The imperishable controversy over aquaculture

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ABSTRACT

Fish farming has been a recurring topic of debate, not the least in the news media. The media is an important source of information about the aquaculture industry and its products to the public. However, the media is also an important debate arena, enabling representatives of the public, stakeholders, authorities, and the industry to engage in discussions as well as to influence policy and regulations. This paper focuses on the continuous debates in news media, the topics and storylines discussed, the various actors participating, and their arguments. Through a study of the content, positions, and producers of debate contributions in nine Norwegian newspapers, this paper sheds light on the public debate on aquaculture and the present controversies. Drawing on discourse theory, it is argued that the concept of discursive conflicts offers important insights into the controversies surrounding aquaculture. Discourse coalitions unite seemingly dissimilar and independent actors, and shared story lines provide political momentum, reduce complexity and reify the debate. However, such coalitions also contribute to maintaining the debate in a deadlock.

1. Introduction

Aquaculture is controversial and triggers fierce public conflict across the world. The debate is particularly visible in the mass media [1–3] and is mostly concerned with farmed salmon, both as a food and as a product that has negative environmental consequences. The debate in Canada has been characterized as involving "*the most bitter and stubborn face-offs over industrial development ever witnessed*" [4: p. 3], and in Norway has been dubbed the "salmon war" [5]. The aquaculture controversy engages a wide range of actors, including scientists, environmentalists, journalists, lawyers, local farmers, sports anglers, native communities, gourmet chefs, and so forth. Simply put, the opposition is between those in favor of a flourishing industry producing food to a growing global population, and those who fear that such industrial production may have irreversible consequences for marine ecosystems. However, at its most fundamental, the conflict is about how much human beings should intervene in nature and, as shown earlier [1,6], reflects a global unease about the health and safety of modern methods of food production. As such, aquaculture is often presented as a complex activity that raises concerns about health, environmental, economic and socio-cultural issues.

In this article, the public debate on aquaculture is investigated as it is expressed through written debate contributions in nine newspapers in Norway. The research questions are: What is the controversy of aquaculture about, and why are prominent storylines and arguments seemingly repeated unabatedly?

2. Theoretical framework

The public debate about aquaculture takes place in a number of arenas, be it in public hearings, conferences, and the mass media, to name but a few. The arena metaphor [7] is here used to portray the symbolic location of the political actions of all social actors involved in a specific issue, namely the public discussion of aquaculture, its production methods, its environmental and social impact, and its product, the Atlantic salmon. Within a policy field several arenas may exist where actors are present to influence the policy process; this is also the case of aquaculture policy. However, here the focus is on the political actions taking place in the arena of the mass media in Norway, and, more specifically, the actions that took place in nine national, regional, and local newspapers through the years of 2012, 2013, and 2014.

2.1. Media influence and public opinion

Even though the degree of the media's influence remains a matter of uncertainty, it is evident that the media have an impact on public opinion [6,8,9]. The media plays an important part in how people receive information about news and people's images of our modern world (our perception of reality) are constructed in a process domi-

nated by the mass media [10,11]. To a significant degree, public opinion as well as politics is shaped by the news media's selection and presentation of their news stories. By giving certain issues differential attention (by covering or ignoring the issue) the media influences our perception of what the most important issues are of the day. Issues emphasized in the news media will over time be regarded as important by the public [12–14].

Public opinion is also subject to media framing, which means that the media highlights some aspects of an issue, and ignores others [14]. A frame can be defined so as to suggest what the essence of an issue is and what the controversy surrounding an issue is about, e.g. like a central story line or idea. An important mechanism for framing an issue is the packaging of information, e.g. the symbols and language used to describe the issue. The symbols used may pertain to the frame or to the reasons and justifications, and help construct the frame/ interpretive package. Examples of symbols associated with a frame are visual images, metaphors, and depictions [10]. A useful approach to investigating such frames and how the media portrays aquaculture is discourse analysis.

2.2. Discourse analysis

Discourse analysis starts from the premise that the way in which people talk about aspects of the world is not a neutral reflection of reality, but rather plays an active role in creating and changing it. Discourses are important to study because they play a key role in the process of political change. Discourses are where political debate takes place, and where different actors engage in a competition for discursive hegemony by seeking support for their versions of reality. Discourses define what types of actions are considered rational and logical and which ones are unthinkable [15]. Discourse analysis is often applied to study controversies, where two or more discourses compete for hegemony [16–18].

