

The Alberta Oil Sands, Journalists, and Their Sources

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Oil Sands Research and Information Network

OSRIN is a university-based, independent organization that compiles, interprets and analyzes available information about returning landscapes and water impacted by oil sands mining to a natural state and provides knowledge to those who can use it to drive breakthrough improvements in reclamation regulations and practices. OSRIN is a project of the University of Alberta's School of Energy and the Environment (SEE). OSRIN was launched with a start-up grant of \$4.5 million from Alberta Environment and a \$250,000 grant from the Canada School of Energy and Environment Ltd.

OSRIN provides:

- **Governments** with the independent, objective, and credible information and analysis required to put appropriate regulatory and policy frameworks in place
- **Media, opinion leaders and the general public** with the facts about oil sands development, its environmental and social impacts, and landscape/water reclamation activities – so that public dialogue and policy is informed by solid evidence
- **Industry** with ready access to an integrated view of research that will help them make and execute reclamation plans – a view that crosses disciplines and organizational boundaries

OSRIN recognizes that much research has been done in these areas by a variety of players over 40 years of oil sands development. OSRIN synthesizes this collective knowledge and presents it in a form that allows others to use it to solve pressing problems. Where we identify knowledge gaps, we seek research partners to help fill them.

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REPORT SUMMARY

Twenty journalists who regularly produce articles, televised reports and videos about the Alberta oil sands and issues pertaining to the oil sands participated in this study.

Although most of the stories about the Alberta oil sands that appear in the news media have a business or economic focus, this study reveals that a clear majority of the 20 journalists who participated believe that the tension between economic and environmental aspects of oil sands development is the driving issue.

A clear majority of respondents also said that there are many stories about the oil sands that go unreported and many of these unreported stories have to do with environmental issues.

While journalists didn't specify why certain stories are not covered by the news media, they did report that some of the sources they would need to produce credible articles or documentaries are not easily available and, in some cases, not available at all. Most reported that industry sources are easily available although they would prefer to speak with decision makers rather than communications staff. And while they often rely on government statistics about the oil sands and the environment, a significant number of respondents said it is usually difficult to reach federal and provincial government representatives to discuss these statistics.

Academics have become an important source of expertise, particularly for journalists who write about environmental issues, as have advocacy groups such as the Pembina Institute. However, most journalists suggested that there are so many vested interests with a stake in oil sands development that it is often difficult to know who to believe. For this reason they use a variety of sources, especially when covering environmental issues.

Most journalists suggested that up-to-date expertise is such a valuable commodity when reporting about the oil sands that they expect all their sources to have it, even citizen and Aboriginal sources.

It is also apparent that most of the journalists rely heavily on online sources of information such as other media stories, government reports and documents, industry updates, advocacy group reports and events, contact information for Aboriginal bands, statistical information of all sorts, and media releases.

Most of the respondents were experienced journalists who have been covering the Alberta oil sands for more than five years. They believe that oil sands development is one of the most important, if not the most important issue, facing the province and the rest of the country. To quote one participating journalist:

“It is one of the greatest issues of our time, inside Canada and outside Canada. So you know you are working on something that's vitally important and you know people are going to pay attention to what you produce.”

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1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this project was to determine what sources journalists use and why they use them when they produce stories for the news media that involve the Alberta oil sands.

1.1 Context

In the past decade, development of the Alberta oil sands has become a key component of the provincial and national economy. If development continues as planned, it is expected that oil sands-related jobs in Canada will jump from the current 75,000 to 905,000 over the next 25 years. And for every two jobs created in Canada, one will be created in the U.S. (Canadian Energy Research Institute 2011).

The oil sands have also aroused fierce opposition both in Canada and abroad from politicians, environmental groups, and citizens at large who contend that oil sands development has too harsh an impact on the environment and needs to be either better regulated, slowed down, or stopped altogether.

A 2010 report by an expert panel established by the Royal Society of Canada (Gosselin et al. 2010) noted that the public discourse on issues involving the Alberta oil sands “has become increasingly strident, leaving the Canadian public to sort out who and what to believe.” The panel concluded that while there was no scientific proof for some of the claims regarding environmental and health impacts, governments needed to implement more consistent and reliable monitoring systems.

Since the development of the Alberta oil sands is of great public interest for a number of reasons, it is frequently the subject of stories produced by journalists for major news media organizations¹. Not a lot of research has been done on news stories that feature the Alberta oil sands, but research to date shows that most journalists report on the business angle of the oil sands. A recent study of 300 articles about the oil sands found that most of the stories had an economic focus and used representatives of business interests as their primary sources. The articles studied were published in the *Globe and Mail*, *The National Post* and the *Toronto Star* between 2005 and 2007 (Way 2011).

Another study of articles about the Alberta oil sands that appeared in the *Globe and Mail* and *National Post* found that 86% of the stories appeared in the business sections of the newspapers. The study also found that the media relied on a greater diversity of sources when stories focused on environmental issues compared to economic issues. But business representatives were still the primary source, followed closely by environmental non-governmental organizations (Way 2009).

¹ Readers are encouraged to browse OSRIN’s What’s New Archives (<http://www.osrin.ualberta.ca/en/Resources/WhatsNew.aspx>) and video collection (<http://www.osrin.ualberta.ca/Resources/Videos.aspx>) for a sample of the media stories over the last couple of years and the types of media sources.

1.2 Methodology

Twenty journalists who regularly produce articles, televised reports and videos about the Alberta oil sands participated in this study. More than 20 were invited to participate, but some could not because their media organizations wouldn't permit it. Others refused because they did not trust the funder of the study owing to links with Alberta Environment; others did not respond despite initial indications they would participate. All participants work in the English language.

- The 20 participants had a range of experience when it came to covering the Alberta oil sands
 - 18/20 had two years or more experience
 - 10/20 had more than five years of experience
 - 8/20 had more than 10 years of experience
 - One participant had covered the oil sands for 40 years.
- The group included 16 journalists who were employed full-time with media organizations, a freelance writer, and three former journalists with extensive oil sands reporting experience.
- Seventeen participants were located in Alberta (12 from Calgary, five from outside Calgary). Three were located in Ontario or British Columbia.
- The group consisted of 14 men and six women.

A questionnaire ([Appendix 1](#)) was drawn up and participants were either interviewed by a member of the research team or filled out the questionnaire themselves and returned it.

The questionnaires were then submitted for analysis without the name of the participant or the media organization that he/she works for.

