

Changing Climates and the media: Lancaster workshop
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Exploring representations of 'essential' energy use in the UK media

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Setting the context

This paper focusses on how energy use is represented as 'needed' or 'essential' in the UK media

Why need?

- Need = an unavoidable requisite for the achievement of some normatively important end
 - Synonyms: essential, necessity, vital, require etc.
- 'Needed' energy-use = energy-use that must and should occur



Implication:

Ideas of what energy use is 'needed' play an important role in framing debates about energy issues

e.g. climate change and energy security policy

Is there a role for demand reduction or changes?

If so:

- What energy uses do we need, and so should be sustained?
- Which don't we need, and so might be open to change?

A key way that notions of needed energy use are constructed and re-produced is through media discourse



Research focus and questions

Focus: UK print news media in 2013

Questions:

- How does the news media define and represent 'necessary' energy use?
- How do these ideas shape the framing of the issue being reported?



Sampling strategy

Sources: Telegraph, Mail, The Sun, Daily Mirror, Guardian (and Sunday versions)

Timeframe: 1st January 2013 – 31st December 2013

Search method: keyword search using 'Nexis' database:

energy or electric! w/8 need! or necess! or essent! or require!

Method of analysis

756 articles resulted from the search.

175 articles selected for in-depth qualitative analysis

In-depth qualitative analysis informed by the ‘framing analysis’ approach

Results

Ideas of essential energy-use circulated in relation to two distinct scales:

- 1) **'Macro' scale** - Energy-use that was essential for the UK as a whole
- 2) **'Micro' scale:** Energy-use that was essential for households and individuals

Macro scale: Energy and the collective 'needs' of the UK

- Prevalent in all the newspapers studied
- Circulated in debates around **energy security** or **climate change policy**

Two things presented as 'needed':

- i) New energy generation technology and associated infrastructure
- ii) 'Energy' as a generic resource.

i) Need for new energy generation technology

“the UK is in great need of that new lower-carbon infrastructure” (Guardian)

“the power stations we so desperately need” (Mail)



Significant amount necessary:

“hundreds of billions of pounds of new power plants Britain needs” (Telegraph)

“To bridge the energy gap, we need more generating capacity of any and every stripe.” (Sun)



The state's responsibility to meet these needs:

“With the possible exception of the defence of the realm, it is hard to think of an issue more critical to any government than ensuring the future of the nation's energy supply.” (Telegraph)

ii) The need for 'energy'

“the nation's electricity needs”

“the electricity needed across the UK”

“our energy needs”

- The particular **uses** that energy is *needed for* (Shove and Walker, 2014) were not highlighted

The idea of 'going without' energy portrayed as a disaster:

“the spectre of 1970s-style blackouts”

State responsible for meeting these needs:

“...it would be hard to find a greater indictment of our long-term infrastructure thinking than the failure to provide properly for the future energy needs of the nation” (Mail)

ALL demanded energy-consumption is needed:

“A £14BILLION nuclear power plant got the green light yesterday ... The move is important as the plant will generate 7% of Britain's electricity needs” (Mirror)

“As the National Grid have said, we have enough energy to meet our needs this winter. Our infrastructure can deliver more than we need and has coped well during recent very cold winter spells.” (DECC Spokesperson, Mail)

How does this language fit within and shape newspaper framings of energy security and climate change?

Acts as a ‘framing device’ (Entman, 1993) - fits into and helps legitimise particular definitions of ‘problems’ and their feasible solutions.

Problem = insufficient supply

- Energy demand is not the issue – ‘energy’ is essential for the UK

Solution = increased **supply**. Needed in order to ‘satisfy’ our energy needs

- **Certain types** of supply necessary:

“The one thing the planet cannot afford is climate change ... variable renewables are not able to provide the reliable electricity we need day in day out, which never falls below about 20,000MW in the UK. So it's coal, gas or nuclear for this segment of our power demand. Unless carbon capture and storage really takes off [...] the choice is simply nuclear power or high greenhouse gas emissions.” (Guardian)

Micro scale: Energy-use and the needs of households

- Particularly tabloids, and Guardian
- Circulated in debates about **energy bills** and **prices**

Need for energy

“Gas and electricity are essential to civilised life” (Mirror)

“...a third [of households are] still cutting back on everyday essentials. Fuel, energy and food prices are the biggest worries.” (Sun)

Particular emphasis on *heating*

“Water, gas and electricity are essential for life. None of these is a luxury. They are public necessities ... There will be hundreds of deaths this winter, particularly among the frail and elderly, because they cannot afford to heat their homes.” (Mirror)

“A warm home should be a given, not a luxury.” (Greg Barker, Mail)

‘Ordinary’ households using the amount of energy they ‘need’

“...for some consumers in some parts of the country we will see energy bills overtake many other bills we have traditionally thought were the biggest items of non-discretionary spend” (Telegraph)

Reduction would lead to ‘harmful’ consequences – i.e. people less than they need

“...[the energy companies] already hiked prices by an inflation-busting six per cent back in December ... Gas was then so expensive that about **70 per cent of us turned the radiators off and shivered in our homes** rather than face ruinous bills.” (Sun)

How does this language fit within and shape newspaper framings of energy bills and prices issues?

Problem = Excessive prices, lack of regulation, lack of insulation

Solutions = Greater regulation, people switching suppliers.

“A POWER boss sparked uproar yesterday by saying the amount of electricity families in Britain use is a 'luxury'. The extraordinary claim by Chris Train, a senior director of the National Grid, coincided with energy companies refusing to rule out more price rises.” (Mail)

Increased energy efficiency only way to reduce consumption:

“With energy bills forecast to rise in the coming years ... making houses less wasteful is seen by most experts as the only serious way of limiting how much people pay for their energy.” (Guardian)

Alternative ideas: uncharacteristic examples

Above 'average' energy use = wasteful

“A MILLIONAIRE boss of British Gas uses twice the energy that struggling families do - just to heat his swimming pool ... ‘How can [he] have any idea how hard it is when he wastes double what I spend’.”
(Sun)

'Ordinary' consumption = wasteful

“[T]he price comparison website uSwitch said [...] “We've enjoyed plentiful and fairly cheap energy in this country for many years and as a result people have sometimes got into a mind set of having their homes warmer than need be and wasting energy ... there needs to be a balance between people wearing a vest top in winter and those who are so cold that they are becoming ill.” (Mail)

Concluding thoughts

- 'Energy' presented as essential, both for the country as a whole and for households.
- Rather simplistic and narrow representations. Little debate or reflection on what is and isn't essential, either in terms of services or amounts.
- 'Closes-down' (Stirling, 2008) and narrows debate toward energy supply and efficiency
- More fundamental debates about **what energy is for** and changing the practices that underpin demand are avoided, or even criticised (Shove, 2010)
- Little variation between or within newspapers – a shared 'common-sense' (Hall, 1980)

Thanks for listening

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