

Storylines in the Sands: News, Narrative, and Ideology in the Calgary Herald

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ABSTRACT *This article presents a critical discourse analysis of the principal storylines through which the Calgary Herald framed the oil sands between May 1, 2010, and May 31, 2011. The analysis reveals that rather than avoid coverage of environmental protests and critiques, the Herald's narratives used these events to portray the oil and gas industry (and the province and people of Alberta) as victims of an aggressive and well-funded global environmental lobby. This framing not only defends the industry by dismissing environmental criticism of the oil sands as ill-informed and ideologically motivated, it also champions the idea that the provincial government must become a promotional petro-state whose main role is to actively defend the industry.*

KEYWORDS *Oil sands; Discourse analysis; News media; Ideology; Petro-state*

RÉSUMÉ *Cet article partage les résultats d'une analyse de discours critique des narratifs utilisés par le Calgary Herald du 1er mai 2010 au 31 mai 2011 à propos des sables bitumineux. Notre analyse démontre que le Calgary Herald n'évite pas les questions et critiques environnementales. Nous avons plutôt trouvé que le Herald les utilisent pour représenter l'industrie du pétrole (et, par extension, la province et les citoyens de l'Alberta) comme des victimes de campagnes médiatiques agressives subventionnées par de puissantes ONG. Nous suggérons que cette stratégie discursive non seulement rejette toute critiques comme ignorants et idéologiques. Ça justifie aussi l'idée que le gouvernement de l'Alberta doit devenir un « pétro-État » en défendant plus activement les intérêts de l'industrie.*

MOTS CLÉS *Sables bitumineux; Analyse du discours; Médias; Idéologie; Pétro-État*

Discourse, storylines and the Alberta oil sands¹

Over the last decade, the oil sands developments in northern Alberta have attracted increasing levels of attention from Canadian as well as international media. Most recently, debate about the construction of two new pipelines to expand bitumen exports (the Keystone XL in the mid-western U.S. and the Northern Gateway across northern British Columbia) has elevated the profile of the oil sands even further, raising broader concerns about their environmental impacts, both in terms of toxic effects

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on local ecologies and communities as well as their contribution to climate change (based on the higher levels of greenhouse gas emissions associated with mining and upgrading the tar deposits into more refined fuels). Proponents of the oil sands (and the associated pipeline construction) counter that they provide significant economic benefits, including high-paying employment, taxation revenue for governments, domestic energy security, and an overall stimulus to economic growth.

With a few notable exceptions, however, critical scholarship on the oil sands has been relatively sparse. The most comprehensive academic treatment of public discourse about the oil sands is Debra Davidson and Mike Gismondi's insightful *Challenging Legitimacy at the Precipice of Energy Calamity* (2011). The principal focus of their book is an exploration of how oil sands discourse functions to normalize capitalist exploitation of this resource and, more importantly, to *legitimate* the Alberta government (and, to a lesser extent, the Canadian federal government) as a "petro-state" (Karl, 1997) with an obligation to facilitate, coordinate, and subsidize such exploitation. Such discursive legitimation, however, has not gone unchallenged. Indeed, as industrial development of the oil sands has scaled up, the oil sands have been subject to increasingly intense cultural and ideological contestation, with different groups fighting to conceptualize, describe, and signify this resource in particular ways.

News media are among the most important venues in which the (il)legitimacy of the oil sands industry (and the Alberta petro-state) are discursively represented, negotiated, and contested; yet, the analysis of news plays a comparatively minor role in Davidson and Gismondi's (2011) text. While they occasionally reference news stories and editorials, their main emphasis is the "primary discourse" of politicians, government officials, corporations, scientists, environmental groups, First Nations, and concerned citizens. News media, to the extent they are considered at all, are implicitly positioned as gatekeepers and conduits for the words, images, and ideas of others. This gap has been reproduced in other scholarly literature on the oil sands, which tend to privilege the analysis of visual discourse, including industry advertising (Friedel, 2008), a 2009 photo essay from *National Geographic Magazine* (Remillard, 2011), and a promotional slide show produced by the province of Alberta (Takach, 2013). The only article that has focused on news media (Way, 2011) reviewed national Canadian press coverage between 2005 and 2007 to assess Prime Minister Stephen Harper's efforts to brand Canada as an "energy superpower," and was largely focused on business reporting. This overall lack of attention is especially noteworthy when compared to the substantial volume of recent work analyzing Canadian and U.S. reporting on climate change (e.g., Antilla, 2010; Boyce & Lewis, 2009; Boykoff, 2011; DiFrancesco & Young, 2011; Feldman, Maibach, Roser-Renouf & Leiserowitz, 2012; Gunster, 2011, 2012; Sonnett, 2010; Young & Dugas, 2011, 2012), or exploring the discursive politics of other energy sources, such as nuclear energy (e.g., Bickerstaff, Lorenzoni, Pidgeon, Poortinga & Simmons, 2008; Culley, Ogleby-Oliver, Carton, & Street, 2010; Doyle, 2011; Friedman, 2011; Luoma-aho & Vos, 2009; Perko, Turcanu, & Carle, 2012; Pralle & Boscarino, 2011).

In this article, we begin to address this gap through an analysis of how the *Calgary Herald* covered the oil sands between May 1, 2010 and May 31, 2011. The paper is part of the Postmedia newspaper chain that owns the majority of large regional newspapers

across Western Canada, as well as the *National Post*, which serves a national audience. In 2011, the *Herald* had an average daily circulation of 130,721, placing it among the top ten dailies in the country (Newspapers Canada, 2011). The *Herald* is also the Canadian daily newspaper that is most closely associated with the oil sands and it aggressively champions the resource as a key driver of national prosperity and economic growth. The recent leak of a Postmedia presentation given to the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP) suggests that this newspaper chain is especially eager to work with the Canadian oil and gas industry to “bring energy to the forefront of our national conversation” and “engage executives, the business community and the Canadian public to underscore the ways in which the energy sector powers Canada” (cited in Uechi, 2014, n.p.). Spearheading Postmedia’s “energy beat” as the preeminent source of news and opinion about Canadian energy development, the *Herald* punches above its weight in terms of shaping discourse about energy at a national as well as a regional level (with its news stories, editorials, and opinion pieces regularly featured in other venues, including the *National Post*). And yet, while the paper clearly possesses ideological sympathies and affinities with the industry and its proponents, it also has a mandate to provide objective coverage of the news of the day, as well as a range of analysis and opinion in order to represent the broader public interest. As such, it offers an ideal venue in which to examine the cultural and ideological labour of discursive legitimation. As the oil sands have moved, both literally and figuratively, from the business pages to the front page, the *Herald* has played a crucial role in supplying the frames, metaphors, and storylines through which the public has come to think and feel about the resource.

Our analytic framework builds on Davidson and Gismondi’s (2011) useful identification of legitimation as the constitutive ideological operation of oil sands discourse. As the oil sands have become increasingly associated with images of spectacular ecological devastation (e.g., Remillard, 2011), it has become more difficult to secure legitimation for their development. Alarming stories about “Canada’s ‘Mordor’” (Barlow cited in Ravensbergen, 2009, n.p.) have intensified pressure on industry proponents to engage in “diversionary framing” (Davidson & Gismondi, 2011) through which the exaggerated celebration of economic benefits distracts attention from the enormous (and disproportionately allocated and experienced) health and environmental risks. There is little doubt that this logic of diversion, as practiced by the federal and provincial governments and the oil sands industry, has helped to sustain public enthusiasm for oil sands development as well as dampen the awareness and concern of citizens about negative impacts. Insofar as the *Herald* is heavily dependent upon the information management strategies of government and industry, it has replicated this logic, with pro-oil sands stories, arguments and sentiments clearly outweighing more critical assessments of the resource.

