



Original research article

Energy security and human security in a Dutch gasquake context: A case of localized performative politics

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ABSTRACT

From the late 1980s, the natural gas extraction in the Netherlands has experienced an increasing number of ever stronger gasquakes (induced earthquakes due to gas extraction). This paper offers a security analysis of the accompanying debate on the material consequences and organization of the gas extraction between the threatened local population, the knowledge institutes analyzing the gasquakes, and the government and extraction industry. This paper studies how these parties make sense of the gasquakes through a combination of securitization theory and the flat relationality offered by new materialism, which forces the two conflicting securitization claims to be analyzed in their local sociotechnical and material context. The resulting analysis shows how the gas debate is structured by a shared security of supply understanding. An understanding which for a long time has been questioned by the local population on its safety and cost implications. However, it took 25 years until their claims were accepted and the security of supply understanding shifted to a focus on minimal extraction volumes. An acceptance that can only be explained through a self-reinforcing combination of security claims, actual material events, increasing measurements (following security calls), shifting value judgements and increasing audience acceptance (creating additional speech actors).

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1. Introduction

The Netherlands has been developing natural gas fields since the discovery of a large field in the region of Groningen in the 1950s. By 2015, this has resulted in 275 billion euro of state revenue as well as an infrastructure that connects almost all of the Dutch households to these gas fields for heating and cooking purposes. Simultaneously, the Groningen gas field is drained to roughly one-third of its original low calorific reserves (680 of its original 2800 billion m³). Unfortunately, from the mid-1980s onwards the areas above the fields have experienced light earthquakes, which have been increasing in magnitude and frequency (Fig. 1). For local residents, the everyday experience and (potential deadly) consequences of these earthquakes are conflicting with the long-standing national economic and security of supply concerns of the Dutch government and European energy markets. For a long time, the concerns for earthquakes remained limited to a small number of Groningen inhabitants. This changed with the 2012 Huizinge earthquake,

which, as the strongest and most heavily experienced earthquake in the Groningen area to date, led to a large public debate and a string of reports on all aspects of the Dutch natural gas extraction and ultimately to a cap on extraction as of 2014. Consequently, the question is, why, after years of neglect, the security concerns of an initially small number of local residents suddenly superseded the energy security concerns of policy makers and energy scholars working on the Dutch gas and energy supplies. In other words, this paper studies the security politics behind an understanding of energy security.

Within the literature, energy security has been described as a 'slippery', 'fuzzy' and 'multidimensional' concept [1,2]. Definitions vary widely, but simultaneously often share common points of interest building around notions of security of supply, vital systems, and environmental and economic energy (in)security concerns [3,4]. As such 'the energy security concept nicely weaves together disparate policy issues into one basket ([5] p. 152).' Consequentially, the discussion on how energy security is used and defined seems ultimately a context bound one [1,6]. As Pasqualetti ([7] p. 278) remarks in his reflection on a two-day meeting of 40 energy security experts: 'Any discussion of energy security must recognize that it varies from one place and one culture to another, especially at the household level'. This is resolved in multiple ways. More traditional historical and geopolitical policy analyses draw conclusions

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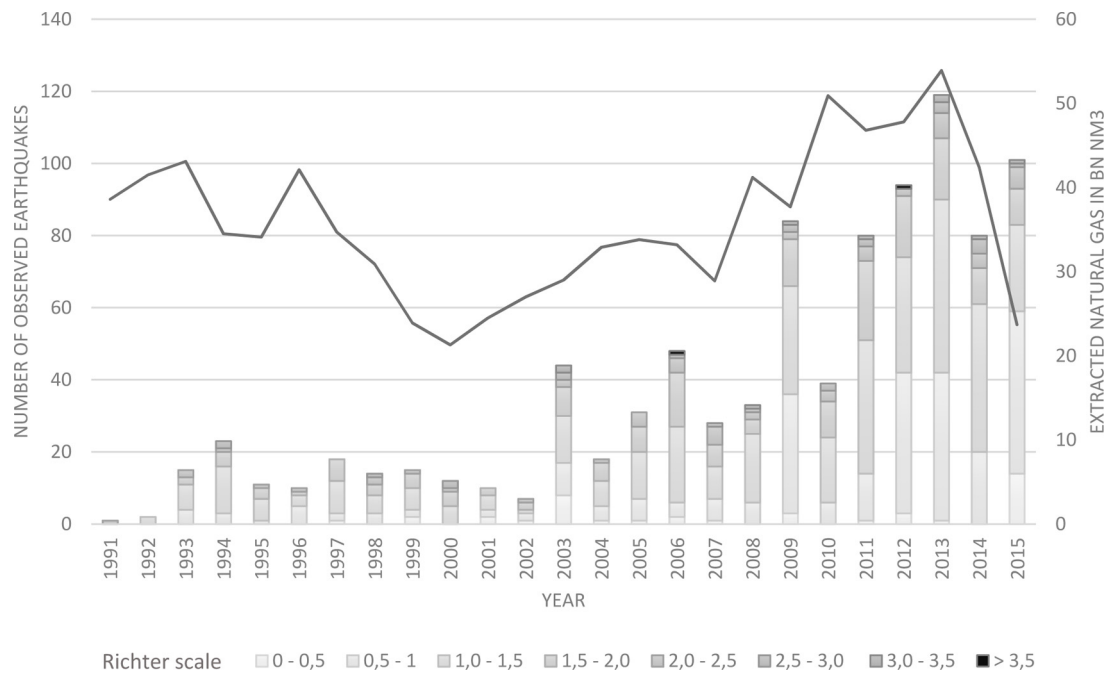