The questionnaire required both qualitative and quantitative responses. Answers from the questionnaire were compiled. Narrative analysis of the material was used to determine what themes arose from the qualitative questions.

2 THE ROLE AND USE OF SOURCES IN NEWS STORIES

To understand why news sources matter to journalists it is necessary to recognize the importance of objectivity as a key principle of western journalism. For journalists, the introduction of the practice of objectivity coincided with their professionalization in the mid-1800s. The trend to professionalism and away from the political partisanship and patronage that had previously characterized journalism also coincided with prevailing Victorian social attitudes: decency, restraint and fair play (Ward 2004). Journalistic objectivity stressed emotional detachment and non-involvement with the people and issues that a reporter examined. It was intended to assure the public that journalists were not politically partisan or biased but relied on facts.

Objectivity not only precludes reporters from injecting their own opinions into a news story it also dictates that direct journalistic observation is not acceptable proof. So instead of using

themselves as the sole source for a story, reporters must construct stories through attribution, linking information directly to sources often through quotations. For objective journalism, sources do more than provide information; they serve as an essential form of evidence (Carlson 2009, p. 527).

Since sources – which can include relevant documents, statistics compiled by various institutions, and people directly involved with an issue – are a necessity for the construction of a news story, how a journalist selects and uses particular sources will determine not only what information is presented but how the story is framed. Some studies have shown that journalists adopt source patterns that privilege a small set of powerful social actors that they tend to use over and over again (Carlson 2009, p. 538). Several factors influence a journalist's choice of human sources and the establishment of regular sources. Gans (1979, p. 129) lists them as:

1. Past suitability: If sources have provided information leading to suitable stories in the past, they are apt to be chosen again, until they eventually become regular sources.
2. Productivity: Sources are judged by their ability to supply a lot of information without undue expenditure of time and effort on the part of the journalist.
3. Reliability: Sources whose information requires the least amount of checking.
4. Trustworthiness: When reliability cannot be checked quickly, journalists look for trustworthy sources: those who do not limit themselves to self-serving information, try to be accurate, and above all, are honest.
5. Authoritativeness: Journalists prefer to resort to sources in official positions of authority and responsibility.
6. Articulativeness: When sources are interviewed they must be able to make their point as concisely, and preferably as dramatically as possible.

Even though Gans' list was compiled more than 30 years ago it still covers most of a journalist's requirements when it comes to preferred sources. But given the current 24/7 news cycle, and the complexity of many topics and events that journalists cover today, there are two factors missing: availability and expertise. These are both crucial factors when it comes to determining which sources a journalist will use.

When the deadline for breaking a piece of news is almost coincident with the event itself, there is little time for independent research. Consequently, a consultation with experts can provide just the quick fix necessary to obtain background knowledge and facts, and to rise above the level of simplistic interpretation (Albaek 2011, p. 338).

In an expanding media universe with escalating coverage of complex topics such as health, technology, energy, and the environment, journalists now call upon experts in particular fields much more often than they did in the past. This factor, combined with the prevalence of more interpretative and investigative journalism, means that experts – academics, researchers, and specialized advocacy groups – have become key sources for journalists. Studies have shown that

journalists turn to experts for three main reasons: to provide facts, add credibility, and present objectivity. Most commonly, expert-sources are used to verify and provide facts (Boyce 2006, p. 890). This is especially important for journalists who produce work on issues that are highly controversial but require specialized knowledge. The environmental impact of the oil sands would certainly fall into that category.

No discussion of journalists' sources would be complete without mentioning the professionalization of news sources or the role of public relations strategists. Studies of the impact of public relations on news sources suggest that uneven distribution of resources results in "powerful actors being able to better mobilize their communication strategies to influence news discourse (Carlson 2009, p. 538)." There is no question that organizations like the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP), individual oil companies, and government have more resources to devote to public relations than environmental advocacy, Aboriginal, or citizen groups. But it is also clear that many advocacy groups have adopted the strategies and tactics used by more well-funded organizations.

In Alberta, the Pembina Institute serves as a good example of an advocacy group that knows how to become a regular source for journalists:

The Pembina Institute knows how to present information that will capture the interest of the media. It is adept at the use of metaphor and imagery to relate and connect with the public. The information presented by the Institute is often backed up with information and real world examples which lend credibility to the organization (Babiuk 2007, p. 35).

According to Carlson (2009), attributing information to sources whether experts or ordinary citizens, benefits journalists in two key ways. First, the reliance on sources indemnifies journalists from charges of bias while allowing critical statements. And since sources do not necessarily have to be neutral, quotes in a news narrative are useful because they can provide a range of perspectives on a common issue or problem. This is particularly relevant when constructing news stories about a topic as complex and controversial as oil sands development. It demands that journalists have a variety of sources because there are so many players who have a vested interest in the oil sands:

- federal, provincial, and municipal governments;
- Aboriginal communities;
- oil sands developers and investors;
- related businesses;
- oil industry associations;
- financial markets;
- environmental advocacy groups; environmental researchers;
- health researchers;

- technology developers;
- local citizens; and
- oil sands workers.

Because there are so many competing interests, journalists construct stories from a variety of perspectives:

- business journalists will focus on investors and financial markets;
- energy writers will focus on production targets;
- environmental journalists will focus on environmental impacts on air, water and land;
- local journalists will focus on both the positive and negative health and economic impacts of the oil sands on the communities close at hand;
- American correspondents will focus on the impact of the oil sands on the United States.

While a journalist's beat or specialty will dictate which sources they seek out, research to date into journalists and their sources makes it clear that most of them are looking for common traits in their sources. These traits include past suitability, reliability, trustworthiness, authority, expertise, availability, and articulateness.

3 ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

The main purpose of this study was to find out what kind of information or comment about the oil sands journalists need from their sources. It was also important to find out why these sources are important to them when they are preparing news stories. It became clear from journalists' responses to the questionnaire that all of them rely on a combination of sources rather than just one or two. Respondents also made it clear that the focus of the article – business, politics, environment, health, or social impacts – also determines which sources they find most useful and credible. Many respondents mentioned that they expect their sources to be easily accessible by phone or e-mail when they need to communicate with them as well as knowledgeable and honest about the topic at hand.

Participating journalists were asked to rate various sources of information as to their knowledge, reliability, trustworthiness and availability. In the following sections, participants' experiences with the main sources of information about the oil sands – government, industry, advocacy groups, Aboriginals, academics, citizens, and other media – will be discussed.

