



Journal of Public Interest Communications

ISSN (online): 2573-4342

Journal homepage: <http://journals.fcla.edu/jpic/>

Twitter and the Struggle to Transform the Object: A Study of Clean Coal in the 2017 Australian Energy Policy Public Debate

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Article Information

Received: August 26, 2018

Accepted: November 15, 2018

Published online: April 26, 2019

Keywords

Twitter
Contemporary publics
Global public relations

Abstract

This paper investigates unusually high spikes in Twitter engagement in Australia in February 2017 invoking the 2014 Peabody Energy global public relations campaign Advanced Energy for Life (AEFL) trope clean coal. Focusing on peak Twitter events, it asks: What caused the spike, what was amplified and signified by the dominant tweeters, and what was the content and tenor of discussion generated? Applying discourse analysis to an archive of Australian-based Twitter activity, the research argues that despite widespread ridicule of clean coal as oxymoronic by contemporary publics, the increased engagement provided unintended impetus for the PR campaign objectives. The research contributes to greater understanding of the reach, influence, and limitations of Twitter-based public debate.

Introduction

On November 10, 2016, Climate Reality, a Washington, D.C.-based activist group, tweeted: “Australia has joined the Paris Agreement! The world is still taking climate action bit.ly/2eYcMLO #ClimateHope #TheRoadForward.”

The Bitly link to *The Guardian* URL stated that Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull “confirmed Australia had ratified the Paris agreement despite domestic opposition from the One Nation party, a critical Senate bloc for the government, and persistent climate change skepticism roiling within Coalition ranks” (Murphy, 2016).

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Since the 1960s, public debate about resource and energy policy in Australia has broadly swung between political support for either nationalism, which aims for industrialization and self-sufficiency, or liberalism, which “embod(ies) the idea of free trade, comparative advantage and security through interdependence” (Hay, 2009, p. 142). In tandem with the latter, debate on global energy policy has also been characterized by a focus on the “maintenance of particular beliefs” as well as high-stakes corporate strategies at play to dominate meaning-making to “delegitimize and silence alternatives” (Mercer, De Rijke, & Dressler, 2014, p. 279). Launched on February 26, 2014, Peabody Energy’s Advanced Energy for Life (AEFL) global public relations campaign is a prime example of the corporate apparatus used to influence and mold public opinion. Supporting the ideological idea of clean coal in the fight against energy poverty, the campaign was aimed at “world leaders, multi-national organizations, a wide range of institutions and stakeholders, and the general public” in the United States, China, and Australia. Its three objectives were to 1) show how coal could alleviate “the crisis of global energy poverty,” 2) sway government policy to support “advanced coal technologies,” and 3) promote technologies to further reduce “power plant emissions” (Peabody Energy Corporation, 2014, para. 2). By 2016, in the United States, there was clear evidence of high-level pro-coal political support. Comments made by the then Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump during a debate on energy policy signposted: “We need much more than wind and solar. . . There is a thing called clean coal. Coal will last for a thousand years in this country” (Fehrenbacher, 2016, para. 5).

This paper builds on previous research that explored the AEFL campaign reception in a 21st century Australian context, with particular reference to Twitter provocations from January 1, 2014, to January 1, 2016 (Demetrious, 2017). The research showed how the campaign’s attempt to revive the clean coal trope by extending its context to end energy poverty mostly floundered in the Australian Twittersphere and was dismissed as a continuation of PR industry spin. Despite this dismissal, there was an anomalous spike in mentions of clean coal in early 2017 (Figure 1). Peak events that triggered the 2017 Twitter spike can be traced to July of the previous year when conservative coal industry supporter and federal Member of Parliament Josh Frydenberg became environment and energy minister in a new portfolio combining climate and energy. The tricky portfolio merger caused a level of agitation in public debate with concerns about the federal government’s integrity in response to climate issues. Further embedding public debate about the energy policy, on September 28, 2016, the federal government vigorously maintained that abandoning base load power such as coal was foolish when in renewable dependent South Australia wild storms caused a blackout leaving 1.7 million residents without power. In another move that triggered debate, on February 3, 2017, it was reported that the federal government wanted an expansion of the so called green bank or Clean Energy Finance Corporation to subsidize, incubating a generation of more environmentally responsible coal-fired power stations. According to Ludlow and Potter (2017), “As the energy sector continued to pour cold water on the idea of any new coal-fired power stations being built in Australia, Resources Minister and Queensland-based MP Matt Canavan said he would consider using the \$5 billion

Northern Australia Infrastructure Fund to help build new base-load power in North Queensland” (para. 2).

