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Fracking in the Polish press: Geopolitics and national identity

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HIGHLIGHTS

- The general tone of Polish media reporting is positive and emphatic about the benefits of fracking.
- The geopolitical dimension of fracking overrides the technological/scientific dimension.
- The implementation of fracking is constructed as a national priority.
- Opposition to fracking is constructed as counter-normative and “anti-Polish”.
- Representations impede open and constructive dialogue about energy policy.

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ABSTRACT

In a context of resource scarcity and political instability, new energy sources and technologies are being explored in many parts of the world and exploited in some. One of these new energy sources is shale gas and one of the countries seeking to decrease its energy dependence and increase its energy security is Poland which is largely dependent on gas and oil imports from Russia. This article presents the results of a thematic content analysis of articles reporting on shale gas/fracking published in *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Rzeczpospolita*, two leading Polish newspapers, from 1 January 2010 to 31 December 2012. Findings suggest that in media reporting the geopolitical dimension of fracking overrides the technological/scientific dimension and that representations are overwhelmingly positive. Positive representations are bolstered through particular linguistic framings. It is argued that the Polish press has polarized the debate on fracking in a particular (positive) direction, which has silenced an open and constructive debate concerning energy policy in Poland and constructed criticism of fracking as counter-normative and “un-Polish.” The potential socio-political and policy implications of these media representations are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Energy security and independence have become important geopolitical concerns in the modern world. Novel energy technologies, such as carbon capture and storage (CCS) and geoengineering, are being discussed partly as a means of ensuring CO₂ reduction (Nerlich and Jaspal, 2012, 2013), while at the same time there is also a pressing geopolitical need to find novel sources of energy especially within nation-states, rather than importing them from others.

One novel source of fossil fuel explored in this context of climate change, resource scarcity and security concerns is shale gas, one of a number of unconventional natural gases trapped in

deep geological formations. Shale gas is extracted by induced hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, whereby high-pressure water with additives is used to increase fissures in the shale rock layer and thereby extract natural gas embedded within the layer (see The Royal Society and The Royal Academy of Engineering, 2012). Shale gas is a *natural gas* and is therefore often claimed to have a lower carbon footprint compared to traditional fossil fuels (Engelder, 2011). It is sometimes positioned as a bridging or transitional energy source and is argued to contribute to climate change mitigation. However, debates are emerging about the threat posed by fracking to water resources (Finewood and Stroup, 2012), about large-scale methane leakage (Slezak, 2012), and also about fracking as a distraction from efforts to reduce carbon emissions (Schrag, 2012).

Previous research into representations and perceptions of fracking highlights the controversy surrounding the practice and the socio-political barriers that have impeded its full implementation in some parts of the US and in Western Europe (Jaspal and

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Nerlich, 2014; Jaspal et al., 2014a,b). In this article we want to extend this analysis to Poland, where fracking is being promoted as a viable option for energy security and independence, in contrast to emerging opposition to fracking in several other European countries (Johnson, 2014; O'Hara, 2014). Unlike in other European countries, fracking in Poland is entwined with geopolitics—it has been depicted as a game-changer because it is regarded as a means of liberating Poland from dependence on Russian energy. Therefore, Poland is an important cultural and political context for considering how the debate on fracking is developing in different countries. In the context of CCS, Mander and Gough (2006, p. 6) have argued that “[t]he way in which the media report any new technology can radically affect the success of its implementation—how it is received by the public and other stakeholders as well as decision-makers in government and business”. In this article we explore how the Polish press has represented fracking and the hopes, fears and expectations associated with it.

1.1. Energy policy in Poland

Black and brown coal has historically played a significant role in the Polish economy and in energy production. Black coal has been exported since before World War II and that process was accelerated during the communist era. However, due to the rapid growth in domestic energy consumption, black coal reserves began to decline rapidly. Despite this, in 2006 91% of Polish electric energy production still consisted of brown and black coal. The construction of the first Polish nuclear power station, based on Soviet technology, began in the early 1980s, but was abandoned in the wake of public protests. According to the 2011 Polish Ministry of Economy document,¹ imported gas currently constitutes 13% of Poland's energy demand, of which 80% is imported from Russia.² Over the last 20 years attempts have been made to import gas from other sources (Norway, Azerbaijan), but with limited success. In 2006 the Polish government decided to construct the LNG-Terminal in Swinoujście (North-West Poland) with a view to reducing its reliance on Russian gas imports. In order to further diversify its energy mix, in 2009 the Polish government announced its plan for the construction of a new nuclear plant (Chmielewski, 2013). However, neither of the two projects is complete. Although Poland's energy mix is diverse and the role of gas in this mix is relatively small, Poland remains reluctantly reliant upon Russia for most of its gas imports. Against the historical backdrop of Soviet influence on Poland, the question of Russian gas remains a point of geopolitical contention. Therefore, claims that Poland may have the largest shale gas deposits in Europe induced, at least for a while, a sense of optimism about 'liberating' Poland from Russian gas imports and securing energy independence.³