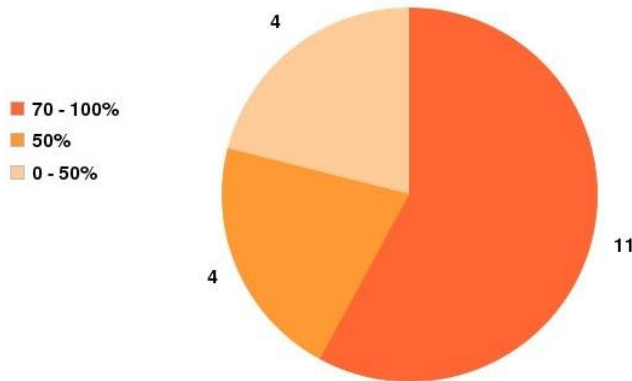
3.1 Online Sources

Given the technological advances in the past few years and the widespread use of the Internet as a communication medium it was not surprising that a clear majority of the respondents (14/20) categorized online sources of information whether they are corporate, government, or NGO websites as extremely, or very, important to them. In answering the question "Where do you

begin your research?” 8/20 journalists specifically mentioned online or web sources for information about the oil sands. They cited corporate websites, environmental websites, academic studies, government reports, and media archives.

One respondent said: “...basically, the way I was able to become an expert on the oil sands was by using Google search. I went from having zero knowledge to a lot of knowledge in a couple of months.”

Another respondent said he/she would go on the web to look for “industry sites, government sites or occasionally organizational sources like CAPP.”



When asked how much of their research is done online, 11/19 respondents said 70% to 100%. Four out of 19 respondents reported that half of their research is done on line. Only four said less than 50%.

Respondents also made it clear that while they search out information on the Internet they also expect to be able to confirm or expand on that information by talking to people who are involved in producing that information.

3.2 Industry

Not surprisingly, sources from the oil sands industry are key to almost any news story that deals with the oil sands. Journalists use a variety of sources from within the industry depending on the focus of the story. They rely on sources from specific companies directly involved in oil sands development for announcements, updates and information about their ongoing operations. They

also rely on organizations such as the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers², the Oil Sands Developers Group³ and the Alberta Chamber of Resources⁴, for information about the oil sands industry in general as well as specific data about oil sands history, operations and production. Journalists also have to get reaction or comment from the oil sands industry for stories that have to do with environmental or health impacts of the oil sands. For some journalists, research done on the oil sands industry by financial analysts and investment bankers is also useful.

When asked what they expect of their industry sources 14/20 journalists said industry sources must have up-to-date knowledge and specific data. Some mentioned that company spokespeople are not always the best sources for information and they would prefer to speak directly to people making decisions or people with expertise in a particular subject. Half of the journalists said they value honesty in their industry sources; they don't want to be simply given the company line, or spin, by spokespeople. Seven out of 20 respondents mentioned availability as important. Prompt answers to phone calls or emails were particularly important for journalists who work for daily news media outlets.

According to one respondent: "If there are people who I call that don't get back to me or don't return my calls then I'll try to go around or find another source. It's the phone test, you know, who picks up the phone first."

While it is expected that journalists would turn to industry sources for information about oil sands operations and development, the survey also revealed that even when dealing with topics such as tailing ponds and water use which touch on environmental issues, the industry was seen by half the respondents as a reliable source. For more technical matters such as in-situ development and production statistics, industry was cited as the most reliable source by a majority of respondents.

However, in general, the industry was not seen as the most reliable source for stories that focused on the environment. Twelve out of 20 respondents reported that they use environmental groups as sources for stories on the environment and the oil sands. The Pembina Institute⁵ was mentioned by eight respondents. The Sierra Club⁶ and Climate Action Network⁷ were also

² See <http://www.capp.ca/canadaIndustry/oilSands/Pages/default.aspx#WUQumMzNQnFI>

³ See <http://www.oilsandsdevelopers.ca/>

⁴ See <http://www.acr-alberta.com/>

⁵ See <http://www.pembina.org/oil-sands>

⁶ See <http://www.sierraclub.ca/en/tar-sands>

⁷ See <http://climateactionnetwork.ca/>

specifically mentioned. One respondent said he/she had used Alberta journalist Andrew Nikiforuk's work.

3.3 Government

Journalists saw government as the main provider of credible statistics concerning various aspects of the oil sands. When respondents were asked if they had a preferred “go to” source for statistics, 15/20 mentioned either the federal or provincial government (Alberta). They cited specific government agencies including Statistics Canada, Environment Canada, Natural Resources Canada, the National Energy Board, Alberta Energy, the Energy Resources and Conservation Board (ERCB), and U.S sources such as the Energy Information Administration. One respondent said he/she would use only statistical information that came from the federal or Alberta government, or academic sources.

Another respondent wrote: “I try to use government or academic statistics just because they have less of a profit motive than oil companies do.”

The survey also revealed that respondents tend to find government statistics regarding environmental issues and the oil sands more credible than industry statistics, or statistics produced by environmental advocacy groups. When asked what sources they rely on for stories that involve water use, air quality, and greenhouse gas emissions the majority mentioned government sources, particularly the federal government.

While journalists will often turn to the provincial or federal government for certain statistics that are available on the web or through other media, many commented that it was difficult to access government ministers or appropriate bureaucrats when they needed them.

One journalist who works for an international media organization said: “While Alberta Environment will call me back, the federal government environment department rarely returns phone calls. If I call the federal environment ministry, I get a call back from Energy, Mines and Resources. The feds generally ignore me.

“[Canada Natural Resources Minister] Joe Oliver's recent open letter about Gateway was a case in point. He granted interviews to several Canadian news outlets. But his office completely ignored me.”

This journalist also noted that all questions sent to federal government agencies about the Alberta oil sands are routed through the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), a new practice under the current prime minister. When asked how often journalists were able to speak with Alberta government ministers for environment or energy, 10/20 said “often” but it was not clear which department

minister was easier to reach. When asked about access to decision makers in industry and government, 14/20 respondents replied that they could reach them only “sometimes or less frequently.”