Yet the *Herald*’s function as a newspaper also imposes real limits on its capacity to simply ignore or dismiss mounting concerns in favour of benign platitudes about environmental stewardship or economic growth. Instead, as criticism becomes newsworthy, the paper has little choice but to represent, address, and confront it in some fashion. In that sense, the paper’s discourse is often very different from the meticu-

lously crafted banality of industry and government public relations that strives to avoid controversy. The *Herald*, in contrast, has no such inhibition; indeed, the political economy of the news business imposes precisely the opposite logic, pulling the paper toward the front lines of the battle over the legitimacy of oil sands development. Indeed, one might say that the *Herald's* editorial board and many of its columnists (and, to a lesser extent, some of its reporters) function as an ideological vanguard for the industry as a whole.² They are often the first to directly engage with the claims and arguments of industry critics. They often assume the task of translating the technical discourse of industry and government into a populist vernacular that is meaningful to the public. Most importantly, they distill the flow of “raw” information about the oil sands into compelling *stories*, which they hope will resonate with their readers, allowing them to not only understand the resource (in highly specific ways) but quickly and easily develop their own political opinions about how it has been developed and managed.

In their work on climate change journalism, Katherine McComas and James Shanahan (1999) identify narrative as especially important in mass media, which they describe as “today’s most visible and important storytellers” (p. 37):

For mass media, translating issues into meaningful stories essentially involves dramatic decisions (i.e., how to portray issues in the most vivid and affecting manner possible). For news media, these include decisions about story lines, actors and themes ... that take into account shared social realities of storyteller and audience. Narratives also contribute to the formation and maintenance of value and value systems (Ball-Rokeach & Loges, 1996), which are tightly linked with beliefs, attitudes and behaviors. (p.37)

While an emphasis on stories in news is commonly used to highlight connections between narrative and news values, the use of stories to *build arguments* through which certain interpretations of events, issues, actors and phenomena are validated and others are criticized, is equally important. As Martin Hajer explains in his now seminal *The Politics of Environmental Discourse* (1995), argument is the practice through which discourses are dynamically assembled, reinforced, and challenged:

environmental politics [is] an argumentative struggle in which actors not only try to make others see the problems according to their views but also seek to position other actors in a specific way. (p. 53)

And the most effective way to position others is to tell stories about them. Indeed, Hajer (1995) privileges the *storyline* as both the principal rhetorical weapon and achievement of discursive struggle, defining it as

a generative sort of narrative that allows actors to draw upon various discursive categories to give meaning to specific physical or social phenomena. The key function of story-lines is that they suggest unity in the bewildering variety of separate discursive component parts of a problem. (p. 56)

Writing about British newspaper coverage of climate change, Anabela Carvalho (2007) defines ideology as:

a system of values, norms and political preferences, linked to a program of action vis-à-vis a given social and political order. People relate to each

other and to the world on the basis of value judgments, ideas about how things should be, and preferred forms of governance of the world. (p. 225)

Stories, we argue, are among the most compelling and persuasive discursive forms through which our values, norms, and political preferences are cultivated and reinforced; over time, the “unity,” coherence and moral certainty that they supply offer us the seductive prospect of anchoring ourselves within a particular view of the world. Ideological critique all too rarely ventures into the messy terrain of detailed narrative analysis. We argue, however, that attending to the recurring patterns of meaning and emotion that are generated when news media tell us stories is vital to understanding how ideologies—“values, norms and political preferences, linked to a program of action vis-à-vis given social and political order”—are experienced as normal, naturalized, and common-sense accounts of the world. Such accounts allow us to not only understand the important issues of the day, but also to quickly and easily develop opinions and judgments about them. In addition, our desire for the “generative unity” that storylines can supply rises in proportion to our proximity to controversial or troubling issues. Stories that allow us to explain (away) growing concerns about the development of a resource that increasingly dominates the Canadian economy may well have become a more precious (and essential) commodity than the bitumen that they defend.

In this article, then, we aim to give the storytellers of the *Calgary Herald* their due in waging a discursive struggle to construct, strengthen, and protect the legitimacy of oil sands development. We examined every story the *Herald* published on the oil sands over the course of slightly more than one year, between May 1, 2010, and May 30, 2011. This period is useful since it includes both substantial portions of reporting that deal with relatively “mundane” everyday issues related to the oil sands, as well as a variety of high profile events, including a highly publicized visit by Hollywood director James Cameron, an international campaign for a tourist boycott of the province, as well as the release of several significant scientific reports on the environmental impacts of the oil sands. We constructed our dataset by performing a keyword search for “oil sands” and “tar sands” in the sample period, which allowed us to identify all relevant news items that focused primarily on the oil sands and related issues. Items that provided strictly descriptive financial information about oil and gas companies, as well as stories in which the oil sands played a minor role were filtered out and not included. These search criteria produced a sample of 562 items.

Our objective is not to undertake a conventional assessment of how “balanced” or “biased” the newspaper was in reporting such events. The *Herald's* broadly favourable perspective on the oil sands is evident from even a cursory reading. The more interesting question, however, is *how* this favourable perspective is communicated to its audience. What role do storylines play in the *Herald's* attempt to persuade its readers of its own position on the oil sands? What are the characteristics of such narratives, and how do they seek to persuade their readers? As such, in this article we aim to identify the broader, overarching storylines through which ongoing eruptions of critique were framed, challenged, contained, and defused in the *Herald's* pages.

Besieged: Industry as victim

Let's begin, then, with a story. Or, rather, a story *about* stories: the stories that *others*

supposedly tell about the oil sands. A couple of days before blockbuster director James Cameron visited northern Alberta in September 2010, *Herald* columnist Stephen Hunt (2010) wryly lamented the dramatic polarization that would surely follow in the director's wake. Earlier that year, a coalition of environmental groups had taken out a full-page ad in the Oscar edition of *Variety Magazine* that featured the tagline "Canada's *Avatar* sands" set over an image of an open-pit mine. "James Cameron," the ad noted, "has shined a light on a dark reality" (cited in Schwartz, 2010, n.p.). Now, opined Hunt, the director himself was coming to bear witness to environmental devastation that bore an uncanny resemblance to the scenes of destruction depicted in his film. The narrative danger, according to the *Herald*, was clear: inevitably, the many social, political, economic, and environmental complexities of the oil sands would disappear as they would be filtered through the naïve moral sensibilities and Manichean predispositions of Hollywood.

