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COMMENTARY



## Energy Communication: Theory and Praxis Towards a Sustainable Energy Future

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### ABSTRACT

This essay comments and expands upon an emerging area of research, energy communication, that shares with environmental communication the fraught commitment to simultaneously study communication as an ordinary yet potentially transformative practice, and a strategic endeavour to catalyse change. We begin by defining and situating energy communication within ongoing work on the discursive dimensions of energy extraction, production, distribution, and consumption. We then offer three generative directions for future research related to energy transitions as communicative processes: analysing campaigns' strategic efforts, critically theorizing energy's transnational power dynamics, and theorizing the energy democracy movement.

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Activism; climate change; energy communication; energy democracy; just transitions

Energy transitions—including international and national policy shifts, rapid technological changes, and public decision-making—address some of the most important sustainability challenges facing society. A sustainable future depends on how we think about, communicate about, and use energy. For this reason, energy—including resources, production, and consumption—has caught the attention of some communication scholars (Endres, Cozen, Barnett, O'Byrne, & Peterson, 2016). By analysing how industry voices influence public opinion about energy choices; assessing attitudes and beliefs about different energy technologies; examining emerging just transition and energy democracy movements; and evaluating the strategic associations and dissociations between energy and the climate crisis, communication scholars can inform a better understanding of energy's societal role. Conceiving energy as an everyday social practice, including daily struggles over energy resources and consumption, patterned modes of understanding what energy means, and collective and individual decision-making, turns attention towards viewing energy transition as a continuous communication phenomenon.

Focusing on these everyday communicative dimensions of energy transitions enhances Endres et al.'s (2016) call for more research on energy communication, particularly research that extends beyond a “crisis frame.” In a synthesis of research on the intersections between communication and energy, Endres et al. (2016) report that most extant research analyses communicative responses to high-profile energy crises, such as the Chernobyl and Fukushima nuclear disasters and the Exxon Valdez and BP Deepwater Horizon oil spills. While the communicative responses to these and other energy-related crises continue to animate energy communication research, the *climate* crisis has galvanized recent work in this area. Thus, much research is caught in a crisis frame. Although this crisis

frame may be generative, Endres et al. (2016) push energy communication researchers to explore everyday energy practices across contexts, national boundaries, and technologies. The essay offers starting points for communication scholars to sustain this developing subfield beyond the reactive crisis frame towards just energy futures.

A specific focus on the communicative dimensions of past, ongoing, and nascent energy transitions can further develop energy communication as an immediately relevant but also theoretically and practically rich research endeavour. In this commentary, we highlight three areas of study within energy communication: strategy-focused energy activism research, critical theorizing of colonial extractive practices, and scholarship related to energy democracy. Each area engages with energy transition as an everyday, collective process, or a communicative phenomenon that spans both commonplace and extraordinary contexts, audiences, and meanings.

## Energy communication as a subfield

Endres et al. (2016) define energy communication research as “the study of symbolic practices surrounding material experiences with energy resources, production, and consumption, including related practices of research, development, deployment, and policy” (p. 420).<sup>1</sup> These symbolic practices are central to topics such as how to conceive of nature-culture relations mediated by energy systems, contestations over global and local power relations, and how energy transitions are realized as well as stymied.

Energy communication is a “content-oriented subfield” of communication that is “held together across diverse theoretical and methodological traditions” in the field of communication (Endres et al., 2016, p. 422). Although Endres et al. (2016) suggest it is not a subset of environmental communication scholarship, energy communication, and the practices surrounding energy resources, production, and consumption, clearly relates to the intersections between communication and environmental issues. Energy communication also relates to a larger interdisciplinary conversation about the sociotechnical aspects of energy transitions,<sup>2</sup> whether these transitions simply add renewable sources into the electricity grid, or initiate a Smart Grid “(r)evolution” (Stephens, Wilson, & Peterson, 2015). Communication research adds depth to understanding the social, political, theoretical, practical, ethical, and critical concerns surrounding energy as a social, discursive, ongoing, and interactional practice.