3.4 Academic Sources

The majority of respondents (15/20) clearly specified that they want academic sources to have deep knowledge of their field, to have peer-reviewed articles in appropriate journals, to be easily accessible, and to articulate about their expertise. Some said they look at other stories in the news media to see who has been quoted in the past. There seemed to be some confusion for two respondents who said they wanted academic sources to be “neutral” about the oil sands. It wasn’t clear if they were referring to opinions or statistical work. One cited the work of David Schindler⁸ at the University of Alberta as suspect because he doesn’t appear “neutral”. But another journalist praised Schindler’s work and said he found him to be a good source:

“Dr. Schindler is pretty bang on. They’ve tried to discredit him several times but so far he’s batting 100, I think.”

Another cited a 2010 Royal Society report by a collective of academics (Gosselin et al. 2010):

“I thought the Royal Society report [Canada Expert Panel: Environment and Health Impacts of Canada’s Oil Sands Industry, December 2010] is an honest attempt by leading academics to sort out the issues. There are extreme claims on either side of the oil sands debate. There’s some very damning research about the effectiveness of carbon capture research. The Royal Society report is really a useful tool, a nice handy place where smart people with no direct interest have gone through statistics and judged them.”

3.5 Advocacy Groups

A significant number of respondents mentioned the Pembina Institute as a reliable source of information especially when it came to information about the oil sands and the environment. When journalists who cover the environmental angle of oil sands development were asked, “What sources do you use to describe the environmental impact of the oil sands?” 12/20 respondents reported that they use environmental groups as sources for these stories.

⁸ See <http://www.biology.ualberta.ca/schindler.hp/schindle.html>

Pembina was mentioned by eight respondents. Sierra Club, Climate Action Network, Wood Buffalo Environmental Association and Greenpeace⁹ were also specifically mentioned.

When respondents were asked what sources they rely on for information about specific environmental issues such as water use and land disturbances, Pembina was cited the most, by about a third of the respondents. Journalists who use Pembina as a source are aware that it has a particular perspective on oil sands development but trust it anyway.

One respondent said: “I wouldn’t say that an advocacy group should be written off just because they take a predictable position. We look at certain advocacy groups as much better sources of information than others. Pembina Institute for example has a very good record of research based reports and that makes them very important.”

Respondents also reported that they want advocacy groups to be knowledgeable and up-to-date about the oil sands. They want these sources to be able to back up what they say with data and research. They don’t want to hear just spin. However, most respondents also made it clear that they use more than one or two sources when writing about the environmental impact of the oil sands.

To quote one respondent: “I would probably go to a number of advocacy sources, Pembina, maybe Climate Action Network. I’ve used some of Andrew Nikiforuk’s work, I’ve used government sources, Alberta government website, I have used media reports such as the National Geographic, academia, there’s a whole wealth of information.”

3.6 Citizen Sources

Two themes emerged when respondents were asked “What qualities do you look for in your citizen sources?” Journalists who seek citizen sources (and not all do, especially those focusing only on business or finance coverage) want them to be knowledgeable about the issues rather than simply giving an opinion without foundation. Journalists also want citizen sources to have direct experience with the impact of the oil sands that they can describe in detail.

Twelve out of 20 respondents reported that they find citizen sources by venturing into various communities so they can meet people personally. Four said they walk down the street, knock on doors, or make cold calls to business. Others said that they go to open houses on oil sands

⁹ See <http://www.greenpeace.org/canada/en/campaigns/tarsands/>

developments or issues surrounding development and talk to people at the meetings. Others said they get to know local officials such as mayors and band chiefs who then refer them to other people. One respondent said he/she simply went to the Maritimer's Association in Fort McMurray to meet and interview people. Four respondents said they look to other media to see who is being quoted or check blogs, newsletters, tweets and other social media sites. Three respondents mentioned advocacy groups, labour unions, and Aboriginal organizations as a source of citizen contacts. One respondent said any citizen source was valuable.

“I don't really know if there is anything that can make a bad citizen source. I mean provided that they are speaking about their own experiences and they're not adopting spin.”

Just over half of the respondents said they would not use a citizen source if the person seemed to be lying, didn't know what they were talking about, or was simply not credible. Three journalists said they were leery of citizen sources offered up by industry or NGOs because they didn't think they were independent. One journalist said she/he wouldn't quote a citizen source if the person refused to say who they worked for.

3.7 News Media Reports as Sources

Even though the majority of respondents do half of their research online when asked how important other media stories were to them, only three said they were extremely important. Twelve reported that other media stories are only moderately or less than moderately important to them as a source. Nobody specifically mentioned what media outlet they might turn to.

3.8 Previous Contacts as Sources

The majority of the journalists who participated in this survey reported that they use a combination of sources for every story they write. Which sources they use depends on the issue at hand and who they can reach in time for their deadline. But as Gans (1979) pointed out when he listed the main attributes of journalists' sources, past suitability is a key influence. If a journalist has already established that a source is reliable, trustworthy, knowledgeable, available, and articulate that source is likely to become a regular source that the journalist will turn to again and again. And indeed when asked how important “previous contacts” were to their work, 17/20 respondents said they were “very, or extremely, important.”

3.9 Visual Information

There were several survey questions about photographs, charts, graphs and maps. In general, this kind of information did not rank high on the journalists' list of priorities: 19/20 respondents reported that photos, maps and images are only moderately or less than moderately important. Over half of respondents (11/20) reported that they are not responsible for selecting or obtaining images. The 7/20 who were involved in selecting images simply said they wanted images that

were relevant to the article. When asked what format they preferred for filing images, most respondents didn't answer. When asked if they were responsible for choosing maps, only four answered yes. Most respondents didn't answer or had vague answers when asked where they obtained maps.

3.10 Visits to the Oil Sands

Thirteen out of 20 respondents reported that they have personally visited oil sands operations. Of those 13, all but two said industry was the most important source during the visit. Local citizens were the second most important source of information. Most respondents accept that oil sands operators control tours of the oil sands and provide information from their perspective. And almost all of the study participants who had visited oil sands operations went there at the invitation of an oil sands operator or the Alberta government. In fact, it's almost impossible for journalists to visit oil sands operations without the permission of oil sands operators. And once on-site, journalists can't simply wander around; they are always accompanied by a representative of the oil sands operator and do not have access to all aspects of the operation.

Three respondents said they would have liked to have had a chance to talk to decision makers rather than communications staff. One respondent said he/she would have liked to see more of the tailings ponds. Another said he would have liked more contact with Aboriginal people in the area. Others said they got all the information they needed while on an industry tour.

One respondent said: "I take such visits with a large dose of salt. Obviously industry is trying to present its message. I would never write a story based exclusively on such a tour without spending time considering and listening to all sides of the given issue. In that context, I don't need to have access to everyone I'd like to speak with on a tour at the same time."

