Under Pressure

Coal Industry Rhetoric and Neoliberalism

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Palgrave Studies in Media and Environmental Communication
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Palgrave Studies in Media and Environmental Communication
ISBN 978-1-137-53314-2 ISBN 978-1-137-53315-9 (eBook)
DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-53315-9

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016939223

Printed on acid-free paper

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by Springer Nature
The registered company is Macmillan Publishers Ltd. London

Preface

Our interest in studying coal first emerged out of a sense of solidarity with those activists and scholars working in the Appalachian region in the US. In 2011, two of us were teaching courses that introduced students to the problem of Mountaintop Removal, or MTR—the process whereby the tops of mountains in Appalachia are literally dynamited open so that coal can easily be extracted. MTR is a fascinating site of study for many reasons: for the devastating environmental and public health impacts it causes, because MTR is located in a region with a long, rich, and complex history of coal mining, and also because of the significant environmentalist and activist responses MTR has engendered. We were moved by the work of scholars such as Shirley Stewart Burns and Rebecca Scott, who complicated for us and our students any easy understanding of coal's role in that region. As the four of us talked about MTR, and began to dive into the wealth of materials on the topic, we also found ourselves drawn to the many activist documentaries, written texts, and information campaigns coming out of Appalachia as rich examples of environmental communication.

It is hard, once you know about MTR and its effects, *not* to care about that issue, and so the four of us tentatively agreed, while sitting at a table in a hotel bar after a long day of listening to academic conference presentations, that we would try to write about coal, extraction, and communication together. That experiment led to an article called "Environmental Melodrama, Coal, and the Politics of Sustainable Energy in *The Last Mountain*," which was published in the *International Journal of Sustainable Development* (Schwarze, Peeples, Schneider, & Bsumek, 2014). In that article, we endeavored to critically analyze the environmental documentary *The Last*

Mountain, which links MTR with the politics of climate change, sometimes to good effect, other times less so. We discovered that we enjoyed working together as a team, with each of us bringing different strengths to our writing projects. Several more articles, and this book, came out of that satisfying collaborative effort (see Bsumek, Schneider, Schwarze, & Peeples, 2014; Peeples, Bsumek, Schwarze, & Schneider, 2014).

We also quickly found that while MTR is a critically important site of contestation over coal in the US, and environmentalist rhetoric about coal is an important site of scholarly study, we were primarily drawn to understanding and theorizing messages about coal from coal corporations and their allies. At times, this felt like a risky choice—in some contexts, choosing to study corporate rhetoric is understood as *defending* corporate rhetoric, or at least as taking it at face value. At other times, we have had to self-reflexively question our own subject positions as scholarly researchers who are largely sympathetic to the values and approaches of the environmental movement, yet who endeavor to produce academic work that is soundly argued and supported. We did not set out with this book to write an anti-corporate polemic, or to uncritically support environmental dogma. Rather, we aimed always to focus on corporate communication that we found confusing, complex, or contradictory and then tried to understand that communication using approaches from rhetoric and cultural studies. Rhetorical theory, and in particular the work of environmental communication scholars, helped us name and analyze the information campaigns produced by Big Coal and its allies. Scholars working to understand the construction and effects of neoliberal theory—many coming out of the cultural and critical studies traditions—helped us understand the larger context in which these messages were produced.

As we finished work on the articles mentioned above, it became clear that the rhetoric of industries finding themselves under pressure could be best addressed in a book-length manuscript. We began work in earnest on this manuscript in 2014, although we have drawn to some extent from our earlier articles published on corporate ventriloquism and industrial apocalyptic in the writing of this book. We would like to thank the editors, reviewers, and respondents at the journal *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* and for the edited volume *Voice and the Environment*, where early versions of Chaps. 2 and 3 appeared, for their critical feedback and encouragement as we worked on those previous iterations of these ideas.

We have also presented drafts of this book's chapters to our colleagues in environmental communication at the Western States Communication Association's yearly convention, the National Communication Association's

yearly conference, and at the Conference on Communication and the Environment, the biannual conference of the International Environmental Communication Association (theieca.org). Colleagues there provided valuable feedback and were endlessly patient in attending panels featuring yet another article from "Team Coal."

We would also like to thank Stephen Depoe and Anders Hansen, editors of the Palgrave Studies in Media and Environmental Communication book series at Palgrave Macmillan, who graciously reviewed our book proposal and accepted this manuscript for inclusion in that series. The editorial staff at Palgrave Macmillan has been helpful in preparing this work for publication. We also thank the reviewers of the manuscript for their invaluable feedback.

