



Original research article

Who cares about climate change? The mass media and socio-political acceptance of Canada's oil sands and Northern Gateway Pipeline



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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Unconventional fossil fuels
Oil sands
Climate change
Media analysis
Climate policy

ABSTRACT

Canada's proposed Northern Gateway Pipeline would carry unrefined bitumen from the Alberta oil sands to the coast of British Columbia for international export. Socio-political acceptance or opposition can determine the fate of such projects, and media coverage offers insight into public discourse, including how the project is framed. We analyzed print media coverage of the project in six Canadian newspapers, including 2097 articles published from 2008 to 2014. The objectives were threefold: 1) to characterize media framing of the project using a risk/benefit framework; 2) to identify regional differences in framing between the two affected provinces; and 3) to investigate the framing of environmental risk. Our findings demonstrate that public debate is dominated by environmental risk of the project with a tendency to frame the project as a trade-off between economic benefit and environment risk. Despite a strongly regional distribution of risks and benefits, we did not find substantial differences in framing between newspapers in the two affected provinces. Finally we found that the environmental risk frame was presented predominately according to potential local impacts due to pipeline or tanker rupture. The global impacts of climate change were rarely mentioned despite the large carbon footprint of the Alberta oil sands.

1. Introduction

This paper examines media framing of a proposed bitumen pipeline project in Canada: the Northern Gateway Pipeline (NGP). Proposed by Enbridge Inc., the NGP would bring diluted bitumen from the Alberta oil sands to the northern coast of British Columbia. Wüstenhagen et al. [1] explain that socio-political acceptance of energy is a complex interplay between the general public (or citizens), key stakeholders and policy actors—where media can reflect the discourse within and between these groups. Within this dynamic, media is not itself a neutral actor. Media coverage can frame issues in specific ways. It can also influence policy agendas and, conversely, be used strategically by policy actors to emphasize specific framings of the issues of the day [2]. Thus, although one of several factors, media can play a critical role in socio-political acceptance of energy projects by framing public debate [3–6]. As a result, analysis of news media is one way to gauge societal discourse about energy deployment [7–9].

Debate over the Northern Gateway Pipeline, other pipelines projects, and oil sands more generally are framed differently depending on the context and the source or speaker. As a result, varying degrees of emphasis are placed on the potential economic benefits; concerns about increased greenhouse gas emissions; risk to local air, land, and water

resources (at extraction sites and along pipeline routes) [10–12]; and the role of First Nations [13,14]. While much of the environmental debate has focused on local risks (e.g. oil spill impacts), there is potential for the issue to become a major front in the debate regarding increasing production of Alberta oil sands more generally. Where construction of new export infrastructure is framed by proponents as necessary for continued oil sands expansion, opposition to new pipelines is a means to protest oils sands development and call for a more proactive climate change mitigation agenda [15].

From a climate change perspective, the issue of expanding the use of fossil fuels has obvious implications for a carbon-constrained world. The increased extraction, processing and distribution of unconventional fossil fuels present a particularly important threat to climate mitigation efforts both because it increases the available fossil fuel reserves and because of the additional energy input required to produce unconventional fuels. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and other researchers have stated that to increase the probability of limiting global warming to 2 °C or lower, only about 1000 Gt of CO₂ can be burned—an additional 500 Gt from current levels which is projected to be exceeded by 2040 even with existing and planned climate policies [16–18]. Researchers estimate that the current economically viable reserves far exceed this “carbon budget” (2900 Gt CO₂) with 11,000 Gt

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of CO₂ in resources that could become viable in the future [19]. To those concerned with threat of climate change, new pipeline infrastructure may be interpreted as an “emblematic issue” [20] representing the larger problem of society-wide inaction on climate change. This climate change framing has appeared in other pipeline controversies such as the vocal opposition to the Keystone XL pipeline by environmental organizations in the United States [15].

We explore these issues using the case of the Northern Gateway Pipeline, a project that has been highly controversial in Canada. The proposed pipeline holds important implications for climate change given that increased pipeline capacity is tied to expansion of the Alberta oil sands. The present study has three research objectives. The first is to characterize media framing of Canada’s Northern Gateway Pipeline using a risk/benefit framework. The second objective is to identify any regional differences in framing between the two directly affected provinces: Alberta and British Columbia. For this particular project, Alberta stands to gain economically while British Columbia will bear a disproportionate amount of the environmental risk. Moreover, a study using 2013 survey of Canadian citizens [21] found greater support for the project in Alberta even when controlling for demographics and individual values. Building on this early work, our present study was designed to examine whether there was a quantitative difference in how national and regional media framed the project. The final objective of the study is to investigate the role of environmental risk framing—particularly the role of climate change versus other environmental impacts.