Fig. 1. Groningen Earthquakes and Extraction Volume until October 2015.

Source: After NAM [39,50], with data from KNMI [40] and NAM [39,50]

from the debates they describe [8,9]. Another prevalent approach is to map and develop the range of indicators and metrics used to analyze energy security [3,10,11]. In a similar line, Cherp and Jewell ([6] p. 334), two strong proponents of a contextual approach, confirm the importance of ‘social reality in shaping perceptions of truth’ and identify a range of story lines about energy security, which they then categorize into a framework that can be used for further analysis.

Elsewhere, they argue that ‘energy security is an instance of security in general’ ([84] p. 415) and thus needs to inquire about the often taken for granted values and assumptions behind energy security. This paper follows the notion that energy security, whether defined by scholars or as a shared understanding of participants, is part of a wider political spectrum. However, instead of defining what energy security is, it approaches the context bound nature of energy security by studying *how* it works. How one of its elements, in this case security of supply, becomes what those involved understand it to be, how it changes over time and how it shapes debates about energy production, transport and consumption in the meantime. ‘The need for empirical investigation into the ramifications of using (...) energy security [claims], for what purpose and by whom ([5] p. 153)’ is not a new question, but due to its relatively small sample size remains an imperative one. Within the energy security literature it is studied mainly from a constructivist perspective on language and discourse [12,13] or from Securitization Theory [5,14–18].

The discussion below builds on these studies in two ways. First, the gasquake debate offers an analysis of a central energy security concept, security of supply, in its broader societal context [15]. As such, it does not study competing understandings of energy security [5] or the linguistic construction of a specific energy security understanding [12,17]. Instead it shows how the Dutch security of supply understanding is influencing the debate and in turn is shaped by the resistance it faces coming from the safety concerns of the local population. This repetitive interaction between these two security concerns builds on a broader relational understanding that is at the heart of this paper. It is a relationality that, second, extends the discursive focus above by incorporating ideas of securi-

tization into the flat relationality offered by New Materialist studies [19–21], in particular Actor-Network Theory [22,23]. A flat relationality puts the shared understandings of security of supply and safety on an equal footing to the materiality of the earthquakes and the models used by the knowledge institutes. In other words, it reduces the analytical importance of the security claims by forcing the observer to study the security claims as part of their wider constantly changing context.

The analysis itself builds on media coverage, news briefs, (court) statements and a number of reports, among them the 2015 report by the Dutch Safety Board (DSB) on the decision-making process behind the Dutch natural gas extraction from 1959 until 2014 [24]. Although the debate is still ongoing, this paper focusses specifically on the period following the Huizinge earthquake in 2012 up to the autumn of 2015, as by then most of the major policy changes had taken place, including the decision to cap the extraction volume [25].

This paper continues in Section 2 with an explication of the theory and subsequent contribution of this paper. Section 3 introduces the Huizinge earthquake and its consequences. Besides a discussion of the gasquake itself, this section touches in particular on a report from the main regulatory body, the State Supervision of Mines (SSM), which studied the Huizinge earthquake and shows how it is this report that actually shifted the value judgement behind the assessments of the decision-makers. Section 4 discusses the internationally encapsulated position of the gas-industrial complex, while Section 5 looks more closely at the safety and security claims of the locals. Section 6 moves on to discuss the knowledge politics behind the earthquakes in order to highlight the struggle over the uncertainty behind the scientific models and how security considerations play a role in this process. The reflection brings these lines together.

2. Contextualizing security as part of a situated and flat performative relationality

This paper and the gasquake debate offers four main additions to the literature mentioned above. First, it completely conflates

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