Want a four word summary of just about every Hollywood movie ever made? Heroes and evil villains ... That's what I love so much about the movies. They take the messy, muddy slog that is life and give it a little clarity of purpose. (Hunt, 2010, p. C3)

Cameron, Hunt suggested, would effortlessly script himself as the hero of the piece:

it's not much of a stretch to turn oil companies into evil villains, and root for Hollywood icons who only want to save the planet from the military-industrial complex that enables our fossil fuel addiction. (p. C3)

The accusation of melodramatic polarization, in which oil industry proponents are simplistically portrayed as ecological villains, has become a common rhetorical trope among those seeking to explain (away) mounting levels of negative attention. Three months before Cameron's visit, for example, the Canada West Foundation, a right-leaning think-tank, published a report that analyzed a year's worth of media coverage of the oil sands. Provocatively titled *Blackened Reputation: A Year of Coverage of Alberta Sands*, the report characterized Canadian media accounts of the sector as "generally" negative, driven by an imbalance between a majority of stories emphasizing an environmental frame and a smaller subset with a more positive message about the economic benefits of the resource (Gibbins, 2010). It argued that industry opponents held the upper hand in securing sensationalized (and exaggerated) coverage that cast the industry in a bad light. Reviewing the most publicized events of the year, it concluded that negative views were "more widely covered in all forms of media than the corresponding responses from the oil industry, the Alberta government and the federal government combined" (p. 7). Lacking the striking visuals of tailings ponds, First Nations protesters, and dead ducks, industry proponents were hopelessly outgunned in the PR battle:

An anti-oil sands campaigner can do more to move the public with just images than an oil sands defender could ever hope to. Photos of doomed ducks or simply photos of the tailings ponds will be covered more extensively in the media and re-posted online more often than any rebuttal from an oil sands company. There are no pro-oil sands photos with the

same impact, if only because energy security and job creation are harder to capture in a photograph than dying waterfowl. (p. 9)

While the report celebrated the comparatively meager attention which the oil sands had attracted in the international press (thereby countering the misperception that global media attention is fixated upon “dirty oil” from Alberta), it cautioned that “generally but not overwhelmingly” negative coverage was likely the best that the beleaguered industry could hope for in the future as it waged a defensive struggle against an environmentalist juggernaut intent on demonizing the oil sands at every opportunity.

“The oilsands have become ... the baby seal of the oil industry,” explained Don Thompson, head of the Oil Sands Developer’s Group, in an interview with the *Herald*. “We’re photogenic, we’re the next developable tranche of oil, we are in one location. So it’s easy to target us” (cited in Healing, 2011a, p. C4). Comments such as these were common in both news and opinion pieces, painting a portrait of an industry under siege. Rather than displacing or ignoring criticism, the *Herald* gave anti-oil sands campaigns extensive and ongoing coverage, casting each individual action or event as but a small part of a much larger war against the industry. Exaggerating the ubiquity, power, and presence of anti-oil sands discourse was among the most consistent and notable features of the paper during the review period. “Environmentalists,” noted a front-page story on proposed pipeline expansion, “can take credit for a well-organized, well-funded and persistent advertising and lobbying campaign against the Keystone XL project” (Alberts, 2011, p. A1). Well-seasoned with metaphors of war and violence, news items regularly featured reports about the threats posed by environmentalist critics:

Alberta’s oilsands are facing a new cross-border *assault*, with a community in the U.S. boycotting the resource. (Fekete, 2010b, p. A4, emphasis added)

Environmental groups are taking another *whack* at the oilsands, trying to capitalize on fallout from the BP oil spill. (Guttormson, 2010, p. A1, emphasis added)

The public relations *offensive* urges Americans not to visit Alberta because of the ecological toll of developing the resource ... the cross-border *volley* is just the latest in a series of recent *attacks* against the oilsands. (Fekete, 2010e, p. A9, emphasis added)

The oilsands industry has come under *heavy fire* from environmental groups. ... Lobby groups recently have stepped up campaigns against the industry. (O’Meara, 2011, p. C1, emphasis added)

Terms such as “lobby” and “interest groups” were commonly attached to oil sands opponents, positioning anti-oil sands sentiments as a product of special interests and political elites rather than an authentic expression of popular or scientific concerns. “Clearly,” argued Ron Liepert, the Alberta Minister of Natural Resources, “there has been a global campaign by special interest groups—highly funded—to discredit the oilsands” (cited in Fekete, 2010c, p. A4). “The concerted lobbying efforts [against Keystone XL] are a wake-up call for Alberta and Canada to stop relying on the U.S. as the primary market for our energy,” analyst Vince Lauerman said: “The dirty oil lobby

is winning the propaganda war, especially in the U.S., and definitely poses a threat to oilsands development' ... " (cited in O'Meara, 2010, p. E1). Framing environmentalists in this manner was a perfect fit for populist conservative narratives that depict powerful liberal elites seeking to impose their radical moral and philosophical values by manipulating public opinion (through their control of the mass media) and influencing the development of government policy behind closed doors (Frank, 2005; Saurette & Gunster, 2011; Saurette & Gunster, 2013).

The coverage provided by *Herald* columnists played a central role in weaving these different components together into a coherent storyline. Paul Stanway, former director of communications for Alberta premier Ed Stelmach prior to joining the newspaper as a regular contributor (and who has since joined Enbridge as their chief spokesperson), led the way in framing opposition to the oil sands as powerful, influential and, most importantly, overwhelmingly *foreign*. Two weeks prior to Cameron's visit, for example, Stanway (2010a) warned about the dangers of celebrity activism, which he described as:

part of a well-funded and well-organized international campaign aimed at nothing less than crippling Alberta's major industry and destroying our prosperity. Backed by a kaleidoscope of left-wing, anti-business, anti-globalization, anti-oil groups, their aim is to destroy Alberta's reputation as an energy producer. They don't want responsible development, which according to study after study is what Albertans want. These folks want to put an end to the oil industry and they don't care what that would do to Calgary or Albertans in general. (p. A14)

A little over a month later, Stanway (2010b) penned a follow-up exposé entitled "Corporate wealth funds anti-oilsands groups." Largely derivative of a storyline supplied by independent researcher and Vancouver blogger Vivian Krause, the column argued that the "media image" of the "anti-oilsands lobby" as "a group of selfless activists operating on a shoestring" (Stanway, 2010b, p. A7) was little more than a convenient fiction, hiding the fact that the Canadian environmental movement is actually heavily (and secretly) funded by a small number of "wealthy and influential" U.S. foundations. Describing Canadian environmental groups as financially (and intellectually) dependent upon American support helped to establish oil sands criticism as a foreign import.

The portrayal of Alberta as under attack by foreign interests was at its most intense in the summer of 2010 in response to a campaign led by Corporate Ethics International (CEI), an environmental organization headquartered in San Francisco. Entitled "Rethink Alberta," the campaign consisted of a handful of billboards in American and British cities and an online video that featured dramatic images of oil-covered ducks and open pit mines. The campaign urged international tourists to boycott the province to protest against the oil sands. The *Herald* gave the campaign more sustained attention than any other single event throughout the period under review. During the week following the campaign's launch, the paper published ten separate news and opinion pieces about it, all in the paper's front section, thereby ensuring maximum public attention to the controversy. Between mid-July and the end of September, the CEI campaign was featured in over two-dozen separate items (not including letters to the

editor), including five front-page stories, two editorials, and eleven columns and op-ed pieces.

Unsurprisingly, the coverage was unambiguously critical, characterizing it as a vicious attack not only on the oil sands industry, but also on the entire province. “Green smears hurt Alberta” exclaimed the headline for a front-page feature story that provided a lengthy account of the campaign’s potentially devastating impact on the province’s tourism industry. “Desire to travel to Alberta plummeted,” the story opened, “after potential tourists watched a short video depicting jarring images of toxic tailing ponds, oil-covered ducks, and aboriginals worried about their health as a result of oil-sands activity, a new survey reveals” (D’Aliesio, 2010, p. A1). “This campaign isn’t just a battle against the oilsands,” warned columnist Don Braid (2010a), “[i]t’s an attack on the people of Cypress Hills, Vulcan, Calgary, Edmonton, and all the lovely places around Fort McMurray itself” (p. A4). Six months later, Alberta’s travel marketing agency reported that this ‘attack’ “had virtually no impact on tourism in Alberta” (Okabe cited in Gerein, 2011, p. A6) and appeared to be attracting little attention in social media. But if the CEI campaign was largely ineffective in driving a tourist boycott, it was a remarkable boon to *Herald* writers marshalling evidence of the global environmentalist conspiracy against the province. Unsurprisingly, then, when CEI acknowledged a minor factual error in its video, the *Herald* gave the retraction front-page billing (Fekete, 2010d), hammering home the perception of foreign critics (and criticism) as fundamentally misinformed.