1.2. Media debates about fracking

In Poland fracking is still an emerging and future-oriented technology which is shaped mainly by hopes and expectations. Since 2011, there have been media reports that Poland may have Europe's largest reserves of shale gas, which could significantly boost the Polish economy, and that the shale gas “treasures” located in Polish territory may “free Eastern Europe from the stranglehold of Russian gas” and thereby safeguard Poland's

energy independence (Evans-Pritchard, 2013). However, it is also noteworthy that in its 2012 report on shale gas the Polish Geological Institute provided only modest estimates of shale in Poland.⁴

As fracking is already underway in the US, where it has largely been represented as a success-story (Wolfgang, 2013), Polish advocates of fracking often point to the US to justify its endorsement of the technology. Although socio-political opposition to fracking has not manifested itself on a scale comparable to that of Western Europe, there have been reports that some Polish villagers believe that shale gas exploration threatens their livelihoods (Materka, 2012). Unlike other European contexts, such as France, which have imposed moratoria on shale gas explorations because of environmental, political and social concerns,⁵ Polish leaders appear to be expediting shale gas exploration in the country (Atkins, 2013; Johnson and Boersma, 2013).

Fracking has attracted increased media attention globally since around 2010. Given that traditional media are still one of the main sources of information flow between policy makers, industrialists and public perceptions of salient issues (Boykoff, 2011), it is surprising that media reporting on fracking has not attracted more empirical attention. Two recent articles outline the social representations of fracking in the UK broadsheet press (Jaspal and Nerlich, 2014) and in online media (Jaspal et al., 2014b). Using thematic analysis, Jaspal and Nerlich (2014) found that in a short space of time, as the socio-political debate on fracking developed, UK media reporting was initially characterized by a period of optimism and subsequently by scepticism. The period of scepticism focused principally upon the constructed risks associated with fracking, such as health and ecological risks. Notions of threat and coping were central to the media debate on fracking. Similarly, Jaspal et al. (2014b) study of representations of fracking on YouTube found that widely-available video clips about fracking focused mainly on environmental risks and economic benefits, but that they also rendered salient issues of human health and well-being.

In this article, we examine the dynamics of the debate on fracking in the Polish press in two major Polish newspaper outlets, namely *Rzeczpospolita*, which is a centre-right and business-oriented broadsheet with regular law-related editions, and *Gazeta Wyborcza*, which is a centre-left broadsheet and was originally the voice of the Solidarity trade union (Ash, 2002). *Rzeczpospolita* is a privately owned newspaper with moderately conservative and nationalistic stance, although it does not overtly favour any particular political party in Poland. Conversely, *Gazeta Wyborcza* is also privately owned but has a social liberal political stance, although it does not overtly support any particular political party. The two newspapers are generally regarded as rivals and, thus, an analysis of both newspapers' coverage of fracking is likely to provide a holistic view of representations of fracking.

During the communist era the press and all media outlets were controlled by the government and were subject to state censorship. However, since the fall of communism in 1989, the free press market has developed rapidly and includes a range of privately owned newspapers and magazines. The Polish constitution, adopted in 1997, guarantees freedom of the press, prohibits any preventive censorship and forbids any licensing requirements for the press (as in the case of the radio and television). Accordingly to Freedom House,⁶ the Polish press scores 25/100 on freedom of expression (with 0 indicating highest level of freedom). There is long-standing recognition amongst communication and media researchers that the press media perform an important agenda-

¹ Polish Information and Foreign Investment Agency, Energy Sector in Poland, http://www.paiz.gov.pl/files/?id_plik=19610.

² International Energy Agency, Energy Policies of IEA Countries, 2011 Review, http://www.iea.org/publications/freepublications/publication/Poland2011_web.pdf.

³ <http://www.economist.com/blogs/easternapproaches/2013/07/shale-gas-poland>.

⁴ <http://www.pgi.gov.pl/en/mineral-resources-en/shale-gas/4744-shale-gas-estimates.html>.

⁵ <http://keeptapwatersafe.org/global-bans-on-fracking/>.

⁶ <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2012/poland#U7aEkq1dXho>.

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