Much of this book was written while each of us hunched over personal computers in our home states—in Idaho, Montana, Utah, and Virginia—and over Skype calls, where we negotiated writing tasks and brainstormed ideas. But we would not have been able to complete the project had we not carved out significant quantities of time to work together while attending academic conferences, and taken advantage of release time and sabbaticals to bring the book to completion. We would therefore like to thank our respective universities—Boise State University, the University of Montana, James Madison University, and Utah State University—for providing travel and conference support.

We have also met once a summer at an undisclosed location somewhere in the middle of Utah to hammer out ideas, brainstorm, and revise. This has meant time away from our families, and we are particularly grateful to our loved ones for their support as this project has come to fruition.

Finally, we would like to note that this book reflects a truly collaborative effort. It would be nearly impossible for any one of us to individually identify the pieces of this book we are responsible for; each of us has been intimately involved in drafting, revising, and revising again every chapter of this book. We believe that this has made the collective work stronger, although we also all share responsibility for any errors or oversights. Most importantly, our collaboration has been joyful and rewarding, and each of us is grateful to be a part of it. Being a member of Team Coal has been an important reminder of how lucky we are to be paid to read, write, and teach for a living, and how important it is to fight for others who do not have the same privilege.

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Contents

Abbreviations

ABEC	Americans for Balanced Energy Choices
ACCCE	American Coalition for Clean Coal Electricity
ACCF	American Council on Capital Formation
AEA	American Energy Alliance
AEFL	Advanced Energy for Life
ASA	Advertising Standards Authority
CCS	Carbon Capture and Sequestration
CCS	Carbon Capture and Storage
CEED	Center for Energy and Economic Development
CORE	Center for Organizational Research and Education
EIA	US Energy Information Administration
EPA	Environmental Policy Alliance
EPA	Environmental Protection Agency
FACES	Federation for American Coal, Energy and Security
FOC	Friends of Coal
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GE	General Electric
HDI	Human Development Index
IEA	International Energy Agency
IGCC	Integrated Gasification Combined Cycle
MDG	Millennium Development Goals
MTR	Mountaintop Removal
NASA	National Aeronautics and Space Administration
NGO	Non-governmental organization

NMA	National Mining Association
RSA	Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce
TINA	There is no alternative
WCA	World Coal Association
WEA	World Energy Assessment
WEA	Western Energy Alliance
WEHAB	Water, Energy, Health, Agriculture, and Biodiversity
WVCA	West Virginia Coal Association

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CHAPTER 1

Under Pressure

"Coal industry stands for progress and prosperity." So says the headline of an op-ed by Brian Ricketts, secretary-general for Eurocoal, the major trade association for European coal and lignite producers (2015). While claims associating coal with progress have long been a staple of the industry's rhetoric, contemporary advocates like Ricketts make their case for coal with renewed vigor. And it is a compelling storyline. Whereas most people "lived lives of servitude" before the Industrial Revolution, "progress fuelled by hydrocarbons means that we live longer, healthier, happier, and more productive lives."

Given this progress, environmental resistance to the coal industry is made to seem absurd. According to Ricketts, anti-coal attitudes represent the height of hypocrisy: "Well-funded green NGOs vilify the coal industry. They employ professionals who wear smart suits and smart phones, the products of fossil fuels. … Many seem happy to take the benefits of fossil fuel use, while telling us to stop producing." In this light, environmentalists are seen as dangerous to modern society. Their resistance threatens not only the coal industry, but also the hard-won economic and social progress that fossil fuels have made possible. "Stopping that journey," argues Ricketts, "seems like a route back to servitude." Indeed, coal is continuing to fuel the journey of progress; it provides the dominant share of electricity worldwide, "a share that is rising as developing countries electrify their people out of energy poverty" (2015).

J. Schneider et al., *Under Pressure*, Palgrave Studies in Media and Environmental Communication, DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-53315-9_1

Ricketts also encourages audiences to believe that technological innovation, if left unimpeded by environmental regulation, will enable the coal industry to handle the challenges of climate change. In fact, according to Ricketts, the industry is already working tirelessly to reduce emissions. "Carbon emissions from the newest coal plants are 30–40 % lower than from the old plants still found in some [EU] member states," and furthermore, "carbon capture and storage (CCS) is now a proven technology." In a telling summation, Ricketts synthesizes these arguments to reveal the real driving force behind this story of progress: the power of the market. "Economics will trump ideology and the coal industry will continue to deliver performance improvements. Outlawing coal would be a divisive and backwards step for humanity. Technological progress is the only way forward and coal offers progress" (2015).