Colorful media theatrics to promote both sides of the clean coal divide were deployed capturing media attention. For example, federal treasurer Scott Morrison MP brought a lump of coal to parliament as a prop to make a political point about the working-class employment losses that renewables would engender. Pointing at the trade union backed opposition benches, Morrison said: “It’s coal, it was dug up by men and women who work and live in the electorates of those who sit opposite” (Butler, 2017, para. 4). As a rebuttal, political performance collective ClimActs constructed the Clean Coal Fairy to parody the fanciful logic of clean coal:

To unequivocally allay the doubts of any deniers out there, the Clean Coal Fairy™ has landed! As the latest in Australia’s arsenal of clean coal commercialising technologies, the Clean Coal Fairy™ will solve global warming (real or imagined), save civilisation, as well as the profits of our beleaguered fossil fuel industry, and make Straya proud! (ClimActs, 2017, para. 2)

Again, on February 20, 2017, possible changes to green bank were mooted, reinforcing earlier concerns that the fund was being compromised:

Coal-fired power stations could be eligible for funding from Australia’s \$10 billion green bank under changes being considered by the Turnbull government. . . in what would represent a significant weakening of the country’s environmental financing rules, Energy Minister Josh Frydenberg confirmed the government is considering issuing a new ministerial directive to the Clean Energy Finance Corporation to put investment in so-called ‘clean coal’ on the table. (Gartrell, 2017, paras. 1-2)

Over February 2017, several newspaper articles and TV current affairs programs focused on clean coal and energy policy (Long, 2017; McHugh, 2017). At the same time, clean coal lobby groups were reported to be trying to “convince the Government to offer it subsidies, or as the industry prefers to call it, ‘policy support’” (Iggulden, 2017, para. 12). Dynamically intersecting with this elevated media attention on energy policy over the period under review, another blackout in renewable-dependent South Australia occurred on February 8 when “on a day of extreme temperatures . . . power demand outstripped power supply” and according to an Australian Energy Market Operator (AEMO) official report, controversially affected 90,000 customers when excessive and unnecessary electricity load shedding occurred to manage the situation (Harmsen, 2017).

This study of the February 2017 Twitter spike invoking the AEFL campaign trope clean coal will be informed by an investigation of tweets and key hashtags that propelled the debate and an analysis of themes and ideas that were signified by the hashtags around the issue of clean coal, as well as speaking positions, under the period in review. There is limited research into how global public relations campaigns discursively interact with new communication tools such as Twitter and more educated, cynical, and contemporary publics. As such, the research provides a revised understanding of the effects of this complex and influential social medium and its possible impacts on public debate.

PR, publics, and neoliberalism

Global public relations campaigns such as Peabody's AEFL are designed to reach specific targeted publics to achieve campaign objectives. Tabling the adjunct idea of contemporary publics, Marshall (2016) discusses the changed digital conditions of the 21st century when direct public participation in media processes is distinct to other eras. Marshall says today's publics are "complex, immaterial entities that can attach and detach from territories, technologies, spaces and practices" (2016, p.10). This shift—from a group targeted for control, to a group that can exert control—together with new social practices linked to digital technologies, is significant for the changing tenor and locale of public opinion and its relationship to news on platforms such as social media.

The United States public relations and contemporary fossil fuel promotional campaigns such as Peabody's AEFL, can be ideologically situated within theories of neoliberalism (Peeples, Bsumek, Schwarze, & Schneider 2014; Schneider, Schwarze, Bsumek, & Peeples, 2016). According to Mirowski (2009), the neoliberal thought collective is characterized by a belief in the freedom to pursue a global agenda for capital expansion, a willingness for interventionism to facilitate this agenda, and an essentialist view of the market system as natural regulator of social order (pp. 29-31). In explaining how the neoliberal agenda has progressed in recent decades, Mirowski, Walker & Abboud (2013) point out:

One reason neoliberals have triumphed over their ideological rivals is because they have ventured beyond a single "fix" for any given problem, instead deploying a broad spectrum of policies from the most expendable short-term expedients, to medium-term politics, to long-horizon utopian projects. While these may appear as distinct and contradictory policies, they are in fact integrated in such a way as to produce eventual capitulation to the free market. (p. 81)

