Research in Brief

Rhetoric of Oil in Canadian News: Framed for Indigenous Care

Marcelina Piotrowski
University of British Columbia

ABSTRACT This article critically examines news representation of oil and indigenous “voice” as a tactic of consensual politics. It suggests that by leveraging the politics of recognition to frame the “oil pipeline debates” as an issue fit primarily for indigenous care, news media position Aboriginality as the primary rhetoric of sustainability. Leveraging Nancy Fraser’s concept of scales of justice and Jacques Rancière’s intellectual emancipation, the article suggests that the politics of recognition can result in branding issue owners, creating lines of divisibility between political and apolitical subjects. The author contextualizes the topic of news representation of oil and indigenous “voice” within the sphere of political pedagogy and social change communication.

KEYWORDS Enbridge; Mass communication; Environmental communication; Social justice

Introduction

Representation of the voices of indigenous people in Canada on environmental issues is an important step in the politics of recognition (Fraser, 2009). Recently, indigenous people have been represented in the media quite frequently on the particular issue of the Northern Gateway pipeline project in Western Canada. While recognition

Marcelina Piotrowski is completing her doctoral studies in the Faculty of Education, University of British Columbia, 2125 Main Mall, Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z4. Email: marcelina.piotrowski@gmail.com .

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may seem like something to celebrate, in this article I suggest that representation of the “oil pipeline debates” as an issue fit for primarily indigenous care can result in conveniently distancing this issue from concerned non-indigenous people in Canada and individuals beyond Canadian borders by suggesting that this topic is outside of their sphere of understanding and therefore their ability to speak as political subjects.

Voice is a common, recurring issue through many environmental debates. Whose voices are heard and represented becomes an important factor in many consultation processes aimed at “giving voice” to the communities that might be affected by particular environmental changes. However, representing an ethnic, interest, or community group and letting its voices be heard can also be used tactically, as a tool to appease true political affect. I am concerned with what Brady (2011), referring to the use of indigenous voices in the context of museum exhibitions, calls signs of indigenous articulation that are used as tools of legitimation for other, and often contrary purposes. Sometimes the representation is unsatisfactory to the represented in question, but often the representation also frames the issues in a way that also distances those who are unrepresented from even getting politically involved. This aspect of representation, as a voice that de-legitimizes political effect, is what concerns me.

A recent environmental justice debate in Canada has been about the building of the Northern Gateway pipeline to transport crude bitumen from Bruderheim, Alberta, to Kitimat, British Columbia, for export into Asian markets. The proposed pipeline, owned by Enbridge Inc., would run through cities and communities in northern Alberta and British Columbia, many of which are indigenous communities. Online newspapers have frequently represented the Northern Gateway Pipeline debate through images of indigenous people, often dressed in traditional clothing, beating drums or walking in protest (Audette, 2012a, 2012b; CBC, 2012a, 2012b; Dyck, 2012; Larson, 2012).

**Legitimate and illegitimate speakers**

As a non-indigenous scholar living in British Columbia, I am concerned about how the frequent representation of the Northern Gateway pipeline debate through images of indigenous people as “legitimate speakers,” often grouped without further distinction under the title “aboriginal,” works to position the entire issue as an indigenous one, and fit primarily for indigenous care. While I wholeheartedly support indigenous discourse about the pipeline, my intention is to use the example of representation of indigenous people and the representation of their voices in newspapers to conduct a critical discourse analysis to theorize about the complexity of legitimate and illegitimate political subjectivity and how representation of one group, as an act of cultural recognition, can be used to create lines of divisibility between political and apolitical subjects.

I contextualize this topic of media representation of the oil debates within a debate on social justice in education, because issues of justice in education include informal forms of education, and particularly how people learn to engage with important social issues such as ecological sustainability. I bring in concepts like mode-of address (Ellsworth, 1997) and intellectual emancipation (Rancière, 1991), to contextualize voice within the question of how we learn about the positions we are expected to take within
power relationships, as subjects who learn about the environment through the media. The question of voice becomes a question of what it means to be a subject who speaks (as one who is assumed to have the power to be speaking) or one who cannot speak, because issue ownership and interpretation discourages her to do so.

Upon review of a topology of philosophical traditions in non-formal and informal environmental education for adults (Walter, 2009), it can be said that contemporary media culture employs the entire range of behaviourist, humanistic, radical, and liberal philosophies to encourage ecological sensibility. However, strikingly little philosophical writing has been done on how people learn to disengage from issues concerning environmental justice. I suggest that framing the oil debate as an indigenous people’s issue has the effect of suggesting that non-indigenous people should become apolitical listeners, not speakers on these topics. Non-indigenous care, as a possibility, becomes literally and metaphorically invisible, through the lack of alternative representations of those who might be affected by the pipeline.