These rhetorical strategies tell a compelling story about the centrality of coal in our lives. First, coal is equated with progress and the benefits of living in the modern, "developed" West. Opposition to coal thus raises the specter of apocalyptic outcomes for industry and society. Audiences are invited to identify with coal, the bedrock of Western society, and with coal corporations, which operate as our neighbors and community members: We *are* coal. Furthermore, this story tells us, coal companies have always been responsive to social and environmental concerns, and they use technological innovation and the power of the market to function as socially responsible citizens. Conversely, opponents of coal are elitist hypocrites and radical outsiders who seek to deny progress to others, and whose ideologies blind them to the hard realities of technology and economics. Finally, this grand narrative emphasizes the ways in which coal lifts people out of energy poverty and delivers the good life to all.

Indeed, Ricketts' op-ed checks off, one by one, the emerging rhetorical strategies of a global coal industry that is facing multiple political and economic pressures. Yet, the one rhetorical standby that we might expect to see in an op-ed like Ricketts'—climate denial—is notably missing. Ricketts does not challenge climate models or trumpet the alleged benefits of global warming. He briefly acknowledges the "dire warnings about climate change" and admits that, "We know we will have to adapt to a warming climate" (2015). In other words, the text noticeably pivots away from constructing doubt about climate change and toward a broader set of industry advocacy strategies that engage issues of economy, culture, technology, and morality.

This is not to say that climate "denial" is dead as an industry strategy. Scholars who have investigated industry strategies that produce a "climate of doubt" surrounding climate science have made it clear that this is a powerful and productive approach for corporate interests (Bricker, 2014; Brulle, 2013; Ceccarelli, 2011; Oreskes & Conway, 2010). We do argue, however, that fossil fuel industries are foregrounding rhetorical strategies beyond those of climate denial, and that this turn in corporate advocacy requires a new focus and mode of analysis for scholars interested in environmental communication, corporate advocacy, and the public discourse surrounding climate change. Consistent with this turn, we contend that environmental communication scholars and advocates could give greater attention to the ideological dimensions of industry rhetoric, particularly if they want to intervene productively in the conditions that perpetuate environmental crises.

To that end, this book investigates the rhetorical strategies used by the US coal industry to advance its interests in the face of growing economic and environmental pressures. We contend that the corporate advocacy of the coal industry reflects a complex and at times contradictory engagement with neoliberalism, a discourse and set of practices that privilege market rationality, and individual freedom and responsibility above all else. Those espousing neoliberalism purportedly oppose social liberalism, the welfare state, government interference in the market, and collective bargaining rights and, in turn, advocate for deregulation, privatization, and reduced taxation to encourage high corporate profits and economic growth (Antonio & Brulle, 2011, p. 196). Drawing on critical approaches from the fields of environmental communication, rhetoric, and cultural studies, we identify five prominent rhetorical strategies in coal industry advocacy that shape the broader public discourse surrounding coal. Each chapter of the book explores one of the strategies through a detailed rhetorical analysis of coal industry discourse:

- *Industrial Apocalyptic*, a set of rhetorical appeals that constitute the imminent demise of a particular industry, economic, or political system and the catastrophic ramifications associated with that loss.
- *Corporate Ventriloquism*, a rhetorical process by which corporations transmit messages through other entities, usually of their own making, in order to construct and animate an alternative ethos, voice, or identity that advances their interests.

- The *Technological Shell Game*, a rhetorical process of misdirection that relies on strategic ambiguity about the feasibility, costs, and successful implementation of technologies in order to deflect attention from environmental pollution and health concerns.
- The *Hypocrite's Trap*, a set of interrelated arguments that attempts to disarm critics of industries that provide particular goods or technologies, based on the critics' own consumption of or reliance on those goods.
- *Energy Utopia*, a set of rhetorical appeals that position a particular energy source as the key to providing a "good life" that transcends the conflicts of environment, justice, and politics.

Ranging from the rise of "grassroots" front groups in the early 2000s, to debates over "clean coal" in the context of climate legislation, to the push for increased coal exports as a solution to global energy poverty, this book undertakes a fine-grained analysis of how the coal industry's rhetorical strategies draw on neoliberal presumptions. These strategies normalize neoliberalization, of course, but they also expose ideological contradictions that open opportunities for rhetorical and political resistance. And as our opening example demonstrates, these strategies are not limited to the US context, although that is the focus of this book; the global reach of the coal industry and persistence of neoliberalism make these strategies relevant for examining coal's corporate advocacy in other locations.

In the remainder of this chapter, we elaborate on the context, assumptions, and motivations that are shaping our analysis of coal's corporate advocacy. First, we extend our discussion of why the coal industry is an ideal site for examining how the fossil fuel industry has been relatively successful at forestalling regulation. Then, we explain why attention to neoliberalism is essential to understanding the rhetoric of the coal industry's opposition to environmental policy and regulation. Finally, we situate our study relative to other scholarship on environmental communication and corporate advocacy, and discuss how our perspectives on rhetoric and neoliberalism inform our analysis of coal's advocacy campaigns in the rest of the book.