Arguably, public relations performs an important discursive role in this multi-pronged approach by articulating to the wider neoliberal repertoire at play. Peeples et al. (2014) argue that in the United States, the coal industry rhetoric is not only designed to hegemonically further neoliberal ideals, such as wide-ranging free market ideology, but is "anti-environmental" (p. 9). Nonetheless, the AEFL campaign presents as ethical and in the public interest because the notion of clean coal is associated with a quest to alleviate global energy poverty. However, the idea of public interest communications is both a problematic and contested concept through which it "must be recognized that contemporary society is constructed from conflicting values and divergent interests, and therefore the public interest is always contingent in the sense that no one definition of the public interest can ever be viewed as final" (Ihlen et al., 2018, p.110). Drawing on these threads, the AEFL campaign can be conceptualized as a complex discursive site where capital, political intent, influence, and ideology intersect in a multi-layered communicative strategy working across international boundaries within new digital conditions that affect the dispositions of contemporary publics. As such, it is a volatile site of political meaning-making

and hegemonic struggle, active in shaping public opinion with the view to determining future energy policy in unusual and under-researched ways.

Coherence, performativity, and power: Twitter and making news

Central to this investigation of the clean coal trope in the 2017 Australian Twittersphere is its relevance and the significance of the medium to public debate and opinion formation. Tumasjan, Sprenger, Sandner, and Welpke (2010) explored the extent to which Twitter was used as a source of political deliberation and opinion leadership in the German election in 2009 and found that “Twitter can be seen as a valid real-time indicator of political sentiment” (Tumasjan et al., 2010, p. 184). They note that their study was based on users who had similar demographics. “However, the fact that these well-educated users ‘influence important actors within mainstream media who in turn frame issues for a wider public’ (Farrell & Drezner, 2007, p. 29) warrants special attention to Twitter as a source of opinion leadership” (Tumasjan et al., 2010, p. 184).

Further to this situation, the demographic profile of Australian Twitter users is more significant than the uptake and usage metrics suggest. Although overall Twitter remains less popular than other social networking sites such as Facebook, Sensis data for 2016 shows that it is the favorite social media site for media content including news at 33%, compared to Facebook at 6%. Twitter is also considered the favorite platform for global reach at 14% compared to Facebook’s 6%. Similarly, it ranks higher as a favorite than Facebook for forum/issue discussion at 8% compared to 4% (Sensis, 2016, p. 25). These data support the views of Revers (2014) who argues that “journalists are drawn to the drama of instantaneity that unfolds on Twitter” (p. 5). Therefore, although Twitter cannot claim to have access to the largest slice of the social media browsing constituency, it can claim to be the site that members of that constituency go to for news-values related activity, including discussion.

Given Twitter’s journalistic affordances and access to social media users wishing to engage with news-related content and activity, it is relevant to shed light on the social identity and relative power of Twitter users. According to Roy Morgan Research, Australian Twitter usage “is demographically skewed to the younger, urban, early adopting, well-educated and, slightly, to men,”¹ which broadly correlate to “its global audience” (Morgan, 2016, para. 3). Based on the 2016 census data, this Twitter user profile can be compared to the average Australian profile as

¹ Usage declines with age. Australian 14-24-year-olds are twice as likely to use Twitter in an average month (38%) as those 50+ (19%). Thirty percent of men use Twitter, which is slightly more than 26% of women. Although 30% of capital city residents use Twitter, just 23% of people in rural areas do. Greens voters (half of whom are capital city residents under 50) are, therefore, the most likely voters to use Twitter (35%), ahead of 29% of Australian Labor Party (ALP) voters, 23% of Liberal voters, and just 16% of National voters. Those with a higher education are more likely to use Twitter: 39% of Australians with a postgraduate degree, compared with 34% of those with an undergraduate degree, 27% of high school graduates, and 20% of people with less than a high school degree. Geographically, Twitter usage is highest in Melbourne (32%), ahead of Sydney (30%) and Perth (30%).

female, in a registered marriage with two children, living in a three-bedroom house that has a mortgage, and high school educated. This discrepancy suggests that the average Australian Twitter user is demographically distinct from the average Australian, by virtue of his or her younger age, urban location, and stronger green political views (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2017). The significance of this difference is compounded by the microblogging site as the preferred social media platform to engage with news and news-related discussion for journalists and opinion leadership (Revers, 2014) and suggests that the Twitter using demographic has a disproportionate influence on the construction and framing of news (Tumasjan et al., 2010).