3.11 FOIP Requests

Seven out of 20 respondents reported that they had requested information pertaining to the oil sands by filing a Freedom of Information request. All seven said the information garnered was very useful.

One said: "I have 300 pages (of FOIP information) and it's pure gold."

3.12 Driving Issues

Near the end of the questionnaire journalists were asked to describe the most important issues arising from oil sands development. This question aroused a lot of interest and it became clear

that the answers were based on personal observation and reflection. Fourteen out of 20 respondents identified the tension between energy or economic security and environmental concerns as the driving issue. Respondents apparently believe this issue has yet to be sorted out satisfactorily and will become even more controversial in the future. Three out of 20 respondents mentioned the economic impact of the oil sands on a local, provincial and national scale. Three respondents said the industry had lost the upper hand when it comes to telling the world what is happening with oil sands development. One respondent mentioned the effect of oil sands development on Aboriginal communities.

Selected quotes from respondents on driving issues:

“Energy security and access to energy and the geopolitics of energy. The degree to which human health is prioritized next to the need to develop the resource, and the third would be the role of science – real science – in the future development of policy and future development of the resource.”

“The environmental impact, the impact on the workers, and the scientific aspect because we’re going on new uncharted technology and there could be problems with the people who have to live with it.”

“The driving issue basically is that the industry has lost control of the message, which is a good thing. There was a time when the oil sands themselves were pretty much ignored outside of Alberta, but those times have come to an end. It’s the inability of the oil industry to grasp the nature of the changes and the social environment in which they are operating.”

3.13 Untold Stories

This section of the questionnaire elicited a lot of interest and comment from the respondents. When asked if there are stories pertaining to the oil sands that are not being reported, fourteen out of 20 said that there are stories about the oil sands that are not being told. Of the 14 who said there were untold stories:

- 7 mentioned environmental issues that were not being reported. These concerns included: damage done by the tailing ponds; contaminants in the water systems; the new directions in environmental monitoring; the impact of excess sulphur produced during the mining process; renewable energy and a post-carbon future.
- 4 mentioned science and technology issues.

- 4 mentioned the local, national and international political ramifications of oil sands development.
- 2 said there are untold stories about the oil sands and health issues.
- 2 mentioned work site and occupational health and safety issues.

Selected quotes from respondents on untold stories:

“Within the context of mainstream media, the story about contaminants in the river system is not being told in a thorough way.”

“There could be more written on a regular basis about local issues (air, water, habitat, health, economics, employment, investment, etc.) at big national and international media outlets. The topic is often boiled down to the bare minimum. It's sometimes difficult to get readers from far and wide interested in the topic beyond the very big sweep issues - climate change, energy security, geopolitics.”

“We shy away from trying to set the agenda in Canada; part of what I write about is what Canadians are doing that will affect the United States. Keystone is one of those stories. There's a disconnect between oil sands profile in Canada, and its impact in the United States.”

“All oil sands are not created equal, and that's a story that's being lost. The fact that the future of the oil sands and the in-situ/SAGD development that's occurring ... there are many, many new technologies that are arriving on the scene to try to do things in a more environmentally friendly way. It's being done in a more sustainable and responsible manner, it's something that's been consistently and, unfortunately, successfully being pushed aside by many of the critics.”

3.14 Improving Sources

This section of the questionnaire also elicited a great deal of interest on the part of participants. Almost everyone had a suggestion about how the information system pertaining to the oil sands could be improved.

Some focused on better access to government and industry decision makers. Four respondents said they needed an insider to tell them the real truth about what is going on. Others asked for a

credible, centralized on-line data bank organized by an independent agency that featured information about all aspects of the oil sands and was easily accessible.

- 6/20 respondents said they would like more access to government officials or they would like the federal and provincial governments to provide more data on the oil sands, particularly on environmental issues.
- 4/20 respondents said they would like decision makers in the oil sands industry to be more open and available. As with other questions some respondents felt they weren't getting the whole truth from industry spokespeople. One respondent said he/she would like more access to foreign companies' records of oil sands investments.
- 4/20 respondents said they would like an "insider" who can provide them with detailed information about what the industry, government, and environmental organizations are doing and talking about behind the scenes.
- 3/20 respondents said they would like an independent agency to provide an online clearinghouse of all statistical information about the oil sands.

Selected quotes from respondents on improving sources:

"I wish I had more access to government officials. I basically go into a story without expecting to talk to any government official because I know what a process it is. And if I'm on deadline and I can't get a response on time I'll usually quote from a source I can access."

"I wish we had better industry sources, that's a big one – people who would be willing to have a really frank discussion about the challenges and what's being done. Because what often happens is that we get the line and it's hard to understand a lot of things. I mean even if we wanted to do a story about this really environmentally-conscious employee of an oil and gas company who lived his life in a really extreme way to conserve every aspect of his life. And the company wouldn't allow him to speak to us and it seems just so ridiculous because that seems like the kind of story that they would. But everyone is so protective of information and of their company and so terrified of what will come out even it's not, to me, in the end in their best interest."

"I'd like to know more about public relations strategies of governments and industries, what goes on in the boardrooms of some of the companies. I would also like to know what goes on in private discussions of

environmental groups. I'd like to know what goes on in private discussions of Canadian diplomats and bureaucrats, provincial bureaucrats, provincial people who are posted abroad. There could be all sorts of stuff that could provide more information and more insight."

"I would love it if there was somebody who kept a complete catalogue all in one place. The really basic stuff that you could get easily. How many mines are there, how many square miles does each mine cover collectively, how much do they produce, where does it go, how much does it cost them, how much does each of these cost? I'm just asking for inventory, to let me find things all in one place instead of going to all those places I've been talking about, and God knows there's a whole lot more, too. If somehow, all of this could be pulled together in an oil sands encyclopedia, and update. Just the factual stuff, that's what can be really hard to get. You can get all the opinion you want, but to find out what is actually happening is tough."

3.15 Journalists' Attitudes towards Covering the Oil Sands

The majority of journalists made it clear that they find the oil sands beat to be very interesting and significant. Only one respondent said he/she was neutral about covering the oil sands. One said he/she hated covering the oil sands because there are rarely new developments to the ongoing story.