Environmental organizations (and their closet financiers) were not the only characters of ill-repute and intention in the *Herald*’s stories. Foreign governments, politicians, celebrities and media were also regularly identified as key sources of opposition. Cameron’s visit, for example, was framed as a largely unwelcome intrusion by an outsider with little understanding for the region or its people.

To Fort McMurray residents such as Janice Horner, the Avatar director and his movies can’t compete with the natural special effects lighting up the Athabasca River valley. “(Cameron’s visit) isn’t really something people are talking about ... This region is already so maligned by people from other places saying negative stuff all the time, many of us are just thinking, Oh, here’s another one.” ... But people here say they have grown tired of outsiders inserting themselves into the oilsands controversy, including those who call the industry a ‘black eye’ on Canada’s environmental record, as Cameron did earlier this year. (Gerein, 2010, p. A1)

A proposal by the European Union to introduce low carbon fuel standards also attracted the *Herald*’s attention, compounding the perception that the province’s economic livelihood was threatened by those far removed from the region (e.g., “EU threatens trade over oilsands” [Harrison & Von Reppert-Bismarck, 2011, p. C9] and “EU to consider fuel blacklist” [2011, p. D4]). Elite U.S. and U.K. newspapers such as *The Guardian* and *The New York Times* were singled out as especially vociferous, ignorant, and ill-willed critics: “there is nary a positive word written about the oilsands in the British press,” pointed out business columnist Deborah Yedlin, “despite the efforts of companies, industry groups and government to offer a balanced perspective” (2010a,

p. D1). Criticism from Canadian politicians was similarly condemned as anti-Albertan and even anti-Canadian: political opposition leaders Michael Ignatieff and Jack Layton were excoriated in *Herald* editorials for adopting “the propaganda lexicon for radical environmentalists” (“The divisiveness that Jack built,” 2011, p. A10) and “using the oilsands as a political punching bag” (“Ignatieff and oil,” 2011, p. A12). The fervour and intensity of criticism was invariably plotted as a function of one’s distance from the resource, an ideological artifact of an individual’s *lack* of connection or experience with the oil sands.

Conversely, the acquisition of such experience was routinely presented as an antidote to the simplistic and mystifying ideology of the critics. *Herald* stories regularly featured a populist epistemology (Saurette & Gunster, 2011) in which the lived experience of living and working in the region was arrayed against the paranoid, apocalyptic fantasies conjured up by critics who had never set foot in the area. Indeed, anyone who visited the oil sands with an open mind could be easily cured of any doubts. “I would give these two teeth,” explained Thompson, “to spend one hour in a helicopter and on the ground with President Obama showing him my oilsands. If at the end of that time he still believed there were issues, I would be a failure.” (cited in Healing, 2011a, p. C4). Thompson was hardly the only one with a strong belief in the communicative and revelatory power of direct experience. In a lengthy feature exploring debate about the oil sands during the federal election campaign, provincial Energy Minister Liepert said

he hopes to take [his counterparts] through an oilsands operation and have them spend a night in a work camp so they can meet people from their respective provinces. “There is a real lack of understanding elsewhere in Canada relative to the oilsands and the (supposed) horror stories that tend to go along with it. (cited in Fekete, 2011b, p. A1)

A worker from Fort McMurray echoed these views:

Brian McDonald believes all political leaders should visit the massive bitumen operations before targeting a sector that’s critical to the entire country ... “A lot of people don’t know what’s going on up here,” MacDonald explains. “They need to come up here and actually live it.” (Fekete, 2011b, p. A1)

Likewise, the mayor of Calgary responded to an anti-oil sands vote by the U.S. city of Bellingham to minimize its use of fuel from the oil sands with a public invitation to his counterpart to visit the region “to see the impressive efforts this vital industry is making to reduce its environmental footprint” (cited in “Mayor goes to bat for oil-sands,” 2010, p. B3).

In stark contrast to the *Herald*’s acute sensitivity to criticism from foreign sources, the paper devoted much less attention to dissenting voices *within* the province, especially when their opposition arose out of personal experience with oil sands projects. Such criticism would have challenged the plausibility of a storyline that depends on the portrayal of critique as the hysterical fears of outsiders. Especially noteworthy was the relative absence of voices from the residents of Fort Chipewyan, a small First Nations community located downstream of the oil sands on the Athabasca River. On

May 3, 2010, David Schindler, a world-respected aquatic ecologist from the University of Alberta, presented research to the Fort Chipewyan community that both confirmed their fears that industrial activities were polluting the Athabasca River and raised serious doubts about industry and government assertions that any toxins in the water were “naturally occurring.” Two days later, the *Herald* printed a very short news story of just over 200 words about the research, which included a statement from Schindler but not a single comment from a local resident (Brooymans, 2010a, p. A5). By comparison, an item from the same issue (and on the same page) describing a trade mission by the premier to promote the province and “share Alberta’s story” received more than twice as much space (Fekete, 2010a, p. A5). When Schindler’s study was formally published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* four months later (Kelly, Schindler, Hodson, Short, Radmanovich & Nielsen, 2010), it received somewhat more attention in a longer story but still failed to crack the front page (Brooymans, 2010b, p. A3). And, once again, not a single First Nations source was cited, despite the fact that the research validated the concerns of local residents who, for years, had been dismissed by industry and government spokespeople.

The only significant exception to this pattern of exclusion was a lengthy and compelling feature story on water that highlighted local concerns about pollution, citing Schindler’s research as evidence that those concerns were justified:

Fort Chipewyan residents have for years suspected that industrial activity upstream was connected to cancers and illnesses in their community. ... “The dots are starting to get all connected now,” [Melody] Lepine [Director of Government and Industry Relations for the Mikisew Cree] said. “Here we had the cancer study saying 30 per cent higher than normal. Now we have these carcinogenic toxins in the river, some very close to the community. Everything is coming together. It’s a really sad story.” (Brooymans, 2010c, p. A11)

A sad story, indeed. In fact, it is precisely the type of story that one would reasonably expect a newspaper to feature prominently given its dramatic elements: a community’s fears are validated after years of official denial, a scientist and a physician struggle against attempts by politicians and bureaucrats to suppress their research, emotionally compelling experiences of suffering and outrage, and industry-government collusion that enables the pollution of a pristine, natural environment. The experience of Fort Chipewyan residents afforded the *Herald* an ideal storyline through which to explore the social and ecological impacts at the epicentre of oil sands developments, and the single exceptional story on water demonstrates that the paper was more than capable of telling this story. To do so consistently, however, would have fundamentally challenged the coherence of the broader narrative that the paper had woven about an industry under attack, victimized by the baseless accusations of foreign critics. Consequently, stories about the suffering of First Nations communities were the exception rather than the rule, attracting little sustained attention or empathy from the *Herald*. Instead, emotions of outrage and sympathy were largely reserved for the real victims of this narrative: the oil industry and its many beneficiaries.