Transformation and adaptation: PR tropes and Twitter

This study of the AEFL campaign and its reception on Twitter over the period of February 15—25, 2017, will apply a discourse analysis of statements related to clean coal on Twitter to develop an understanding of how influential the tweets were or how the campaign may be linked to relations of power, corporate persuasion, and public opinion. While discourse analysis is a vast area of scholarship with competing traditions, Fairclough's (1992) critical discourse analysis sheds light on the concept of intertextuality and how it hybridizes and transforms textual meanings. He defines intertextuality as "the property texts have of being full of snatches of other texts, which may be explicitly demarcated or merged in, and which the text may assimilate, contradict, ironically echo, and so forth" (Fairclough, 1992, p. 84). He argues that this concept is useful in understanding how texts move along or transform from one site to another, such as when a political speech is distributed into media such as television and then into homes through the six o'clock news and then into discussion around the dinner table (Fairclough, 1992). Although predating Web 2.0 developments in 2004, Fairclough's notions of intertextuality are conceptually relevant in analyzing how statements interact with the microblogging site Twitter in an era of digitization when the "despatialization of production practices" may affect "interpersonal relationships and their replacement by technologically mediated relations" (Revers, 2014, p. 3). For Fairclough (1992), intertextuality is a subtle effect where various discourses are often absorbed unconsciously by the reader. He argues that it comes in two forms: manifest intertextuality—where specific texts occur in a text such as a quote and interdiscursivity—where orders of discourse are drawn on to constitute the text from discourse and text types or conventions such as genres, discourses, and narratives. Bringing these ideas into the social media era, Davis (2013) argues: "Twitter's unique intertextuality contains the potential for spurring widespread political activism by encouraging voices from all echelons of society to be heard" (pp. 16-17). However, as noted, other studies have found that small groups of users with similar demographics on Twitter can exercise disproportionate influence because it is a preferred source for journalists (Revers 2014; Tumasjan et al., 2010). Therefore, discourse mapping, drawing on the concept of intertextuality and examining its capacity to open or close

public debate, will be used to understand the normative relationship of contemporary publics to the AEFL campaign in the context of the Australian energy public debate.

This paper focuses on an intense node of communicative activity in the February 2017 Australian Twittersphere. During this time, there was a spike in volume and the patterns of tweeting, drawing on data, using clean coal as a key search term. A period of volatile engagement was intensively profiled from February 15-25. The data were profiled using the software program Tableau and select periods of time were targeted either due to high levels of engagement or key events in the course of the campaign. The Tableau data provided evidence of prominent hashtags that were reviewed to inform an understanding of the greater themes signified around the issue of coal. In addition, a data set of tweets and retweets that contained examples of manifest intertextuality (e.g., presented in quotation marks, as hashtags, or as web hyperlinks such as Bitly) was analyzed.

The data were analyzed in relation to these questions: a) What peak events triggered the 2017 spike in engagement around the AEFL trope clean coal in the Australian Twittersphere?; b) What tweets engaging with the AEFL trope clean coal were retweeted and why?; and c) What meanings and social themes emerged that shaped the overall tenor and influence of the public debate?

Twitter data for this research were accessed through Tracking Infrastructure for Social Media Analysis (TrISMA). TrISMA is a cross-institutional project funded through an Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage, Infrastructure, Equipment and Facilities (LEIF) grant that “establishes a powerful new framework for tracking, storing, and processing the public social media communication activities of Australian users at very large scale and in close to real time” (Bruns et al., 2016, para. 2). These data were curated to incorporate all Australian-based Twitter accounts active in 2016, retrieving archival activity from 2008 to present activity in 2017.