- 13/20 respondents said that they like covering the oil sands because they have such national and international significance.
- 4/20 respondents said they like this story because of the tension between energy issues and environmental issues.
- 3/20 said the oil sands are interesting to cover because almost everything that happens in Alberta is connected to them.
- 2/20 respondents said they like the technology aspects of the oil sands story.

Quotes from respondents about their attitudes towards covering the oil sands:

"...there's no other project like this in the world, and it's history in the making, and you are watching this all come about ..."

“It is one of the greatest issues of our time, inside Canada and outside Canada. So you know you are working something that’s vitally important and you know people are going to pay attention to what you produce.”

“The prospect of expansion versus environmental stewardship, the huge investments being planned, impending climate and energy policies on a national and international level.”

“I hate this story. It’s a terrible story, it’s important but there’s no direction or progression. It reminds me of softwood lumber. It’s the story I wrote in 1981. That’s why Keystone has made the topic a bit more interesting. But up here, there’s no substantive opposition to them. It’s not like the NDP has enough opposition.”

4 CONCLUSIONS

A clear majority (14/20) of respondents reported that the tension between economic/energy security and environmental impact is the driving issue for them when it comes to coverage of the oil sands. The framing of this key issue largely determines which sources they turn to and which sources they find credible, accessible and trustworthy.

If the focus of the story they write or broadcast is oil sands operations, production, investment, or technology, journalists will turn to sources within the oil sands industry for information and comment. Those journalists that do turn to industry as a main source find that in general they get what they need although many said they would rather talk with decision makers than spokespeople or communication staff.

When stories deal with environmental issues respondents said they are much more likely to seek out academic experts, statistics from government or regulatory agencies, data and comment from environmental advocacy groups, as well as information provided by the oil sands industry. All the journalists who write these kinds of stories reported that they never rely on one source but will use several sources so as to present an informed and balanced view. A significant number complained that it was difficult to get either federal or provincial government departments such as energy and environment to respond to their phone calls and emails. A significant number of respondents reported that they rely on the Pembina Institute for information and statistics about the environmental impact of the oil sands. They said that even though they see Pembina as an advocacy group they find their research and statistics reliable. It also appeared that Pembina was more responsive to journalists’ needs for up-to-date information and comment than government departments.

In general, journalists said they wanted credible, up-to-date, online documentation and statistics about oil sands operations, environmental impacts, government policies and regulations, and other factual information that pertains to the oil sands. Photos and maps were low on their priority lists.

They also want easy access to industry and government decision makers rather than communication staff. Even when they are talking to citizen sources they prefer people to know what they are talking about and to have personal experience with some facet of the oil sands. Several respondents commented that it is difficult to find sources who talk openly and honestly about oil sands issues because there are so many vested interests to protect. Academics were seen as the most independent and credible but some journalists even questioned their motives.

A clear majority (14/20) of respondents said there were stories about the oil sands that were not being told by the news media. Half of those respondents named environmental topics as stories that needed more coverage. To get those stories journalists said they need more access to government officials, more environmental data from government, and open and honest industry sources.

A few journalists suggested that an independent, credible, on-line clearinghouse of all data that pertains to the oil sands would be extremely useful.

5 RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The establishment of an on-line, well-organized, up-to-date clearinghouse of all information that pertains to the oil sands by an independent, credible agency. It would include:
 - a. oil sands definitions, peer-reviewed academic papers;
 - b. statistics;
 - c. government policy, regulations, and decisions;
 - d. reports prepared by advocacy groups;
 - e. news articles; and
 - f. commentary as well as an image bank and a map bank.
2. Oil sands operators and developers make more effort to provide decision makers and in-house experts for interviews by journalists. It is common practice for journalists to seek information from people directly involved in an issue rather than communications staff.
3. Both federal and provincial governments make more effort to provide credible, up-to-date, accessible statistics on all aspects of oil sands operations.
4. Both federal and provincial governments make more effort to answer journalists' queries about the oil sands by providing decision-makers and in-house experts for interviews rather than communications staff.

5. Journalism schools in Alberta are provided with introductory curriculum material about oil sands economic and environmental issues designed to engage a young audience about the economic and environmental impact of the Alberta oil sands. Travel awards should be established so that student journalists can visit the oil sands.
6. Media organizations and journalists should continue advocacy to ensure that access to information legislation ensures that government documents are fully disclosed within the legal timelines, and that costs for information is not a deterrent to openness.

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7 GLOSSARY

7.1 Terms

Attribution

The act of attributing, especially the act of establishing a particular person as the creator of a work of art.

Assigning some quality or character to a person or thing.

Sources

The various contributors of information and commentary that a journalist uses when putting together a news item. Sources can include documents, statistics compiled by universities, governments or research organizations, and people who are directly involved with an issue or have some expertise relating to the issue.

7.2 Acronyms

CAPP	Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers
ERCB	Energy Resources Conservation Board
ISEEE	Institute for Sustainable Energy, Environment and Economy
NDP	New Democratic Party
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OSRIN	Oil Sands Research and Information Network
PMO	Prime Minister's Office
SAGD	Steam Assisted Gravity Drainage
SEE	School of Energy and the Environment

8 LIST OF OSRIN REPORTS

OSRIN reports are available on the University of Alberta's Education & Research Archive at <https://era.library.ualberta.ca/public/view/community/uuid:81b7dcc7-78f7-4adf-a703-6688b82090f5>. The Technical Report (TR) series documents results of OSRIN funded projects. The Staff Reports series represent work done by OSRIN staff.

8.1 Technical Reports

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8.2 Staff Reports

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APPENDIX 1: Questionnaire Used in this Study

Journalists Sources Interview Guide:

1.1 How long have you been covering the Alberta Oil Sands?

1.2 Can you tell me, how do you begin to search for information when you are covering the Alberta Oil Sands?

1.3 How important are the following sources?

Please answer:

Not at all important	Low importance	Slightly important	Neutral	Moderately important	Very important	Extremely important
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a.) Online sources of information

Not at all important	Low importance	Slightly important	Neutral	Moderately important	Very important	Extremely important
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b.) Sources from other media stories

Not at all important	Low importance	Slightly important	Neutral	Moderately important	Very important	Extremely important
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c.) Previous contacts

Not at all important	Low importance	Slightly important	Neutral	Moderately important	Very important	Extremely important
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d.) Statistical Sources

Not at all important	Low importance	Slightly important	Neutral	Moderately important	Very important	Extremely important
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e.) Photos, maps and images

Not at all important	Low importance	Slightly important	Neutral	Moderately important	Very important	Extremely important
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1.4 What qualities do you look for in your industry sources?