Visibility operates as a currency, a form of exchange for voice. In other words, the rhetoric of colonial guilt, which is unsatisfactory to both indigenous and non-indigenous individuals in Canada (Rymhs, 2006), is leveraged here as a form of reconciliation through the promise to let indigenous people (appear to) speak by being visible (this one time) for themselves on the issue of oil. As Rancière (1992) argues, to be recognized means that one has become classifiable within a hierarchical system and made visible within a logical structure that seeks to maintain order. The images take advantage of historical guilt to allow indigenous people to speak for themselves, both in press coverage, in history making, and in politics (Rymhs, 2006). Historical burden in Canada is a reoccurring theme in which historical injustices resurface in the context of hope of renewed relations in which these injustices are recognized (Furniss, 1999). Yet, while representative images demonstrate care for indigenous voices and the economies of communities, what the images do is suggest to non-indigenous people in Canada, as well as to other environmentally concerned individuals in the international community, that this is a topic they are not legitimated to speak about.

A lack of news images of non-indigenous representations in the oil pipeline debate suggests that non-indigenous people might lack the context or the knowledge to be able to engage in and speak to these topics emotionally or rationally. By representing environmental issues using specific images, the media suggest that only those who can see themselves in those images are legitimized to identify with the issues and respond to them. In this way, these representations of indigenous peoples and their voices become images of convenience. The constructed dualism between indigenous and non-indigenous people’s visibilities, and therefore between legitimate and illegitimate political voices on the topic of oil, is an unfruitful one, as it goes against promoting the cooperation that environmental activists can achieve by working against this pipeline together regardless of ethnicity or race. Despite the fact that the proposed twin-pipeline system would be built in northern British Columbia and Alberta, and run through many indigenous communities, it is unrealistic to speak of the risk of environmental degradation, as might happen in the case of a pipeline leak or oil tanker
spill, as a local issue. These catastrophies affect the entire global ecosystem and, as I will argue later in this article, are best approached through Nancy Fraser’s “all-affected” approach to justice (Fraser, 2009).

Images in news media affect people’s perception of their ability to speak out for and act upon environmental issues. One of the key representations of environmental concern in newspaper images is that the care of the environment must be balanced with the care for people and their local communities, if we are to sustain ourselves within this ecological matrix. Although I do not negate the complexity of ecological well-being as part of an environmental–socio-economic web, these recent news images suggest particular common-sense ways to approach the subject of environmental protection, by which they legitimize who can be politically and emotionally engaged as a participant on these topics.

There is a lot to learn from observing how media representations attempt to address people from positions of power. While it is not within the scope of this article to examine the specific relationship between companies that have economic stakes in oil and their relationship to ownership of media industries, it can generally be said that those who are in the position to represent an issue always legitimize some forms of identification with it and de-legitimize others. Often this happens under the guise of expert opinion, which means that by constructing more and less legitimate forms of knowledge, representation serves to separate expert opinion from the passion of the multitude (Rancière, 2006). Without doubt, news media have made improvements in diversifying the representation of people they show and turn to for information, allowing other voices than only those of traditional expert sources (Boyce, 2006). In the case of the Northern Gateway Pipeline project, the media could be congratulated on having balanced “expert sources” with “non-expert speakers,” such as indigenous community leaders, instead of showing only industry-certified scientists or economy experts as stewards of public opinion on how such high-stakes industry interventions will affect the ecology of this planet. However, by turning to indigenous speakers as the representatives on this issue, the media have, perhaps inadvertently, created a new set of “expert speakers” who guard the interpretation of this topic from others who may also be concerned.

An all-affected approach to environmental care
In the appearance of care, those with the power to represent the oil industry's interests have aligned the pipeline issue with indigenous issues, those whom this topic affects the most by virtue of (local) geography. The representative images visually extinguish the idea that non-local and, hence, non-indigenous, non-northern residents or members of the international community could also care for this pipeline's potentially catastrophic effects. While the media may appear to care by giving priority on the issue to indigenous groups by depicting them as the central persons concerned, the question is whether or not this tactic is intended to limit others’ ability to become political subjects. The rhetoric of colonial guilt is that non-indigenous people cannot “speak for” or “speak louder than” indigenous people regarding issues affecting their land, and instead suggests that non-indigenous people should seek opportunities for reconciliation, which rarely means entering into dialogue, and usually means listening, or being
spoken for by governments (Rymhs, 2006). Ultimately what is at stake is the health of the ecology of the Earth, which should be everyone’s concern.