The voice and reach of the energy communication subfield continues to grow. Consider the proliferating environmental communication research since Endres et al.’s (2016) synthesis of research prior to 2015. In that time, the subfield includes a book on coal rhetoric (Schneider, Schwarze, Bsumek, & Peeples, 2016), various book chapters (e.g. Check, 2016; Waggenspack & Vandyke, 2016), and numerous articles published in this journal, including topics on hydrofracking (Bigl, 2017; Buttny & Feldpausch-Parker, 2016; Matz & Renfrew, 2015), resistance projects (Davis, Glantz, & Novak, 2016; Kinsella, 2015), carbon capture and storage (Boyd, 2017; de Vries, Terwel, & Ellemers, 2016), renewable energy (Djerf-Pierre, Cokley, & Kuchel, 2016), biofuels (Einsiedel, Remillard, Goma, & Zeaiter, 2017; Raymond & Delshad, 2016), solar politics (Fischhendler, Boymel, & Boykoff, 2016), oil policy (Hornmoen, 2016), fossil fuel marketplace advocacy (Miller & Lellis, 2016; Mitra, 2016), and nuclear power (Renzi, Cotton, Napolitano, & Barkemeyer, 2017). This continual growth reinforces energy communication as an emerging subfield with particular relevance and timeliness to environmental communication scholarship. In his review of Klein’s *This Changes Everything*, Gunster (2017) argues that, “critical analysis of media coverage and communication about energy—and, in particular, the *politics* of the fossil fuel industry—ought to receive equal billing to climate change in terms of the research priorities of the [environmental communication] field” (Gunster, 2017, p. 2, emphasis in original). We seek to build on this momentum by proposing additional areas of research in energy communication that draw from and contribute to scholarly conversations in environmental communication.

## **New directions in energy communication**

While we cannot address all gaps and directions for continued research, this commentary offers three intersecting lines of inquiry to further develop energy communication. We propose enhanced critical attention to activism and social movements' strategic efforts related to energy, transnational energy extraction and environmental justice, and social developments related to energy democracy to highlight new, overlapping facets through which communities communicate and enact energy transitions. These areas are valuable for thinking about energy transitions as not merely responses to crises, but comprised of continually dynamic communicative encounters including everyday social struggles over energy, dissent against patterned thoughts and deep-seated assumptions about what energy is and does for society, and the composition of alternative possibilities for living in the world, especially as it intersects with energy resources, production, and consumption.

### ***Activism, social movement, and the strategic***

Activist resistance is central to ongoing controversy over current energy practices and to calls for energy transition.<sup>3</sup> Although previous environmental social movement research either explicitly or implicitly addresses the important role that energy plays in these struggles (e.g. Doyle, 2007; Monani, 2008; Pezzullo, 2007), its authors have made minimal connections to energy communication research. Cox's (2010) use of the Sierra Club's Beyond Coal campaign, as a case study illustrating the strategic dimensions of environmental communication, and Katz-Kimchi and Manosevitch's (2015) study of Facebook's Unfriend Coal campaign's online tactics move towards directly connecting energy and environmental communication research. This research reveals tactics of resistance to the energy status quo and also offers a pivot point for various environmental struggles, where energy activism can inform broader scholarship on resistance logics and social movement rhetoric. Further research into the communicative dimensions of energy activism could analyse recent fossil fuel divestment campaigns, local actions to fight against the deleterious effects of rail pathways transporting fossil fuels, and coalition-based resistance to the Keystone XL and Dakota Access pipelines. Increased emphasis on such dissent can enable better understanding of strategic modes of resistance to the universalizing narratives of energy growth. Such analyses can contribute to the composition of alternative frameworks for understanding and engaging with the diverse relationships among energy resources, production, and consumption.

### ***Transnational colonialism and environmental justice***

Energy transitions intersect with transnational power relations, resource colonialism, and environmental injustices. Beyond examining activist communication strategies, we call for further research into the specific intersections between extractive energy and colonial entanglements (see de Onis, 2016), especially in terms of how energy production and consumption, and related discourse, perpetuates transnational environmental injustices. Work on nuclear colonialism, for example, explores rhetorical silences and justifications for siphoning energy's externalities onto marginalized communities, nations, and lands (Endres, 2009). Contestation surrounding the redirection of the proposed Dakota Pipeline path to land bordering a Native American water source (Associated Press, 2016) offers a recent example challenging these rhetorical silences, portending analyses on broader discourses and frames that connect energy, (neo)colonialism, and imperialism.