Narrative alchemy: Turning Goliath into David

Painting one of the largest and most influential and profitable industries in Canada as a naïve and largely helpless victim (at least in the battle for global public opinion) of the “Goliath” of the environmental movement is no easy task. And it clearly was not a function of downplaying or minimizing the economic size, impact, and growth of oil sands projects. The paper lavished an enormous amount of attention on the many economic benefits of the resource, such as employment, revenues for government, foreign investment, and the overall stimulus to economic growth, especially in regions outside of the province. News and opinion pieces were almost entirely unanimous in portraying the oil sands as a “national treasure,” the economic engine of the country. Celebrating the many economic benefits of the resource was probably the single most common theme in the *Herald* during this period, a form of “common sense” that framed the broader context for virtually all of its coverage.

Furthermore, such benefits were consistently described as flowing to *all* Canadians, positioning oil sands development as an unequivocal public good. “Every Canadian enjoys a drop of Alberta oil,” (McIver, 2011, p. A15) declared an op-ed during the federal election campaign, reminding the public that everyone was a beneficiary of oil sands development.

Why ... would the leaders of the national opposition parties be promoting policies to hobble or slow down or even kill oilsands and energy industry development? Can they not see the inconsistency of in one breath touting public health care, social supports and infrastructure spending, and in the next breath, proposing policies designed to effectively cut off the major source of paying for it all? (p. A15)

On the heels of the Conservative victory in that election, the *Herald* urged the new government to “be persistent in reminding political naysayers that the oilsands are the new economic engine of the nation” (“The West gets in,” 2011, p. A12). Glowing headlines about investment and growth—e.g., “Rejuvenated oilsands poised to spend billions” (Healing, 2010c, p. D1), “Trillions predicted in Alberta energy spending” (Healing, 2011b, p. D1), and “Tens of billions aimed at oil sands” (Varcoe, 2011, p. A1)—rhapsodized about the extraordinary levels of wealth that the oil sands would generate and attract. Such coverage was heavily “subsidized” (Gandy, 1982; Lewis, Williams & Franklin, 2008) by industry public relations: trade groups such as CAPP, as well as pro-industry think tanks, such as the Canadian Energy Research Institute (CERI), generated an endless flow of reports about investment, employment, and taxation revenue that were widely (and uncritically) reported in opinion and news pieces alike.

While there was no shortage of figures highlighting the economic benefits of the oil sands for the province and its workers and taxpayers, data about industry profits were almost entirely limited to specialized reports providing financial analysis of specific companies. Broader information and analysis of corporate profits, including questions about the proportion of revenues flowing to parent companies and shareholders located *outside* the province, was largely missing. The province of Alberta has an exceptionally low rate of royalties on oil sands development as compared with other ju-

risdictions, and thus the vast majority of bitumen revenues accrue to private corporations. The Parklands Institute, a progressive Alberta think-tank, notes that

[s]ince 1986, more than \$285 billion worth of bitumen and synthetic crude oil have been produced from the tar sands. From those resources the oil companies have netted approximately \$260 billion dollars in pre-tax profits, while the public has received less than \$25 billion in return. ... That means roughly 6% of the total value extracted from the tar sands has gone to the public through royalties and land sales. (Campanella, 2012, p. 7)

Given this lop-sidedness—and the fact that such a comparison would highlight the fact that economic advantages from the oil sands are distributed in ways that are difficult to square with a portrait touting them as a public good flowing to all Canadians—it is not surprising that discussion of the extraordinary asymmetries between the benefits flowing to the public as compared with private companies was almost entirely absent from the *Herald*. While royalties were frequently described in terms of the “billions” of dollars collected by government, they were almost never explained as a percentage of overall corporate revenues (which would have given the public a much better sense of how the economic benefits of the resource were being unevenly distributed). The single exception was a story (Healing, 2010d, p. D1) covering the release of *Misplaced Generosity: Extraordinary Profits in Alberta's Oil and Gas Industry*, a major report by the Parklands Institute. Notably, the item was buried in the business section and, unlike the endless repetition of industry-generated facts and figures, it was only referred to on a single occasion. Such patterns of emphasis (on jobs and government revenues) and omission (of corporate profits and low royalty rates) performed a kind of “symbolic nationalization” of the industry, framing it almost exclusively as a kind of collective national enterprise to serve the public good.

Running in parallel with the promotional celebration of the sector's sizeable economic impacts, however, was a much more anxious discourse that constantly fretted about the ultimate fragility and even weakness of the oil sands industry. Just as much of the celebratory discourse was cued by industry subsidies, so too was this corresponding discourse of anxiety reflective of a slavish attentiveness to reports, conferences, and speeches from industry executives, experts, and analysts in which the vulnerability of the sector to a long list of external threats (e.g., lack of access to international markets other than the United States, fluctuating global oil prices, inflationary pressure, evolving regimes of state regulation, and, as already noted, fierce opposition from environmentalists) was emphasized. Headlines regularly alluded to these myriad challenges: “Bitumen with no place to go” (Braid, 2010c, p. A6), “Prentice warns energy leaders of U.S. “green protectionism”” (Polczer, 2010, p. C1), “Industry fears cost of oilsands plan” (Brooymans, 2011a, p. A1), and “Oilsands process bogged down by red tape” (Healing, 2010a, p. D4). At first glance, the anxiety and vulnerability on offer here sits rather oddly with the ritual exaltations of the industry's economic size and growth potential, which, as noted, were equally pervasive in the *Herald's* coverage. They begin to make more sense, however, when one recognizes the schizophrenic manner in which the “power” of the oil industry was portrayed.

At one level, oil sands developers were regularly celebrated as economic titans, combining scientific knowledge, technical expertise, and entrepreneurial acumen to perform extraordinary feats of industrialized alchemy on a truly unprecedented scale. Yet, the industry was also cast as remarkably naïve and simplistic when it comes to the more delicate arts of public relations and political communication. As powerful as the oil and gas industry may be in the technical and economic sphere, it was regularly castigated for its failure to translate that power into corresponding levels of political, ideological, and cultural influence. Industry executives led the way in publicly confessing their communicative impotence.

Oilsands chief executives ... said they've been stung by distrust and disinformation. Chris Slubicki, CEO of Opti-Canada ... said oilsands players are doing an excellent job on the environment but nobody knows about it. "I think we've done a particularly disastrous job of informing people exactly what it is we do and what we're doing to improve it," he said. "When I hear feedback from people you tell you're the CEO of an oilsands company, and they let go on you, they lose it, and the comments you get—my reaction is not that they're naïve, it's that we've done a poor job." (Healing, 2010b, p. D1)

Marcel Coutu (2010), CEO of Canadian Oil Sands and chairman of Syncrude Canada, opened an op-ed in the *Herald* by noting that

for too long, the oilsands industry did not communicate well with the public. We focused on investors and government, and our critics filled the vacuum with other stakeholders, setting the agenda and dominating the debate. Our 'silence' was taken as an admission that their accusations were true. My industry colleagues are now making a concerted effort to communicate better about our business, but we are playing catch-up. (p. A21)

Coutu went on to describe his "personal mission to speak to Canadians directly" and engage in discussion and debate about the oil sands, thereby helping to "clarify" misconceptions about the sector's environmental impacts and performance, as well as explain its significant economic contributions to the well-being of all Canadians.

In a fawning editorial review of "Why We Hate the Oil Companies," the *Herald* quoted author and former Shell Oil president John Hofmeister's dissection of the

lamentable inability of the industry to get its message out to a public that believes it is nasty, rich and dirty. "The industry has a real serious problem. The industry lives in public relations solitude. It does very little to engage the consuming public or the voting public or really anybody except who they think is a key stakeholder in what they're doing. As a result, very few people know what the industry actually does." (cited in "A kinder, gentler oilsands," 2010, p. A16)

Jeff Immelt, head of General Electric, delivered a similar diagnosis when he addressed oil and gas producers in February 2011. "You guys have a collective problem that you have done a terrible job of marketing the technology, and that is on you. ...