We achieve these objectives through analysis of print media coverage of the Northern Gateway Pipeline, specifically, 2097 articles published by six major Canadian newspapers between 2008 and 2014, inclusively. We find that the controversy was, as expected, framed predominately as an issue of economic benefit versus environment risk. Despite the regional distribution of risks and benefits, we do not find significant differences in framing between Alberta and British Columbia. In terms of environmental risk framing, climate change was only mentioned in 4.5% of the articles. Thus instead of framing the risk as global due to impact of climate change, environmental risk was presented as primarily local impacts due to terrestrial or aquatic spills of diluted bitumen or general environmental risk.

2. The Northern Gateway Pipeline

Oil sands are large bitumen deposits that consist of crude bitumen, silica sand, clay, minerals, and water. Extraction from Alberta’s oil sands has increased significantly from 0.2 million barrels per day in 1990 to 1.9 million barrels per day in 2013 [22]. Oil sands production exceeds Canadian domestic demand and are therefore dependent on the ability to transport bitumen to markets [23,24]. Because existing pipelines are reaching capacity, proponents of oil sands development have proposed the construction of several new pipelines to better access international markets [25,26].

One such proposal is the Northern Gateway Pipeline that would extend from northern Alberta to the coast of British Columbia providing marine access to Asian markets. Proposed by Enbridge Inc., the project would include approximately 1170 km of twinned pipeline carrying on average 525,000 barrels per day of unrefined bitumen west for export and, in the opposite direction, 193,000 barrels per day of imported condensate (the substance used to dilute bitumen so that it can be transported by pipeline). In addition, a marine terminal with two tanker berths and 19 tanks for bitumen and condensate would be built in Kitimat, British Columbia. The terminal would have the capacity to serve 220 ship calls per year.

The NGP proposal was first launched in 2005 and in 2006 the federal Minister of the Environment referred the project to a joint review panel between the National Energy Board, the regulatory body charged with overseeing pipeline construction, and the Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency. At the request of the proponent, the review was

postponed and thus it was not until May 2010, that Northern Gateway Pipelines Partnership Limited (a division of Enbridge Inc.) formally filed a regulatory application under the joint review panel. This signaled the beginning of what would become a highly contested review process.

The project was strongly opposed by environmental organizations in British Columbia out of concern for the impacts of an oil spill in remote and potentially fragile ecosystems along the pipeline route or in the coastal waters of northern British Columbia. The NGP project was also seen as a means to justify further growth of the Alberta oil sands and its carbon footprint [15]. A number of First Nations also opposed the project based on the potential impact to their ancestral lands and claims that the consultation and decision-making process violated their territorial and treaty rights.

Opposition to the project was evident in the regulatory review. The number of people who applied to speak at the joint review panel’s public hearings was so large that the review process was extended by a year. Opponents also raised issues with the review process itself. One contentious issue was that the terms of reference of the joint review panel did not officially account for the upstream greenhouse gas emissions from oil sands production even though the economic benefits of the same production were included in the project rationale [14]. In addition, in the midst of the review process, the federal government made significant changes to the legislation governing the process. Among other things, these changes set a two year timeline for project review, limited the scope of the “environmental effects” considered, limited public participation, and allowed the federal cabinet to override the ruling of the joint review panel [27]. Although these changes did not apply to the NGP review process, they were seen as a government response to public opposition to the project and an attempt to streamline the review of subsequent pipeline projects. Fuelling the controversy, in 2012 the Prime Minister and several cabinet ministers made negative public statements about opponents of the project [28]. The provincial government of British Columbia also weighed into the debate by formally opposing the project in the review process and issuing five conditions that would need to be met before it would support the project. In December 2013, the joint review panel submitted its report to the federal government recommending approval provided 209 conditions were met. The panel concluded: “The potential adverse environmental outcomes are ... outweighed by the potential societal and economic benefits” [29].

In June 2014, the federal government formally granted conditional approval based on the joint review panel’s recommendations. In 2016, with the certificates due to expire at the end of the year, Enbridge filed for a three-year extension. At the time, the project was facing a multitude of legal challenges from eight First Nations, four environmental organizations, and one trade union. It had also failed to secure supply contracts that were necessary conditions to proceed with the project. In June 2016, the Federal Court of Appeal overturned the federal approval based on the finding that the federal government had not adequately consulted with indigenous communities along the pipeline route [30]. In late 2016, a Liberal federal government (elected in 2015 after the project was approved) rejected the project. It also recommitted to a campaign promise to ban tanker traffic on British Columbia’s northern coast effectively ruling out subsequent proposals for the project.

3. Framing energy and climate change in the media

Wüstenhagen et al.’s [1] framework for social acceptance contains three dimensions: socio-political acceptance, community acceptance, and market acceptance. As such it entails more than social license or the ability “...of a company to engage in a certain activity in relative harmony with the local community and other stakeholders” ([31], p. 51). Social acceptance also encompasses the acceptance of technologies and policies by the market and the public, more broadly. Because the oil and oil transportation industries are well established in Canada, in this case,

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