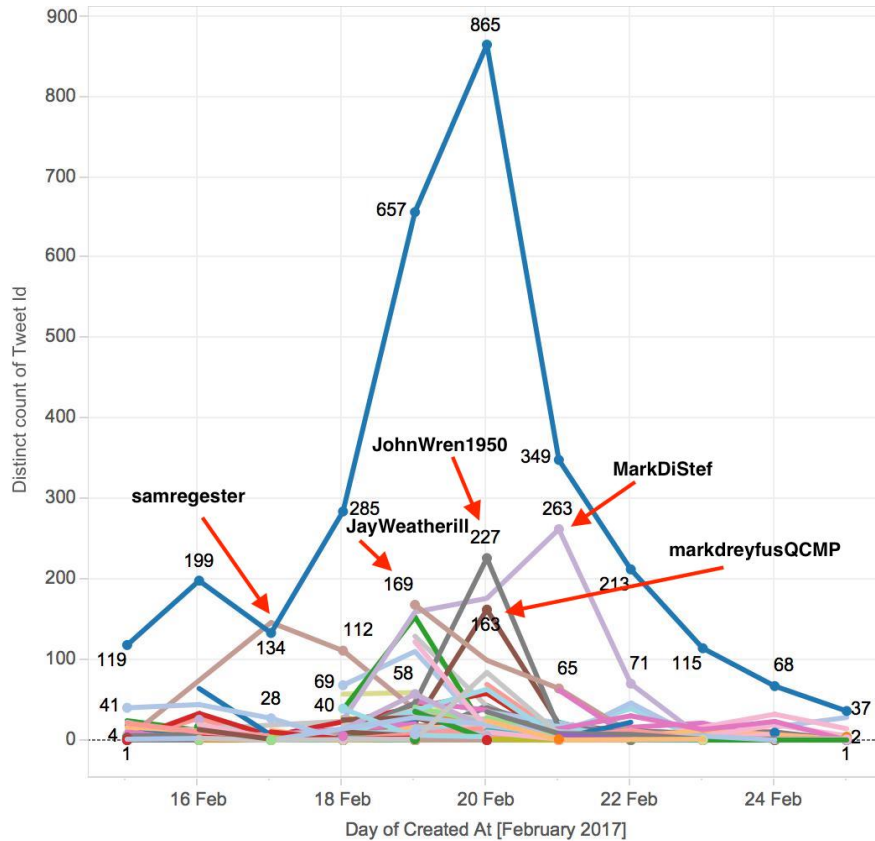
Although all information used for this study is in the public domain, as part of my ethical approach to digital data collection, I chose not to identify some account holders. Therefore, generally, I de-identified Twitter account screen names or handles and replaced some words within the tweets to impede searchability. The exception to this was high-profile individuals experienced in public debates, such as news commentators, politicians, or non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

New clean* coal in Australia—Who do you believe?

In reporting on the use and impact of the AEFL campaign trope from the February 15-25, 2017, Twitter spike, the research found that clean coal was used intertextually 7,635 times. The study found that a majority of tweets referring to clean coal were retweets or reshares rather than original-generated content. The most frequently mentioned accounts with the most retweeting and reposting within the discussion were progressive, left, or left leaning political accounts: @MarkDiStef (Buzzfeed), @JayWeatherill (Australian Labor Party), @samregister (GetUp, an

Australian left-wing political lobby group), @JohnWren1950² (ALP leaning) and @markdreyfusQCMP (ALP). These accounts were scrutinized for their potential to generate content in defining the debate, and it was found that although they were credible and influential, they were not consistently amplified over the period of analysis, but rather retweeted at specific times (see Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1. Top 5 most retweeted accounts during the February 15-25, 2017 timeframe.



The trend of distinct count of Tweet Id for Created At Day. Color shows details about retweetee. The marks are labeled by distinct count of Tweet Id. The data is filtered on clean coal, Created At Month and Created At Day. The clean coal filter keeps True. The Created At Month filter keeps January 2017, February 2017 and March 2017. The Created At Day filter keeps 11 members.