The fact that you've allowed yourself to be painted into this corner is ridiculous" (cited in O'Meara, 2011, p. C1). Immelt's remarks sparked calls from the *Herald's* editorial board for the oil and gas industry to take much stronger action to improve its public image.

Canada's energy industry has failed to tell the real story of Alberta's oil-sands, or confidently play the secure-energy card. The *Herald* has long called on government and industry to fight activists' false claims with facts. ... [Alberta] needs to stop playing nice when it comes to countering smear campaigns that spread false information about Alberta oil. ("Oil's well," 2011, p. A8)

The *Herald's* business columnist, Deborah Yedlin, was equally sceptical of what she described as the industry's anaemic efforts at self-promotion. Although she complemented the "extraordinary effort" of Coutu to communicate with Canadians, Yedlin (2010b) casually dismissed the initiative, noting that "one guy traipsing across the country is simply not enough" (p. D1). The overall impression she created was that of an industry that was unwilling, but also (and more importantly) fundamentally unable to defend itself in the arena of public opinion.

The time has come to find a credible individual to speak for the oilsands—to consistently counter the attacks levelled on the industry by the myriad environmental groups. The industry is of too much importance—not just to Alberta's economy, but also to Canada's—for anything but a bold and targeted approach to stop the practice of the oilsands as the favoured whipping boy of environmental groups, shareholders and elected officials. (p. D1)

Later in the year, she penned a second column entitled "Lobbyists building "dirty oil" brand" in which she once again took the oil and gas sector to task for doing such a poor job of brand management, essentially allowing organizations like Greenpeace "to brand the oil produced from this rich resource as an evil product" (Yedlin, 2010c, p. C1). How to explain the serial communications failures of the industry, she speculated, was a most vexing question.

Much ink has been spilled trying to determine why the energy sector doesn't control the brand reputation of the oil it produces, especially from the oilsands. Some have suggested it's because the sector has taken what it does for granted, because access to energy is a fundamental need. Others point to the fact that it's an industry run by very technical types who don't necessarily communicate in a way those outside the sector can understand as well as is needed. (p. C1)

As Hofmeister explained,

part of the problem ... is that most oil people are engineering geeks who use stultifying dull language. "If you look at the track record of most oil executives, they tend to be of engineering or technical backgrounds." (cited in "A kinder, gentler oilsands," 2010a, p. A16).

On the one hand, then, the oil and gas industry was presented as highly capable, successful, and active when it comes to producing social wealth and employment, developing innovative technologies for extraction and processing, and attracting global investment. On the other hand, when it comes to communication, public relations,

and political lobbying (especially with governments outside Alberta), the industry was portrayed as weak, disorganized, and fundamentally overwhelmed by their more nimble and culturally savvy opponents.

Saving the sands: Envisioning the promotional petro-state

On January 4, 2011, Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper shuffled his cabinet, appointing former television anchor and journalist Peter Kent as the federal Minister of the Environment. Harper's selection of an individual best known for his communications experience and expertise might have seemed an odd choice to lead a ministry with a mandate to "preserve and enhance the quality of the natural environment," "conserve Canada's renewable resources," "conserve and protect Canada's water resources," and "coordinate environmental policies and programs of the federal government" (Environment Canada, 2012). But as the title of an op-ed analyzing the shuffle made abundantly clear—"Kent's job will be to stop the world from lying about Canada" (MacDonald, 2011, p. A8)—Kent's skills as a professional communicator would serve him well in what the *Herald* clearly hoped would be one of his top priorities: defending the oil sands from its critics. And shortly after taking office, Kent did exactly that, delivering a vigorous defence of the resource. Not surprisingly, his remarks received top billing from a euphoric *Herald*:

Canada's new environment minister ... says the oilsands have been unfairly demonized, trumpeting the resource as 'ethical oil' and as an economic boon for the country. ... "There has been a lot of disinformation and outright misinformation. ... There has been a demonizing of a legitimate resource. ... It is ethical oil. It is regulated oil. And it's secure in a world where many of the free world's oil sources are somewhat less secure." (D'Aliesio, 2011, p. A1)

Although Kent acknowledged that some improvements in monitoring the oil sands' impacts were required, "he believes the resource's economic value to Canadians isn't properly understood. He said it is up to the industry and governments to clear the air." (D'Aliesio, 2011, p. A1).

This enthusiastic coverage of Kent's oil sands advocacy reflects the primary rhetorical and ideological achievement of the storyline we have been describing: *the narrative justification of the promotional petro-state*. Once the basic storyline of victimization was established, with powerful, foreign interests bent on destroying an industry that was so clearly serving the needs and interests of all Canadians, government could be (pre)scripted into a more aggressive role as *the* preeminent defender of oil sands development as a *public good*. For the most part, this was not a description of what government was doing, but rather an idealized vision of how the petro-state *should* conduct itself. As Davidson and Gismondi (2011) note, the historic role of the Alberta government as a petro-state was "to nurture a fledgling but vital industry, by providing infrastructure and economic subsidies to meet a unique investment 'moment'" (p. 69). But the intensification of anti-oil sands campaigns, ostensibly driven by a network of well-financed special interests, has generated the need for new cultural and political resources, and the development of new discursive capacities to intervene quickly and effectively in globalized struggles over the representation of the oil sands. The success

of the petro-state, in other words, has come to depend on radically increasing its capacities to defend and promote the resource in the court of public opinion. Building *symbolic and ideological* infrastructure, providing *information and communication* subsidies has become just as important—more so, perhaps—than more traditional forms of regulatory, material, and financial assistance.

“Every narrative needs a hero,” observe Davidson and Gismondi, “and in our case, the heroes are the energy corporations” (2011, p. 178). While that may be true for much oil sands discourse (especially as produced by corporations), the real hero of the *Herald’s* storyline was the promotional petro-state, an idealized vision of government as a vigorous, unbridled champion of development. Of the three main characters in the story—critics, industry, and government—only the latter was given any real opportunity for development or agency. As the villains of the piece, critics were regularly indicted on a wide variety of charges, from fear mongering and lying to hypocrisy and jealousy, but these vices were for the most part naturalized as inevitable features of the environmentalist disposition (in both its radical and elite liberal variants). It was absurd to expect that the critics themselves would amend the errors of their ways: they were beyond saving. An inverted but similar logic governed the equally minimal demands placed on industry. A steady parade of items documenting industry achievements in technologically mitigating and reducing their ecological footprint left the overall impression that companies were making steady progress in this area: the real problem was a lack of public awareness, not a lack of industry effort. The overall message was that industry should continue to do what it does best: develop the resource, improve technologies of extraction and processing, build infrastructure, create jobs, generate economic growth, and fill government coffers.

The constitutive dramatic tension animating the *Herald’s* storyline was the possibility of political redemption. Would government recognize, accept, and fulfill its responsibility to protect the industry against those who sought to destroy it? Was it capable of moving beyond the incompetence, indifference, and timidity that had allegedly characterized its disposition in the past? Would it finally become the hero of the story by taking up the cause of oil sands development with the force, skill, and passion that the industry deserved? Such tension was never conclusively resolved one way or the other; thus, the potential for redemption could be perpetually invoked as a disciplinary instrument to punish or reward governments, depending on the vigour, enthusiasm, and commitment with which they take up their responsibilities as a petro-state. At the height of the “Rethink Alberta” controversy, for example, columnist Don Braid (2010b) penned a column entitled “Alberta fights to win oilsands PR campaign” in which he praised the premier for giving “the best speech I’ve ever heard him deliver” at a regional economic development conference.