The case here is about issue ownership and jurisdictions of what constitutes legitimate space for debate. Issue ownership comes from political theory in which political parties come to be known for their stance on particular issues and become associated with a topic (Petrocik, Benoit, & Hansen, 2004). Whereas the Canadian government has provided little official room or political space in which Canadian citizens and residents can engage in environmental discussions, it could be argued that cultural, academic, scientific, and interest groups have carved out their own space for environmental rhetoric and become issue owners, the most obvious examples being what are perceived to be the polar camps of scientists and environmental activists. The average citizen seems to fall between these discursive spaces, in a way that is illustrative of the Keynesian-Westphalian framework of justice.

The Keynesian-Westphalian framework is one in which those with access to the space of justice are those “citizens” who are able to exercise rights only within the context of nation-states. Yet as Fraser (2009) argues, a globalized market and movement of people requires a post-Westphalian concept of justice. The examples of a skilled migrant worker who cannot take her employer to court for mistreatment because she is considered an illegal migrant, and therefore invisible within the context of national law, or a community that is susceptible to diseases from a polluted river that flows from another country, both illustrate this point. In a Keynesian-Westphalian framework of justice, nation-state boundaries are constructed frames of justice, enabling visibility and the ability to speak only when a person is within a nation-state frame. Conversely, this framework of justice frequently pretends not to notice the difficulty people find themselves in when they choose to or are forced to find their voice between cultural and national frames. This authoritarian division of legal space is limiting, not only in the sense that people increasingly fall outside of or in between these frames, but also in that there is a decreasing discursive space to contest what these very frames mean and do.

A post-Westphalian framework (Fraser, 2009) requires not only contesting the content of justice, such as the validity of laws and constitutions, but reconsidering the role of these frames. It is in this context that I approach the issue of environmental discourses, particularly that of oil in Canada, as an issue of the capacity to have political voice within a set of convenient frames that appear to recognize marginalized groups, but simultaneously form new frames that marginalize those who have not been sanctioned to speak due the way they have been dis-identified in the media.

The privileged status of speech
The point is that politics of recognition and inclusivity of marginalized groups can be taken to the other extreme of creating issue ownership in which marginalized groups’ voices become commodified in the news as the new, uncontested expert opinion. Newspapers can create a purposeful tension between action and observation when viewed as a tool of persuasion or explanation. On the one hand, news consumers are expected to engage with the issues that they see, but on the other hand they are told they do not understand, or could not possibly understand the issues, without having
someone who is legitimized to speak, to explain them. In this sense, voice becomes an important speech act that creates what appear to be political subjects.

The concept of intellectual emancipation (Rancière, 1991) is useful in illustrating that as long as a group of people insists that they have the legitimate right to provide explanation and interpretation on a topic, as issue owners they will maintain a power differential that aims to stultify. In reviewing the pedagogical lessons from the early nineteenth century of the French literature professor Joseph Jacotot, (Rancière, 1991) observed that despite good intentions to teach, explanation that is intended to produce understanding reduces learners' capacities to believe in the power of their own intelligences. The learner never decides whether she has understood the lesson. Part of the pedagogical myth is that power is maintained by the teacher, the stultifying master, who has the privileged status of speech, determining when the learner has understood. Rancière urges us to consider the relationship between the power of speech and the power of the enforced master-learner relationship.

Whenever a person thinks she can decide when another person has learned and understood something, she enforces the pedagogical myth, which suggests that there is an inferior and a superior intelligence (Rancière, 1991). The separation between one who knows and another who does not yet know suggests that there is a gap of knowledge and understanding between the two. This tension of speech as explanation (those who determine who is a speaking subject) and speech as self-representation (those who seek self-determination) becomes apparent when we examine the environmental rhetoric of oil.

Newspapers' representation of the Northern Gateway Pipeline project as an indigenous issue conveniently avoids suggesting that governments or industry are stultifying masters and control the decisions on these topics or make decisions behind closed doors. Instead, news images conveniently suggest that indigenous people are the primary legitimate political subjects who can make the right decision and provide the correct explanation for understanding what is happening. Yet these images in the media also victimize indigenous people by framing them in the position of the explaining master teachers. In other words, by visually depicting the oil pipeline debates in the news in terms of aboriginality, the government is shown to relinquish responsibility and decision-making to indigenous groups, indadvertedly framing them as issue owners and those responsible if dialogues with corporations do not work out. This is concerning because in reality the government has been pursuing an aggressive pro-pipeline propaganda agenda and has final decision-making power over pipelines.