Energy communication scholars have started highlighting the importance of globalization and thinking transnationally about energy, including analyses of fruitful energy-focused coalitions across social, environmental, political, and economic justice efforts. Hopke (2016) examines how activism against unconventional fossil fuels often builds links between local and global movements. Recent documentation of these types of translocal efforts include Nixon's (2011) emphasis on various energy activist writers, as well as popular work such as Klein's (2014) focus on the coalescing challenges over

extractivist zones. In each instance, energy practices ground critical inquiries into justice. Further research might examine how energy promotional discourses legitimate and maintain specific colonial relations, how energy activism like the Dakota Pipeline constitutes new political subjectivities related to broad questions of justice, or how further developing concepts, such as slow violence, can account for energy-focused environmentalisms of the poor (Nixon, 2011).

### **Energy democracy**

Patterns of discourse and practice are not merely reproduced and resisted but are also constituted through new forms of participatory communication. Recent energy democracy efforts point to ways communities and regions are producing new forms of energy engagement by asserting local control over energy practices. Recognizing that the term remains contested, we define energy democracy as an emergent movement of people who seek more participation and voice in energy decision-making (see Giancattarino, 2012). Sweeping change in numerous regional energy systems, such as rural electric cooperatives, rooftop solar programmes, and municipal utilities, makes energy a productive site for studying democracy in action. This movement embraces the importance of public engagement in energy decisions and public involvement beyond consumption. Such participation constitutes a shift from consumer to *prosumer*, generating social capital, a sense of collective identity, and a deepened understanding of the messy process of negotiating conflicting political interests.

This movement spans from local municipal governments exercising more control over energy decision-making (Sprain, 2016), to activist calls for a just energy transition. Yet, energy democracy has been minimally theorized in interdisciplinary energy studies (Reinig & Sprain, 2016). Similar to the development of environmental justice as a movement and a scholarly area, energy democracy would benefit from such reciprocity, wherein scholarship profits from empirical insight and, in turn, helps advocates generalize beyond a single campaign to insights towards future participatory action. For instance, energy democracy foregrounds emplaced locality in relation to energy system transition. As Lester (2015) argues, environmental communication scholars are well situated to attend to place-based issues—and, we can add, the multi-directionality of power relations, not merely top-down approaches that inform decisions about energy, potentially informing more expansive and radical change. Research on energy democracy could benefit from multi-method approaches that assess publics' perceptions of energy transitions as related to democratic participation, and democratic forms of energy policy that constitute collective identities for future action.

### **Conclusion: communicating energy**

This commentary expands on Endres et al. (2016), which suggested energy communication research should expand beyond climate change and other crises, by outlining three generative streams of research that exploit communication theory and praxis for not only understanding but also composing new relations between energy and society. Energy transitions entail shifting human modes of thinking and habits, not simply employing instrumental strategies to respond to particular crises. Energy communication studies, ranging from how issues are framed to how communities conceive of energy and their own subject positions, can develop methodological and theoretical considerations that mutually inform communication research and interdisciplinary energy systems research. Considering communication's role in terms of transitions foregrounds how publics understand energy developments, but also how publics come to see themselves as engaged in energy practices: be it through activism, naming colonial relations, or democratic participation. This unfolding process, of energy transition activism, centralizes communication's role in constituting how humans understand and act towards nature, with energy practices as fundamental to that relationship.

## Notes

1. Energetic communication (Del Gandio, 2012; Lee, 2012) does not immediately fit within this framework but can inform how discourse on energy resource systems often emphasizes their energetic, or vibrant and generative, qualities.
2. Energyimpacts.org compiles a directory of social science energy researchers.
3. The Trump administration's actions add a new tenor to many United States movements.

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