He mounted a spirited defence of oilsands and climate change policy. ... He went after the ‘outrageous claims’ of the San Francisco group, debunked talk that oilsands production is more carbon-intensive than offshore oil, and outlined the action that Alberta is taking. The speech, unlike many of Stelmach’s, wasn’t cluttered with detailed points that tend to put audiences to sleep. It was short, clear and very effective. (p. A4)

Braid (2010b) optimistically concluded that “while the radical groups stage their simple shows, Stelmach’s government is focused and fighting hard in the corners. They might even be starting to win.” (p. A4). Given the fact that a negative public image was consistently presented as the single biggest challenge faced by the industry, the *Herald’s* editorial board and columnists consistently reserved their highest praise for successful public relations, enthusiastically celebrating any and all victories in the battle against industry critics. When an environmental NGO revealed secret cooperation between federal and provincial officials and the fossil fuel industry to “fight international global warming policies that ‘target’ oilsands production,” (De Souza, 2010, p. A4), the *Herald* praised the secret lobbying efforts with the front page headline “Ottawa helping Alberta fight oilsands smears” (p. A1). Lionizing the Energy Minister for his mastery of the “oil sands counter-punch,” Braid (2010d, p. A7) extolled the virtues (and necessity) of an extensive public relations tour by Alberta politicians to enlist businesses in Québec and Ontario as allies in the battle against negative publicity. This was government at its best: focused, disciplined, and aggressively taking the fight to the enemy.

The elevation of public relations as the master-frame in assessing government performance also shaped the *Herald’s* editorial framing of several highly critical reports that raised significant and troubling questions about the abysmal state of scientific monitoring of the impacts of the oil sands. Between December 2010 and February 2011, five different reviews delivered strong indictments of the existing water monitoring regime in which the responsibility for collecting and analyzing data was largely left to industry (Brooymans, 2010d; Brooymans, 2011b; Cryderman, 2010; Fekete, 2011a; Healing & De Souza, 2010). Taken together, the reviews made a mockery of an earlier claim by the *Herald’s* editorial board—printed less than two weeks before the first of the damning reports was released—that Alberta bitumen was “the most regulated and transparently sourced oil on the planet” (“Who’s the ding dong ... ?,” 2010, p. A12). In an abrupt reversal of its earlier position (but absent any *mea culpa*), the *Herald* turned its guns on the government, arguing that

the province is not doing Albertans, Canadians *and the oilsands industry* any favours by failing so miserably in its environmental monitoring of the impacts of such an important part of our economy and oil security. Only science will silence critics or assuage fears that the environment, especially water quality, is being properly protected. (“Monitoring Mess,” 2010, p. A14, emphasis added)

Describing industry as a “victim” here stretches the boundaries of credibility, especially given that environmental monitoring was a joint industry-government initiative. If one conceptualizes regulation first and foremost as a form of public relations, however—a marketing device designed to promote the sale of bitumen to foreign investors and customers—then this label begins to make more sense. Science, too, is similarly positioned as a tool for managing perception rather than as a means of producing knowledge: it matters because it can “silence critics or assuage fears” (“Monitoring Mess,” 2010, p. A14). The *Herald* simply assumes that water quality is being protected, dismissing out of hand the possibility that better science may actually

justify critics and intensify fears about environmental impacts. Later in the editorial, this reasoning becomes explicit:

Lax monitoring also undermines public relations efforts to convince our customers—that being the entire world—that Alberta is being environmentally responsible as it develops this increasingly important industry. Premier Ed Stelmach and his gang need to understand those who buy oil from the oilsands won't settle for anything less, nor will they be hoodwinked into believing statements not backed up by credible evidence ("Monitoring Mess," 2010, p. A14).

Never once does the *Herald* raise the much bigger and far more shocking prospect that oil sands development has proceeded without any real capacity to understand and assess its impacts on human health and the natural environment. It simply assumes that such impacts, if they are occurring, are minimal. Instead, the real problem with poor monitoring is how it has deprived industry of an essential promotional tool.

Earlier in the year, the *Herald* responded to a press conference about deformed fish downstream of oil sands operations in much the same way, prioritizing the management of perception as a key factor to take into account in the design and implementation of an effective monitoring system.

If the Alberta government relies too heavily on industry monitoring as has been suggested, that must change. *If for no other reason than optics*, the foxes must not be left guarding the henhouse, no matter how tame and responsible the foxes. ("Fishing for answers," 2010, p. A14, emphasis added)

In a third editorial from February 2011, the *Herald* once again condemned the provincial government for stacking an advisory panel with industry representatives.

The Alberta government just can't seem to get it right when it comes to the oilsands. ... The province last week approved its ninth open-pit oil-sands development, largely based on RAMP [Regional Aquatics Monitoring Program] data. Twelve of RAMP's 22 members are energy companies. Critics argue that the foxes are guarding the henhouses. Thanks to the government's seeming inability to understand the *importance of optics*, it's difficult to disagree. ("Tarred again," 2011, p. A9, emphasis added)

The problem, yet again, is one of optics and perception, rather than any deeper contradiction between the interests of government and the public on the one hand, and the interests of the oil sands industry on the other. The management of perception becomes the yardstick by which to measure not only the performance of individual politicians, but also the success or failure of government itself.

Final thoughts: Melodrama, ideology, and critique

In "Environmental Melodrama," Steven Schwarze (2006) offers a compelling and insightful set of arguments about the virtues of using melodrama to tell stories about the environment. He identifies four features as distinctive to the "rhetorical action" of melodrama: "a focus on socio-political conflict, a polarization of characters and positions, a moral framing of public issues, and development of monopathy" (p. 245). The

Herald's storyline of victimization is a perfect fit for Schwarze's model. First, it framed oil sands politics as a fight between external critics and the province (and people) of Alberta. Second, it sharpened and dramatized that conflict by portraying those critics as extremists seeking nothing less than to cripple the province's most important industry. Third, the *Herald* was quick to frame the conflict in deeply moral terms as a battle between honest, hardworking Albertans, and a distant, hypocritical elite with no experience or connection to the oil sands. Fourth, the coverage assiduously cultivated monopathy, defined as "a 'singleness of feeling' that strengthens identification with one part to a controversy" (Schwarze, 2006, p. 251), suturing together the interests of industry, government, and the public into one and the same. While Schwarze argues that "within environmental controversies, the coherence offered by melodrama typically serves an oppositional political stance," this rhetorical mode may be equally useful for those seeking to legitimate (and expand) existing structures of power.

Was the narrative of victimization the only one to appear in the pages of the *Herald* during the period under review? Certainly not. Were alternative perspectives on industry, government, and critics occasionally featured? Absolutely. It would be easy enough to identify examples of news stories, columns, op-eds, and even editorials that featured different storylines, even some that developed an opposing perspective. The presence of competing narratives or contradictory facts, however, does not compromise the ideological power of a storyline. Instead, they more often serve as the raw material from which a storyline is fashioned. The power of a good storyline lies not only in its ability to provide conceptual, narrative, and philosophical unity to otherwise disconnected facts and events, but also in its capacity to insulate its adherents from facts and events that might otherwise challenge the values and worldview embodied in the storyline: or, even better, it enables the rhetorical disarming of threatening elements and facilitates their incorporation into the storyline in such a way that reinforces one's pre-existing values and worldview. Good stories allow us to close our eyes and our ears to what we do not want to see or hear or know or feel.