Convenient images are therefore those that disguise power structures that might be inconvenienced by being confronted by too many vocal subjects. This convenience might be characterized as a deferral of responsibility by not taking the time to involve all affected people in this issue, as well as the use of historical injustice and the rhetoric of guilt to discourage or delay a feeling of being legitimate speaking subjects. Representation, instead of enabling voice and recognition, becomes a means to conveniently appropriate historical mis-recognition, for the purpose of dis-enabling others from the legitimacy to speak. To play on the words of one of the most famous examples of environmental documentaries, namely Davis Guggenheim's (2006) documentary
An Inconvenient Truth, a film about Al Gore and his crusade for environmental awareness, I would argue that newspaper coverage of the Northern Gateway Pipeline project has, through the use of images, constructed a convenient truth to deal with the lack of proper process of environmental justice that might satisfy all those who feel affected (Fraser, 2009).

While Fraser (2009) argues for all-affected politics that de-legitimise legal rights based on nation-states, location, proximity, or history, I suggest the all-affected principle can be extended in its use as a conceptual tool to address issue ownership on environmental questions. Those who cannot afford for a large portion of this country to have equality in making decisions on matters as important as the environment find ways to address people from positions of power. By turning indigenous people into gatekeepers of interpretation and decision, the media depict the conflict as one that only indigenous people can explain. Doing so enacts the teacher-learner power differential. However, this teacher-learner differential is constructed not between the government and all Canadian citizens, but between indigenous individuals and non-indigenous individuals. Indigenous communities are presented as the stultifying masters who explain and therefore maintain an upper hand on the power of the decision to care for the environment. This arrangement is convenient to governments and industry who prefer to limit democratic dialogue but is ultimately destructive to political and intellectual emancipation for both indigenous and non-indigenous people.

Most indigenous communities impacted along the route of the pipeline are against building it. I do not disagree with their perspectives, but I do suggest that it is convenient for decision-makers to frame this issue as “indigenous” to absolve themselves of the responsibility to ensure due consultative process and that everyone can have a voice on the issue. In other words, recognition is leveraged to “govern without politics” (Rancière, 2006, p. 80). Whether or not the consultation and decision-making process has satisfactorily engaged enough people who feel affected by this issue is beyond the scope of this article. It is unquestionable that anyone would object to indigenous leaders as key stakeholders on environmental issues in their communities, but, to turn to Rancière’s (2006) perspective on democratic governance: “by administering the local consequences of global historical necessity, our governments take great care to banish the democratic supplement” (p. 81). To represent people through the media is therefore never apolitical.

The act of representation is a reflection of more than the people the image depicts; it is a reflection of the act of diverting the gaze of people who expect to be reflected through their political system. It highlights the struggle that media, governments, and industry wish to avoid with the democratic supplement, those who refuse to have their condition explained to themselves and recognize themselves under the guise of consensus (Rancière, 2006). Ironically, the democratic supplement in this case includes a large portion of people living on Canadian soil and around the world.

One of Canada’s key national narratives is the linking of sustainability to Aboriginality (Friedel, 2008). Indigenous scholar Tracy Friedel (2008) has studied the use of images of Aboriginal people by the oil industry in their official marketing materials, such as commercials, reports, and websites. She writes that representations of
indigenous people are part of the greenwashing strategy that supports the oil industry’s claims to social responsibility by positioning Aboriginal people as partners in corporate goals. Friedel’s review of the marketing paraphernalia is important as it uncovers the links between national narratives and how oil companies leverage these to help mask the potential risk of ecological devastation. Looking at the link between sustainability and representations of indigeneity in newspapers, as I do in this essay, it appears that representations of indigenous people are not only being used to increase support of the pipelines, but rather are being used to position the entire discourse as an indigenous discourse.

Conclusions
My narrative—on the convenient application of frames that use representation in a way that provides politics of recognition to marginalized groups, yet sets up normalized frames that distance political engagement in others—has been critical so far. I have argued that despite the politics of recognition, in which indigenous people appear to have been recognized for their local and cultural knowledge and featured prominently on environmental issues, the politics of recognition has set up discursive frames that construct convenient issue gatekeepers. Readers wishing to find solutions to overcoming polarizing representations that dominate interpretation in newspapers will be disappointed with a lack of clear answers. Instead I have examined alternative approaches through a conceptual discussion of voice, visibility, and politics as they relate to environmental topics. I have suggested that we need to question representations, which always speak from positions of power.