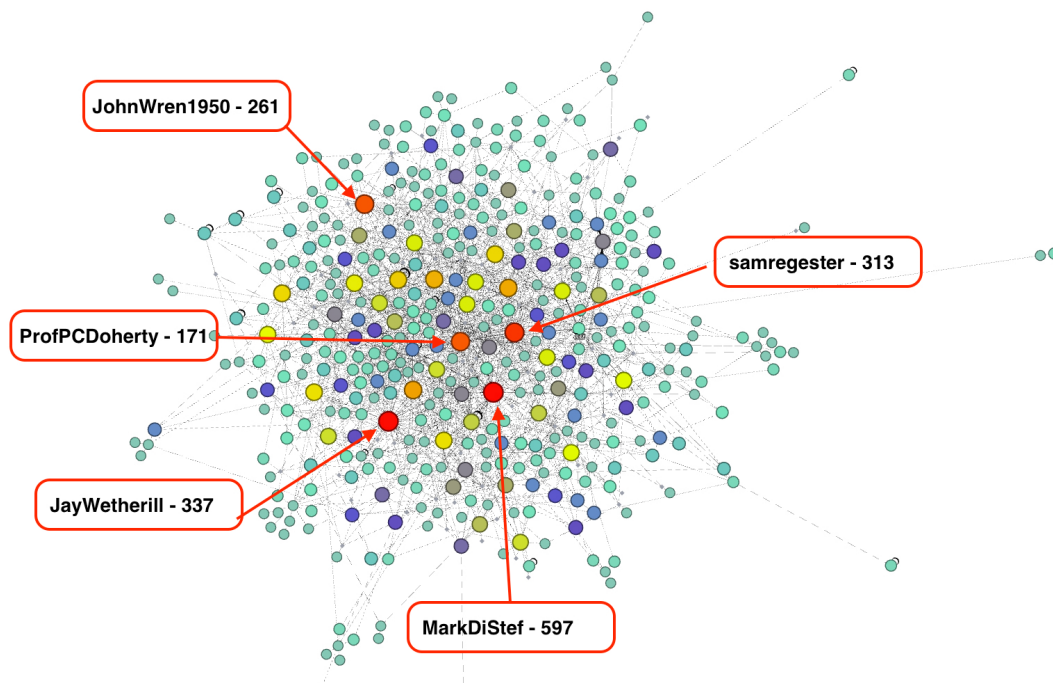
Most of the top tweets had a satirical flavor or were ironic in attempting to reveal the contradictions of clean coal. This satire or irony was achieved by taking the flawed logic a step further and, for example, comparing it with the oxymoronic notion of clean cigarettes or green coal. Others were more outright disparaging in tone. Hyper or Bitly links to other institutional sites included: left-wing think tank The Australia Institute’s satirical graphic titled ‘New clean*

²² @JohnWren1950 is a fictional account based on a historical inner-Melbourne underworld and business identity who died in 1953.

coal in Australia—Who do you believe?'; the *Sydney Morning Herald*; a hashtag to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC) political analysis show *Insiders*; and a video clip discussing clean coal from the 2008 ABC political satire focusing on PR and spin, *The Hollowmen*. The words Clean Coal Fairy associated with the ClimActs publicity stunt were identified in 61 tweets.

Peak events for engagement were February 16, 18-19, and 20-21. These days coincided with the release of a report by the Australian Energy Market Operator on February 15, discussing the blackout in South Australia on February 8 and the problems with intermittent renewal supply.

Figure 2. The most amplified accounts within the clean coal discussion during the February 15-25, 2017 timeframe.



Proposed changes to the so called green bank, or the Clean Energy Finance Corporation, to include subsidies for coal were the dominant driver for other clean-coal-related discussion. Cross-checking of the transcript showed that the February 16 spike was largely due to media reports and much of this activity was associated backlash to the Turnbull government and Josh Frydenberg's mooted changes to subsidize coal as clean energy. In addition, there was a general debunking of the clean coal idea featured on ABC's *Insiders* program on February 19. Over February 18-19, further momentum built propelled by ABC's weekday current affairs program *7.30*, which reported on energy policy and the idea of clean coal. Seventy-nine tweets with the hashtag #abc730 were identified. For example:

RT @Twitter user 1: LOL. That #abc730 piece on clean coal just made a complete mockery of Turnbull's clean coal crock. Well done all involved.

Similarly, on February 19, the program *Insiders* was referenced by hashtag 398 times, in particular when host Barrie Cassidy interviewed Josh Frydenberg, the environment and energy minister. Less contemporaneous material also was evident. On February 20 @MarkDiStef posted a tweet which gained traction that referred to a Minerals Council of Australia television commercial, published several years earlier YouTube:

@MarkDiStef Incredible. Coal industry spent money for 'clean coal' research on ad campaign called 'COAL IS AN AMAZING THING' t.co/RZLAUZLoUW

In total, there were 99 tweets satirically denouncing "COAL IS AN AMAZING THING," a number demonstrating the contemporary public's predilection for drawing out the irony of PR tropes such as clean coal. Over the period in review, 2,140 tweets hashtagged #auspol, the Australian political discussion site (Bruns, 2017, p. 3). Although pejorative references to corporate spin and the rise of right-wing politics were readily evident, an occasional attempt to break down the polarization and reference to a wider group of institutional sites also was apparent. For example: @Twitter user 2@account Great stuff Jenny. A just transition for coal ind³ workers must also be part of plan. #CleantechFuture #auspol. However, in total, the word worker was used only nine times over the period under review.