1.5 What qualities do you look for in your citizen sources?.

1.6 What qualities do you look for in your academic or advocacy group sources?

1.7 What makes a source not useful to you?

2. Oil Sands Visits

2.0 Have you ever been to visit the Alberta Oil Sands in person? Yes/No.
[If answer is yes, proceed to#3]

2.1 What sources were you able to access when visiting the Alberta Oil Sands? N/A

- a.) Government sources
- b.) Industry Sources
- c.) Citizen Sources
- d.) Statistical Sources
- e.) Photos and other images

2.2 What are the advantages or disadvantages of any of those sources?

2.3 What sources or information would you have liked to have had when visiting the Alberta oil sands that you didn't?

3. Citizen Sources

3.0 How do you locate your local citizen sources? [Note, by local we mean those who live close to the Alberta oil sands.]

3.1 How do you locate your aboriginal citizen sources?

3.2 What are the qualities that make a good citizen source, in your view, when covering the Alberta oil sands?

3.3 What would lead you to not quote a citizen source who you've interviewed?

4. Statistics

4.0 This question has to do with statistics that you choose for your reporting. Do you have preferred "go to" sources that you tend to use for statistics?

4.1 What statistics do you tend to use to help your reader understand the Alberta Oil Sands?

4.2 What are your preferred statistical sources when writing about:

- a) greenhouse gas emissions

- b) in situ activities
- c) mining activities
- d) tailings ponds activities
- e) air quality
- f) water use
- g) oil sands production
- h) land disturbances

5. Environmental Reporting

5.0 Do you write about the environmental impact of the Oil Sands?

5.1 What sources do you use to describe the environmental impact of the oil sands?

6. Access to Sources

6.0 How often do you contact spokespersons when writing stories about the oil sands?

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
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6.1 How often are you able to access senior decision makers within industry, government when reporting on the Alberta Oil Sands?

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
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6.2 When you need to, how often are you able to access and speak to Alberta government ministers as sources, for instance the environment minister or energy minister?

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
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6.3 Do you think some sources are more credible than others, for instance do you think that any of the following are more credible than the others?

- 1. Government Sources
- 2. Environmental Groups
- 3. Citizen Sources
- 4. Industry Sources

- 5. Aboriginal Sources
- 6. Academic Sources

7. Images

7.0 This question has to do with images. Are you responsible for choosing graphics, charts or photos to accompany your stories?

If NO, can you tell me if you work with a graphic designer and consult about the images, and that person's name?

7.1 If YES, can you tell me how you decided what images (graphics, charts, photos, or video) to use? We pick them based on their relevance to a story, how useful they are to look at.

7.2 What are some of your key concerns when selecting images to accompany stories about Alberta Oil Sands?

7.3 Does your organization choose stock images or shoot original images or footage when portraying stories about with the Alberta Oil Sands?

7.4 When sourcing photos and images, what format does your organization prefer: Choose and describe any that apply.

- a) Electronic file
- b) Hard copy
- c) PDF
- d.) Jpeg files
- e) TIFF files
- f) Broadcast quality video

8. Maps

8.0 This question has to do with the use of maps showing the location of the Alberta oil sands. Are you responsible for choosing maps to accompany your stories?

8.1 If YES, where do you obtain your maps, and why do you choose the ones that you do?

8.2 Does your organization use its own map making software?

9. Untold Stories

What stories do you think are not being told about the Albert oil sands?

9.1 What sources would you need to tell those stories?

10. Online Sources vs. In Person Sources

10.0 What percentage of your research on the Alberta oil sands would you estimate is done online?

10.1 How often do you meet sources in person when covering the Alberta oil sands?

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
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10.2 Have you ever made a FOIP request when seeking source information about the Alberta oil sands.

10.3 If yes, was the information a useful source for your story?

11. Concluding Questions

11.1 In general, when you reflect about your reporting on the Alberta oil sands, what are your preferred sources?

11.2 In conclusion, what do you like about covering the Alberta oil sands?

11.3 What information or sources do you wish you had that you don't?

APPENDIX 2: What Information or Sources Do You Wish You Had That You Don't?

I wish I had more access to government officials. I basically go into a story without expecting to talk to any government official because I know what a process it is. And if I'm on deadline and I can't get a response on time I'll usually quote from a source I can access. I've found it hasn't really hurt my reporting at all, it just means I have to work harder to get that story. I've found the industry to be much more helpful. I'll get a call back in an hour from Syncrude or Enbridge and government will take four days at least.

I would love it if there was somebody who kept a complete catalogue all in one place. The really basic stuff you could get easily. How many mines are there, how many square miles does each mine cover collectively, how much do they produce, where does it go, how much does it cost them, how much does each of these cost? I'm just asking for inventory, to let me find things all in one place instead of going to all those places I've been talking about, and God knows there's a whole lot more, too.

If somehow, all of this could be pulled together in an oil sands encyclopedia, and update.

Oh, those anonymous sources who won't go on record! But they are usually the best ones, and they won't give you their names!

Probably more and easy access (a central clearing house?) of all information related to environmental monitoring, production numbers, emissions, employment from each and every oil sands company and project, investment would be helpful. Basically a trusty neutral source of information that one could use as a benchmark for all data coming out of the variety of sources. This would be most useful if it came from an academic source/institute (Parkland/ISEEE, perhaps).

I wish I had a lot better access to other information. The ERCB is pretty good but the government's not.

International sources. Chinese oil companies, sovereign wealth funds etc. and their intentions long-term in the oil sands.

One of the pieces I've been wanting to write for a long time, or comment on for a long time, is this question of the percentage of ownership of oil sands industry and then the profit flow from oil sands development that goes outside the country vs. that which stays inside the country and, preferably, inside Alberta, to know how that breaks out. So, where geographically are the profits flowing to, and what is the breakdown of ownership.

In the last 10 years of my reporting, I had such a great tool I worked with every day – a great database. It was pretty fulsome, so I had a lot of access to information that others probably didn't. There wasn't much that I didn't have access to that I could use as a reporter.

There's so much, but what is missing is Environment Canada publishing a stream of peer-reviewed reports on air quality and water quality, and Health Canada doing high quality science on health and cancer in the region so we have credible bodies with a good staff of credible scientists publishing these results in academic journals.