The paradox of representation as recognition needs to be disrupted by acknowledging an equality of voices and interpretations. Representations can conveniently separate people into groups with rights to interpretations. They separate people into knowledgeable and ignorant readers, and speaking and “spoken for” citizens. Instead of fostering historically appropriate rights to interpretation, we need to foster diversity of interpretation. The mode of address, a concept in film theory used to describe “who the film thinks you are,” illustrates that in media culture, film and images are created with a perspective that they think people will identify with or that they hope people will adopt.

Modes of address are usually prescriptive and do not take account of the space of interpretation between how the viewer is addressed and how they interpret the address (Ellsworth, 1997). The focus should be on the right to different interpretations, not right interpretations, as suggested by the mode of address. The depiction of indigenous people in many of the oil industry’s marketing images is intended to address both indigenous and non-indigenous people. For example, as Friedel (2008) argues, “greenwashing” strategies involving images of indigenous people are intended to relieve public, and presumably non-indigenous worry about safety, with the rationalization that indigenous people are the stewards of the environment. In contrast, recognizing the equality of intelligences with the possibility of different interpretations could lead to a reconsideration of people as political actors who refuse to be divided into more or less privileged groups. By contesting stereotypical representations of indigenous rights to “stewardship” over environmental issues, we might begin to unify within a network of ecologically concerned people.
Oil advertising images in the media address indigenous people through the message that the oil industry is the future of the economic sustainment of their communities while at the same time ignoring the historical injustice that has been inflicted on indigenous communities (Friedel, 2008). I use Friedel's example of greenwashing marketing that uses images of indigenous people to suggest that modes of address intended at indigenous and non-indigenous people speak to them as political non-subjects who are not given the right to represent their care for ecological sustainability on their own terms. The tension found within the two modes of address in these images, might serve to create conflict between indigenous and non-indigenous groups, and position them as standing in each other's way to care for the environment. It is therefore imperative that the approach to care of the environment renders multiple forms of care and self-representation visible and sayable.

To create this indivisible community based on difference, news audiences need to recognize that representation in the media has the power to influence through the use of the rhetoric of historical burden. The representations in the media, even if well intentioned, can significantly impact other efforts at environmental education. Representation must therefore be used in ways that de-familiarize any historical and national narratives that might force groups into silos, positioned against each other, and prevent all-affected efforts at a unified ecological approach to care.

The all-affected principle of justice suggests that “those affected by a given social structure or institution have moral standings as subjects of justice in relation to it” (Fraser, 2009, p. 24). This principle helps to refocus the issue of representation as an issue of framing, concerned with the “who” of politics within and beyond the Keynesian-Westphalian territorial paradigm (Fraser, 2009). Another framework, which, much like the Westphalian citizen vs. non-citizen boundary, is increasingly difficult to maintain, is the framework of local-global when speaking of environmental impact. Whereas the goal of re-framing the Keynesian-Westphalian approach is a critique of citizenship and territorial markers as boundaries of political justice (Fraser, 2009), a re-framing of the local-global discourse would try to move beyond the local-impact-local-justice approach. Framing therefore has a communicative function, namely the choices one makes about what is included and excluded in the representation of an issue (Gitlin, 1980), and it also has a cordonning function, where it legitimizes and de-legitimizes political subjectivity. In a transformative frame approach (Fraser, 2009), issues of environmental justice could become discussed in ways that permit political subjects to speak from outside of discourses that link political agency on environmental issues with land ownership, geographical proximity, land claims, or local knowledge to an all-affected approach in which anyone who feels impacted by a looming environmental devastation can demonstrate legitimacy to care.

Returning to the topic at hand, the visual representation of the Northern Gateway Pipeline project in the news, and its surrounding debate as one that is dominated by indigenous voices, begs the development of new approaches to representation and political recognition. It calls for transformative social movements that demand not only ecological justice, but “democratic arenas for entertaining arguments about the frame” (Fraser, 2009, p. 16). Environmental contexts require voice to inconvenience,
particularly the convenient images and rhetoric of the indigenization of nature, of historical burden, and of land ownership or geographical proximity. Indigenous, historical, local, landowners, local jobs, et cetera are words (like citizen rights and nationality) that have too frequently been leveraged to draw boundaries around environmental issues instead of opening up the space for real dialogue.

References