The Coal Industry and Corporate Advocacy

For decades, coal dominated electricity production in the US, generating approximately half of the nation's electricity. In the spring of 2012, coal's share of total electricity production in the US dropped to less than

40 % for the first time, and through mid-2015 its share has continued to hover in the high 30s (US Energy Information Administration, 2015). The industry faces pressure from several directions. Market competition from cheaper natural gas has made a significant dent in coal's share of electricity generation, at times with the two sources providing nearly equal amounts. On the regulatory front, the Obama administration has been more amenable than its predecessors in enforcing Clean Water Act provisions applicable to mountaintop removal mining (Broder, 2012). As "the single biggest contributor to global warming," the coal industry also is girding for a protracted struggle over the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Clean Power Plan, which aims to reduce carbon emissions from the electricity sector by 30 % (Black, 2014). Perhaps most notably for our purposes, a vocal and well-organized movement is challenging the industry on a variety of fronts, including mountaintop removal, retirement of old power plants, coal exports to Asia, and institutional divestment from coal and other fossil fuel industries.

Coal, it appears, is under pressure: It has become the leading target and leverage point for those seeking more aggressive action to mitigate climate change.[1] As a result, coal's corporate decline may be a bellwether for controversies involving other energy industries and environmental policy and legislation. Following that logic, our analysis of coal's advocacy may foreshadow rhetorical strategies available to other industries, particularly those who are coming up against environmental opposition as well as legal and social pressure to measure the costs of externalities as they negotiate significant economic and cultural shifts in the age of climate change. In other words, the coal industry is the proverbial canary in, well, the coalmine. The way it responds to and attempts to manage its current situation provides insight into the ways that other industries with significant environmental footprints can be expected to manage similar economic and cultural shifts. For example, we have already seen the natural gas industry

[1] Not all are in agreement regarding the amount of pressure being enacted on the coal industry. Jonathan Thompson (Thompson, 2012) questions whether coal companies are being as negatively impacted by the new political and economic situation as they contend. In response to Peabody Coal's announcement that it is laying off 1000 workers in the US and Australia, Thompson writes,

> "Peabody, it turns out, is not hurting at all. In fact, the same story about the layoffs notes that its earnings during the third quarter of this year were higher than last year. Peabody has thrived during the alleged war waged by the Obama administration. It's had higher profits for each of the last four years than it did in 2007" (Thompson, 2012).

use some of the same rhetorical strategies we identify as they deal with increasingly effective public advocacy campaigns designed to regulate or ban "fracking," or hydraulic fracturing.

The significance of coal's rhetorical strategies lies in how the industry manages the tensions and contradictions of neoliberalism while serving the aims of stalling regulatory action and marginalizing environmental concerns. The coal industry has interrupted the passage of a climate bill and dodged repeated attempts to regulate and prohibit the practice of mountaintop removal mining, and yet it continues to face significant economic and regulatory pressures. How it manages its successes and failures, and how it positions itself relative to different audiences and contexts are of interest for scholars of rhetoric. Therefore, we consider coal's corporate advocacy in light of its being "under pressure" from growing public concern about climate change, rapidly shifting domestic and global markets, and the specter of federal regulation. The rhetorical strategy the industry uses depends on *which* pressure coal is responding to, and how it wishes to both speak of and hail particular audiences. Regardless of the situation, however, the coal industry seems to move with agility among the different rhetorical strategies we examine in this book.

We make two broad assumptions about the coal industry that deserve mention. First, when we refer to "the coal industry" or "the industry," we mean to acknowledge a diverse affiliation of corporate interests and organizations that work together to coordinate messages and influence policy makers in the US. In this, we follow Richard H. Vietor's (1980) description, in which he argues that the "coal industry" broadly encompasses utilities, front groups, advisory councils, industry associations, equipment producers, and even banks, in addition to coal mining companies. Since the late 1960s, he argues, "these councils and trade groups have cooperated formally and informally in the unified promotion of the environmental policy goals of all the coal-related industries" (Vietor, 1980, p. 37). Therefore, while we are cognizant that the "coal industry" is made up of many different organizations, from a rhetorical perspective, we note the existence of a fairly unified message that often appears to be coming from multiple voices.

Second, we recognize that the significant financial resources of the coal industry, and of fossil fuel industries more broadly, permit the expensive and expansive circulation of their rhetoric. For example, the coal mining industry made $15.3 million in federal campaign contributions during the 2012 election cycle and averaged $18 million in annual spending on