In summary, the research of Twitter activity showed an abundance of left leaning conversations about energy policy and the need for further investment in renewables as well as the need to abandon coal as an energy source, and within this discourse there was ample talk of shutting down coal mines. Tweets often were propelled by links to a handful of key accounts, self-reinforcing hashtags and Bitly links to key media sources and left leaning policy institutions. The data suggested a preoccupation by contemporary publics to expose and satirically deconstruct the discursive hegemonic properties of clean coal as a PR trope, but although thematically relevant, there was little reflection about what may happen to the people who work there or the regions that depend on the economic stimulus of mining.

Twitter, PR, and the impact of aggregated discontent

The Twitter explosion during the February period was sparked by a confluence of events, including the capacity of the national electricity grid in light of the second round of blackouts in South Australia, the AEMO report into the cause of the blackout, media stunts such as the lump of coal, and the federal government's mooted change to the Clean Energy Finance Corporation to include a subsidy for coal, as well as intense media coverage of political discussion invoking either the idea of or the trope clean coal. This research shows that the Twitter debate around clean coal was dominated by a handful of key accounts facilitated through retweeting and

³ ind refers to industry.

sharing. The tenor of the debate was mocking and satirical and focused narrowly on a limited repertoire of discursive sites and strategies.

Since 2014, the AEFL campaign has worked to elevate the key campaign tropes of clean coal to end energy poverty in public discourse (Peabody Energy Corporation, 2014, para. 1). Although criticized as oxymoronic, the public relations trope has nonetheless successfully worked its way into Australian public debate on energy policy, intensifying over the 2017 period. This peak in Twitter discussions about clean coal suggests a win for the AEFL campaign, but an examination of the tweeting behavior and content shows that the majority of the tweeters focused on the negative aspects of coal. Despite this negativity, the increase in clean-coal-related discussion entrenches the idea and can counterproductively create a level of legitimacy for the public relations trope and its associated ideals. This situation was created by Twitter-using progressives who were focused on a counterhegemonic exposé of clean coal. By applying their rhetorical powers to clever ridicule, they ignored other real-world issues that affect the communities most impacted by mining closures and contributed to the ideological divide. Although not ideal, this situation could be interpreted as an adequate outcome for the AEFL campaign objectives.

The speaking positions Twitter privileges are urban-dwelling, younger, politically left or green, mostly male, and well-educated, so this group is unlikely to be affected by the economic restructuring of the coal industry (Morgan, 2016). This distortion toward a particular sector in public debate has particular significance and is also evident in the findings of Tumasjan et al. (2010) who argued that although Twitter was an important site of opinion leadership and indicator of political sentiment, the discussion was limited by, and at the same time skewed by, the similar demographics of its users. The data in this study support this argument, showing that the key accounts retweeted all had left or progressive agendas, which had the effect of fortifying the exclusivity of the Twitter discussion. Indeed, the most retweeted account was (@MarkDiStef) of independent online news organization BuzzFeed which is geared towards millennial preferences by “leveraging data and innovation to reach hundreds of millions of people globally . . . for a more authentic audience engagement” (BuzzFeed, 2019, para. 1). The hashtag #auspol was used extensively in the discussion but its prevalence also reinforces the exclusivity of Twitter. According to Bruns (2017), and in relation to #auspol: “There are a handful of very active users, which I would number 200 to 300 or so, who are using the hashtag to engage with each other. . . debating with each other, talking to each other about Australian politics” (Ariel, 2016, para. 15). This pattern suggests contemporary publics using Twitter share exclusive demographics that influence the trajectory of left or green debates through a disproportionate ability to frame and set news agendas.

Bearing in mind the ideas of Mirowski et al. (2013, p. 81) concerning the likelihood of a multi-pronged neoliberal strategic approach to triumph over ideological rivals, it would appear that although the high-stakes Peabody Energy AEFL corporate public relations campaign trope clean coal may have been delegitimized to some extent by the Twitter discussion, on the other hand, it has been successful in silencing alternatives. By doing so, and on balance, it has