In line with Hajer [19], an argumentative approach inspired by Foucault in which interest is understood as being constructed through discourse is applied here. According to Hajer [19], the development of a new political discourse may create a change in people's perception of problems and opportunities, which may lead to new coalitions. As Hajer explains:

> The argumentative approach focuses on the level of the discursive interaction and argues that discursive interaction (i.e. language in use) can create new meanings and new identities, i.e. it may alter cognitive patterns and create new cognitions and new positionings. Hence discourse fulfills a key role in processes of political change [19, p. 59]

Hajer proposes three tools for examining discourses: similarity in metaphors and rhetorical concepts; dominant storylines; and discourse alliances consisting of authors applying these concepts and storylines.

2.3. Metaphors and imagery

Metaphors and other rhetorical concepts are used to create consistent, coherent, and powerful images. Schön [20] has argued that metaphors provide a common ground between various discourses. Complex research work is reduced to a visual presentation or a catchy one-liner. All uncertainty and all the conditionality of the original knowledge claims are erased and replaced by statements that are still true, but simplistic and shallow. The use of metaphors can thus be seen as a way of reproducing scientific findings in a non-scientific language. They often have strategic policy implications [21, p. 107], and can point the finger of blame and imply responsibility for remedial actions. Metaphors and other rhetorical concepts are an integral part of story lines.

Story lines refer to a condensed form of narrative in which metaphors, analogies, clichés, historical references, and so forth, are employed and used by people as 'short hand' in discussions. Hajer defines story lines as: *narratives on social reality through which elements from many different domains are combined and that provide actors with a set of symbolic references that suggest a common understanding* [19, p. 62]. Through story lines the problem is defined, solutions are proposed, and blame and responsibility are distributed. Through story lines actors are positioned as victims, problem solvers, perpetrators, top scientist or scaremongers. Complexity and uncertainty are erased so that story lines may serve as a narrative that many can subscribe to. Story lines allow for the clustering of knowledge and have a prominent role in the creation of discourse alliances. A discourse-coalition refers to a group of actors that shares the usage of a particular set of story lines over a particular period of time. Hajer [22] describes discourse coalitions as alliances of knowledge bearers. Discourse coalitions are defined as the totality of a set of story lines, the actors involved and the areas where the discursive activity takes place. Actors are not necessarily closely related to each other, but are united through shared story lines. Actors are attracted to specific sets of story lines for different reasons, but are united through a common understanding of the social and moral order the story line portrays.

Shared story lines provide political momentum. No matter what their institutional position is, the actors *who are able to impose their interpretations of reality on others gain substantial control over political debates* [22, p. 6]. Such actors are elsewhere called 'policy entrepreneurs' or 'claim-makers' [10,23,24]. By framing public issues to garner support from the media, public, and political actors, these claim-makers are working to shape public debate. Claim-makers aim to construct a social problem, and to be successful they typically must identify a potential triggering device, such as natural catastrophes, ecological change etc. [10]. *If claim-makers are able to persuade others of the legitimacy of their concerns and are able to recruit early converts, a collective definition of a problem forms; and to the extent that collective definitions of problems come to supplant individualistic definitions, a social problem can be said to exist.* [24, p. 38].

2.4. Debate contributions

The opinion pages in newspapers play a distinct role in public debates. It is the only place in the newspaper where members of the public can contribute as writers. However, the pages are also open to journalists (most often writing as freelancers in our material), and government officials, including members of parliament. The opinion pages are often viewed as a key site for public debate [25] and allow for the expression of opinions both based on personal experience as well as objective knowledge claims. The position of and the space allocated to the opinion pages vary greatly between newspapers and countries [25], but have in most Norwegian newspapers a very prominent role. The media desk is the gatekeeper to get published, and will select contributions that ensure the ongoing relevance of the opinion pages, and which contribute to the overall circulation of the newspaper. The desk may reject contributions, but the desk is often looking for a multiplicity of voices [26]. Hill [27] found that the opinions expressed in debate contributions were similar to public opinion polls on the topic in question. However, others are more reluctant to view the opinion pages as a good representation of public opinion [28]. In this paper debate contributions are viewed as a representation of the public debate in the mass media, as one arena among others for public debate. To get a contribution published, an author will attempt to address and convince both the media desk and the general public. And as former research [25,28,29] has shown, the media desks select debate contributions based on four main rules.

The first one considers the structure and form of contributions, especially in terms of brevity, and whether the message is to the point and explicit, and employ a primarily argumentative style. Brevity is important due to the newspapers structure and format. There is limited space and the text should be appropriate for the readers of the