I'd like to see a one-stop shop for oil sands statistics. I'd like production data, land mass, environmental impact – I'd like it all in one place. It IS possible. It's a distant dream, though. What we need is basically a Canadian version of the EIA, the U.S. Energy Information Agency has that information and there's also the BP World Information Statistical Book. There are avatars to that out there, useful and reliable sources of data. It can be done; we just don't do it here.

I would like to have an inside guy – someone who I could get information off the record from and that's probably my own fault. I'm sure there are guys out there who do have the inside track, like someone inside the organization that I could talk to off the record and get information that way. Basically, I think oil sands are important and I'm glad to be out here covering it. It's probably the biggest, at least one of the biggest issues affecting the country right now. You know it's important when it made The Daily Show.

I think the movement towards better environmental information, I think's that important. I think we need more open and transparent information about environmental indicators.

I wish that I had more time to understand and to really sink my teeth into what's going on. And I wish we had better industry sources, that's a big one – people who would be willing to have a really frank discussion about the challenges and what's being done. Because what often happens is that we get the line and it's hard to understand a lot of things. I mean even, we wanted to do a story about this really environmentally conscious employee of an oil and gas company who lived his life in a really extreme way to conserve every aspect of his life. And the company wouldn't allow him to speak to us and it seems just so ridiculous because that seems like the kind of story that they would. But everyone is so protective of information and of their company and so terrified of what will come out even its not, to me, in the end in their best interest.

I'd like to know more about public relations strategies of governments and industries, what goes on in the boardrooms of some of the companies. I would also like to know what goes on in private discussions of environmental groups. I'd like to know what goes on in private discussions of Canadian diplomats and bureaucrats, provincial bureaucrats, provincial people who are posted abroad. There could be all sorts of stuff that could provide more information and more insight.

An insider within the government and within some of the companies. But it would probably require me to be on a full-time oil sands beat to do that.

I would prefer to see more openness by government agencies, similar to US, where citizens can see early draft of documents/reports and track how the recommendations are changed over time as the government consults with industry officials.

More access to government access and comments.

APPENDIX 3: Untold Stories Journalist Quotes

What stories do you think are not being told about the Alberta Oil Sands?

The two major ones are ones I'd like to do a lot more on ... one is a real sense of what it's like to work in the oil sands. We get little glimpses here and there but I've talked to a lot of people, friends and relatives and others who've worked in the oil sands, and there are some incredible human interest stories that I don't think are being told. The second is, everyone talks about how we need to move to renewable fuels, how we need a post-carbon future. You get this from all sides, but there's very little reporting about how we're going to get there, and what that looks like. That's something (we) will be looking at actively. I find most of the stories that are written about the oil sands are repetitive, a war of words essentially.

There are a million that aren't being told – updates on tailings ponds, is in-situ really the golden goose; aboriginal participation and reaction to oil sands development.

One that isn't being well told is an environmental one: sulphur. The oil sands average five per cent sulphur. What are they going to do with all that sulfur? It's literally millions of tons, but you could widen that out to say byproducts, because their processes also produce coke, a byproduct, it's just like charcoal and there's thousands if not hundreds of thousands, millions of tons of that shit out there. And there was at one stage a quite controversial project in the Edmonton area for a new railway for all this crazy sulphur. I wonder what the hell ever happened to that?

Another piece is to find out what is happening with the plan to start shipping oil sands production by rail. Canadian National Railway is heavily promoting this. Canadian Pacific Railway is getting involved. These things are liable to spring to life if there is a decision in the United States not to allow the second stage of the Keystone Pipeline – that's the one they are having all the arguments about – so if that gets turned down all this other stuff is going to leap to life, the West Coast TransMountain pipeline tankers tariff change that will increase tariff shipments, the rail shipping.

Oh, plenty. There are a lot not being told. I always get these anonymous phone calls about incidents onsite that you never hear about, the leaching from the pipelines onsite from some sites that will spew oil onto aboriginal land, and you don't hear about it. The actual number of wildlife that are lost to tailings ponds. You hear these stories through the community grapevine, so you say to them, the next time you see an oil spray coming from a pipeline, call us but you never get that call. Which is unfortunate. There's so much going on you don't know about.

There could be more written on a regular basis about local issues (air, water, habitat, health, economics, employment, investment, etc.) at big national and international media outlets. The topic is often boiled down to the bare minimum. It's sometimes difficult to get readers from far and wide interested in the topic beyond that very big sweep issues - climate change, energy security, geopolitics.

The mines are going to be a rapidly diminishing story. All oil sands are not created equal, and that's a story that's being lost. The fact that the future of the oil sands and the insitu/SAGD development that's occurring ... there are many, many new technologies that are arriving on the scene to try to do things in a more environmentally friendly way. It's being done in a more sustainable and responsible manner, it's something that's been consistently and, unfortunately successfully, being pushed aside by many of the critics.

Where to start? Within the context of mainstream media, the story about contaminants in the river system is not being told in a thorough way. Another story that is not being told revolves around the distinction between science and proprietary data, they are two different things. The importance of science in the debate.

There are so many stories are being told, but they are being told in ways that I feel miss really important details. One of the big stories not being told is the changing policy, the battle over policy, around environmental monitoring in the oil sands and the degree to which the last 12 months there has been a huge shift in how that monitoring that's going to be done. It's a huge story, it's going to change so much on how operations are done, or it ought to.

I think an underreported story is the role of the N.W.T, and the cross-territorial/provincial boundary issues when it comes to the emissions and contaminants. The role of the N.W.T government in future policy in the oil sands.

One of the really neat things is the degree of technology and the role of technology of developing the oil sands, whether the in-situ side or the mining side. For example the use of water or steam-assisted gravity, I really don't really know if all that is being told. In some case they are valid points to make. The technology that's going on in the oil sands is really quite remarkable and in a lot of ways I don't think that story is being told.

I'm sure there are lots of them. Like occupational health safety standards being violated or they're doing some kind of practices they're not supposed to be doing. Unless someone files a complaint with Alberta Health and Safety, then we don't know about it. We would have to go undercover to get this stuff but we don't have the resources/time.

I think there is a lot more to learn about the potential health implications.

The one thing that doesn't get the headlines that other things are, are actual scientific efforts that are being made by the various companies and organizations to do things like reduce tailings ponds and that type of thing. They do not get as much coverage as the actual environmental controversies.

One untold story is how little interesting R and D research is done, most money seems to be dedicated to carbon capture. Norway does some interesting research, I am surprised how little technological innovation there is here. So there's lack of good R& D.