

Media framing of unconventional fossil fuels: The absence of climate dialogue in Canada's Northern Gateway Project

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Context: Northern Gateway Pipeline

The Northern Gateway Pipeline (NGP), proposed by Enbridge Inc., would carry unrefined bitumen 1,172 km from Alberta oil sands to British Columbia's coast. Regulatory review of the project began in 2010, and in June 2014 the project was approved by the Canadian government, subject to 209 conditions. The project faced ongoing controversy, including potential environmental impacts and the government's failure to adequately consult with First Nations. The project was rejected by a newly elected federal government in November 2016.



Research Objectives

1. Characterize media framing of the pipeline project using a risk/benefit framework
2. Identify regional differences in framing between the two affected provinces (Alberta and British Columbia) and nationally
3. Investigate the framing of environmental risk

The Media Analysis

We conducted a media analysis to better understand the dialogue surrounding the pipeline project.

We analyzed print media for coverage of the Northern Gateway Pipeline (NGP) in six major Canadian newspapers including the top newspapers in Alberta, British Columbia, and nationally. **In total, the analysis included 2,097 articles published from 2008 to 2014.**

News coverage began to grow in 2011 (139 articles) and peaked in 2012 (875 articles) during the public review of the project. Coverage declined somewhat in 2013 (536 articles) and 2014 (483 articles) when the project was initially approved.

Frames and the SPEED Framework

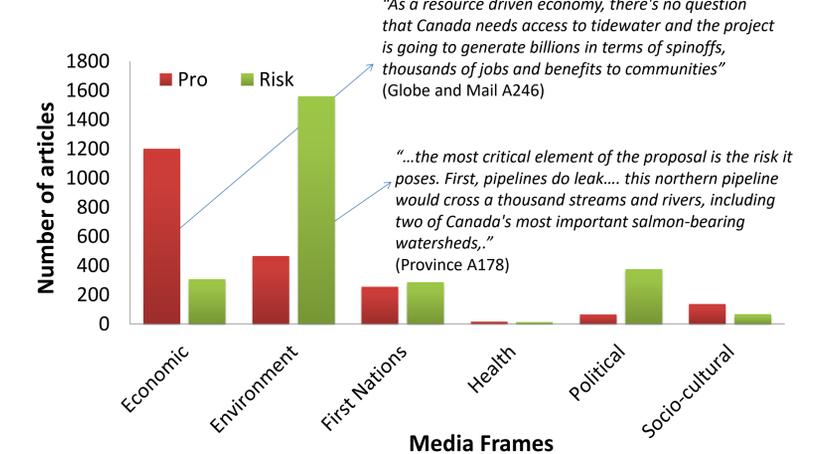
Frames are a means through which people make sense of unfamiliar, complex or controversial concepts.

The Socio-political Evaluation of Energy Deployment (SPEED) framework categorizes frames as benefits or risks relating to technical, institutional, legal, political, economic, cultural and environmental factors (Stephens et al. 2008).

We adapted the SPEED framework to the present case study of the NGP project. We coded risk-benefit statements (in the 2,097 articles) for seven frames: Economic, First Nations, Technological, Environmental, Health & Safety, Socio-cultural, and Political. Most frames also included sub-categories to further characterize media representations, e.g. environmental statements were categorized into: climate, coastal, terrestrial, other/general.

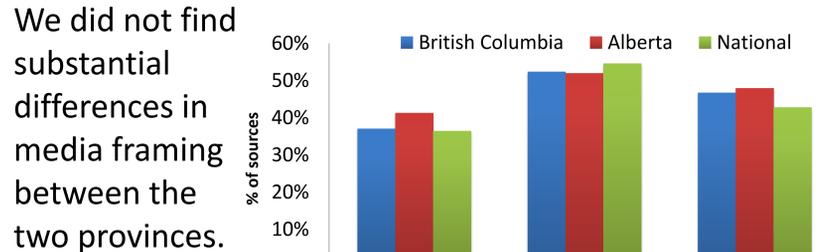
Objective 1: Characterize Framing

Media framing focused on economic benefit (pro) and environmental risk (con).



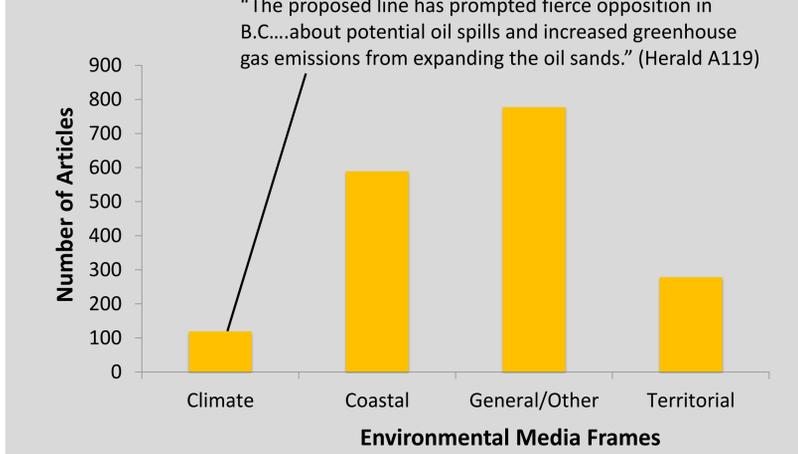
Objective 2: Identify Regional Differences

There is little difference among regions, despite a strong regional distribution of risks and benefits, where Alberta would experience most of the economic benefits and British Columbia would bear considerable environmental risk.



Objective 3: Investigate Environmental Framing

Framing of environmental risks were mostly general with little mention of climate change. We found that environmental risk frames predominately related to local impacts from a potential pipeline or tanker rupture. The global impacts of climate change were mentioned in less than 5% of articles, suggesting that climate change was a marginal component of the public discourse of the NGP project during this time period.



Main Conclusions

1. Media framed the Northern Gateway Project as an issue of economy versus environment.
2. There is little regional variation in media frames, despite regional differences in potential risks and benefits.
3. Media coverage largely ignores climate change impacts—environmental groups could better invoke climate framing.

The debate has shifted since 2014...

- New national government (PM Trudeau) in 2015
- Climate policy announced, including carbon pricing
- Northern Gateway pipeline rejected in late 2016
- Other pipelines were approved in 2016 and the discourse appears to be shifting toward ecological modernization

Citations:
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Stephens, J. C., Wilson, E. J., & Peterson, T. R. (2008). Socio-Political Evaluation of Energy Deployment (SPEED): An integrated research framework analyzing energy technology deployment. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 75(8), 1224-1246.