It is often assumed that the main way that media play an ideological role is through agenda-setting and gate-keeping techniques that largely rely on providing selective information and on discursively silencing and erasing oppositional groups and information. While these tendencies do exist in the *Herald's* coverage, we have shown that the reverse can also be true. Media can also play a profoundly ideological role, not by *downplaying*, but by *highlighting* the political salience of contending groups. Such a discursive strategy casts the different players in the story in very specific character roles, within a strong and consistent narrative, so that the ultimate moral conclusion favours the dominant interests. In this case, the storyline involved portraying the oil industry as a victim, terrorized by irrational and ill-intentioned radicals, in need of rescue by a state whose noble mission is to protect and nurture the oil sands *qua* a public good.

The sharp focus of the *Herald* on discursive politics and the battle over public relations framed the core issue as the unfair and unscrupulous communicative practices of oil sands critics, thereby allowing industry proponents to claim the moral high ground and go on the offensive. Rather than ignoring external criticism, the *Herald's* key strategy was to reframe it as part of a foreign attack on a domestic industry,

thereby transmuted one of the industry's greatest weaknesses into a potential source of ideological strength and a means of galvanizing political and public support. Exaggerating the severity, intensity, and potential impact of the criticism (as distinguished from the substantive claims made by the critics) allowed the *Herald* to tell the story of an industry, a province, and a people under siege. The greater the threat, the greater the need to circle the wagons and rally to the community's defence. In a diabolical political allegory, this storyline unmasked signifiers of ecological devastation as, in fact, signifiers of environmentalist conspiracy: horrifying images of pit mines, tailings ponds or even "dying waterfowl" could then be "read" as symptomatic of the nefarious efforts of misguided critics to savage the province's reputation. Anti-oil sands discourse becomes an emblem of the ideological sins of its bearers. Their claims are reduced to propaganda even before they are made. Anti-oil sands criticism is assessed *not* as a set of claims about the environmental and health impacts of industry, but instead as an attempt at brainwashing that is to be resisted. The primary aim, then, is not simply to censor criticism, but also to pre-determine *how* such criticism will be heard and understood.

The most sinister political effects of this storyline do not lie in the rhetorical inoculation of the public against anti-oil sands criticism, but in the appropriation of such criticism to provide narrative legitimacy for a more activist, muscular petro-state. Filtered through the prism of this storyline, partisan intervention to protect and promote the oil industry becomes a signifier of legitimacy rather than illegitimacy, thereby crippling one of the most common and effective modes of challenging the petro-state. As the "Rethink Alberta" controversy illustrated, this storyline is particularly well placed to profit from international campaigns that spotlight the province as a supplier of "dirty oil." Rather than seeking to achieve the impossible (reduce criticism), this narrative uses it as fuel for its counter-campaign. The more criticism, the more food for their narrative. The stronger the sense that the oil sands—and Alberta by extension—is besieged, the greater the capacity for this specific narrative to trigger other narratives and emotional investments (e.g., identity, provincial pride, patriotism, sympathy for victims, etc.) that in turn strengthen the emotional appeal of the "oil-sands-as-victim" and "government-as-saviour" frame.

While a full exploration of the political impacts of this storyline lie beyond this article, it is worth noting the central role it has played in the increasingly aggressive efforts of the federal government to facilitate the expansion of the oil sands. On January 9, 2012, the Canadian Minister of Natural Resources, Joe Oliver, penned an open letter making the case for "streamlining" the federal regulatory processes for approving major development projects, including the construction of pipelines to enable the diversification of energy markets. The rhetorical centrepiece of the missive was a remarkably direct assault on

environmental and other radical groups that would seek to block this opportunity to diversify our trade. Their goal is to stop any major project no matter what the cost to Canadian families in lost jobs and economic growth. (Oliver, 2012, n.p.)

In words that could have come directly from the opinion pages of the *Herald*, Oliver (2012) explained:

These groups threaten to hijack our regulatory system to achieve their radical ideological agenda. They seek to exploit any loophole they can find, stacking public hearings with bodies to ensure that delays kill good projects. They use funding from foreign interest groups to undermine Canada's national economic interest. They attract jet-setting celebrities with some of the largest personal carbon footprints in the world to lecture Canadians not to develop our natural resources. (n.p.)

The ferocity and intensity of the attack took many by surprise, as did the announcement, later that spring, that the federal government would be allocating an additional \$8 million to the budget of the Canada Revenue Agency to audit environmental non-profit groups (Dembicki, 2012). Ostensibly to ensure compliance with the statutory requirement that registered charities cannot spend more than ten percent of their resources engaged in “political activities,” the measure was viewed by many as an attempt to intimidate the environmental movement into moderating its critique of oil sands development and pipeline expansion (e.g., Wells, 2012). The attack on these “radical groups” was accompanied by an unprecedented gutting of Canadian environmental legislation designed to smooth the approval process for energy projects and infrastructure development (see Kirchhoff & Tsuji, 2014 for a useful summary). In addition to furnishing politicians like Oliver with convenient talking points, the *Herald's* storyline of victimization was crucial in casting the aggressive intervention of the petro-state as essential to protecting the interests and values of Canadian families against those who threaten our prosperity.

The desperate plight of a province under attack continues to generate headlines in both regional and national media. In a September 2013 *Globe and Mail* piece entitled “Hollywood vs. oil sands? Not a fair fight,” columnist Gary Mason (2013) lamented that

in the high-stakes oil-sands debate, Alberta's defenders look like pikers. The province doesn't have an answer for the Robert Redford and Tom Steyers of the world. ... [Alberta is] getting walloped from all sides and doesn't seem up for the fight. (p. A13)

More recently, Rex Murphy (2014)—a high profile commentator and program host for the CBC, and a columnist for the *National Post*—was criticized for accepting payment to deliver a passionate endorsement of the oil sands to a conference of industry officials and proponents. Defending his actions, he explained that he

particularly wanted to say something about the timidity and ineptness of the oil industry in providing an inventory of the benefits—as I see them—of what it is doing and has already done; and asked the audience members, pointedly, why the industry is so lacking in confidence, and not headlining what should be seen as a great national—not just Albertan—project. (p. A17)

Clearly, this story about a meek, modest and hopelessly naïve industry in desperate need of rescue continues to resonate within broader national debates about energy, politics, and the public good.

That said, playing the victim card is a narrative gambit that is not without its own weaknesses. In particular, this storyline depends on two crucial omissions or displacements: first, local experiences of risk, suffering, and opposition; and, second, the asymmetric flow of economic benefits to private corporations (and foreign shareholders). Both of these themes were present in the pages of the *Herald*, but never with enough consistency, authority, or narrative coherence to congeal into an oppositional storyline. The *Herald's* economic, political, and philosophical commitments to the oil industry ensure that it is unlikely to ever offer a hospitable environment for the formation, development and dissemination of such discourse. Outside of its pages, however, the accumulation and repetition of such themes, especially in the form of compelling stories that resonate with the values, norms, and beliefs of the public, hold enormous potential to shatter the brittle discursive fusion of petro-state with public good, as well as to catalyze a truly democratic conversation about the future of the oil sands.

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Notes

1. There is considerable political debate about whether to use the label “oil sands” or “tar sands” with the former term preferred by industry and government, and the latter term used by environmental critics (e.g., Dembicki, 2011). In this article, we have used the phrase “oil sands” because that is how it is predominantly described in the newspaper under study.
2. As the presentation to CAPP suggests, Postmedia has actively sought to commodify this function by seeking more active sponsorship from the industry.

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