can be adjusted to present a more balanced presentation of perspectives. The strategies documented by this research have made it less ambiguous what can be done to close this gap. Clearly defined content strategies can be used by journalists and other writers to get their messages promoted across more news outlets than before. These are actionable choices that may reduce the overall polarization that exists across Canada in environmental discourse.

To further understand this area, it would be beneficial to examine and follow reader interactions. Studying this would make it easier to understand how reaching a wider audience may affect public discourse on environmental topics. Another area of study may involve

analyzing previously circulated articles to determine how often these content strategies are used. This would help understand how effective these are in getting content promoted across a variety of news outlets. Another area that would be valuable to study, is an examination of similar articles on other subject matter to see if other content strategies are used on non-environmental topics. Researching this would help determine how universal these strategies are on other societal-issues.

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