advanced the neoliberal agenda (Mercer et al., 2014). In this debate, despatialized contemporary publics formed online affirmations with a few key accounts (Marshall, 2016), producing little original content and mostly resharing and retweeting. These technologically mediated relations deployed a range of intertextual features such as quotes and hyper and Bitly-style links as well as hashtags, which mapped out the boundaries of the discussion within a limited range of choices and propelled these tweets to form the spike (Fairclough, 1992; Revers, 2014). Much of the content on Twitter displayed a preference to select satire and mockery as a dominant discursive mode to engage with political debate. In this mode, the Twitter discussion fixated on being clever, exposing the oxymoronic elements of clean coal and promoting or running down institutional sites, but absent was a focus on the new realities for the workers and regional communities impacted by economic restructuring. This example also showed Twitter's limitations in expanding the discursive boundaries of public debate about energy policy. This finding is at odds with Davis (2013) who argued that Twitter's potential for intertextuality opens up debate more broadly in society. In this case, the opposite was true. The trope clean coal was incendiary throughout the Twitter discussion under review. An effect was that the trope drew the oxygen out of the debate and allowed two distinct groups to emerge based on class and demographic divides with greater potential for political exploitation. While unintended, this situation had the effect of constricting the scope of the public discussions and advantaging the AEFL campaign. Arguably, the neoliberal AEFL campaign is ideological and therefore it is possible for it to work by muting alternative discussion, even when the campaign is ostensibly not working (Mirowski et al., 2013). Although unintended, the repeated performative mocking and satirical statements of the Twitter debate created dispositions focused on a limited repertoire of ideas and avoided issues affecting the everyday lives of those involved more directly.

The satiric tenor of the Twitter discussion around clean coal can be explained in part by Raisborough and Adams (2008, p. 2) who argue that cultural hegemony works through mockery and "it befits an audience more consciously liberal, tolerant, and ironic, and perhaps polite" (2008, p. 6). This argument is validated by the demographic trends for Twitter users that have been discussed so far. This lack of attention to real-world impacts from middle classes for affected working communities was evident in a study by Pini, Mayes, and McDonald (2010). They investigated media reporting of the Western Australia Ravensthorpe nickel mine closure and found:

The moral and emotional imperatives of class are clearly conveyed in the media treatment of 'miner.' While unemployed without notice, these people are not worthy or deserving of positive emotional responses such as sympathy or understanding for they are deemed avaricious and vulgar. (Pini et al., 2010, p. 563)

Similarly, in a study of middle-class attitudes toward the changing fortunes of miners at the demise of the resource boom in Australia, Pini, McDonald, and Mayes (2012) discussed how "mockery distances elites from the working class via an expression of disgust" (p. 46)

An underlying class divide in the public debate about clean coal was evident in the federal treasurer's Scott Morrison's remark in parliament accompanying his lump of coal stunt when he

said, “It’s coal, it was dug up by men and women who work and live in the electorates of those who sit opposite” (Butler, 2017, para. 4), and the rebuttal by ClimActs clean coal fairy “to make Straya proud!”⁴ According to Vincent (2015, para. 13), the word “Straya” “plays directly to the Aussie Aussie Aussie, Oi Oi Oi bogan brigade, who will no doubt drape themselves in the flag again on January 26.” Arguably, the idea of bogans connotes anti-environmental, xenophobic working-class nationalists (Demetrious, 2016). Use of the term bogans suggests that the progressive contemporary publics participating in the Twitter debate around clean coal are intertextually invoking a pejorative term used to identify a social grouping of low status Australians. Inflected with disgust, the deployment of this term shows the Twitter users posting about clean coal are emotionally distant from working class issues, despite identifying with a left leaning, progressive political orientation. Therefore, in their aggregated form, the tweeting patterns discussed so far show how several elements, including the shifting cultural dispositions of Twitter users and technological affordances such as retweets, shares, and Bitly links, work to unconsciously propel the AELF public relations trope clean coal into contemporary public debate, keeping it alive.

In general, the Twitter discussion that surrounded clean coal was produced by demographically left leaning or green users who showed little inclination to canvas long-term issues of adversity should coal mining cease and instead was highly reactive to current events. This emphasis has the potential to skew the overall public debate and overlook hardship issues for miners, families, and communities affected should mining cease. This situation also could have the effect of polarizing the ongoing debate more broadly in ways that create social division and inertia, if, as discussed by Hopke (2015), “Twitter serves to bolster in-group affirmation” (p. 11). This in-group affirmation together with the emotional and partisan tenor of the debate had a narrowing effect, which could have long-term social consequences for the resolution of complex public debates such as the future of the coal industry and energy policy. As such, Twitter may be counter-productive to left and green causes and actually advantage corporate campaigns such as the AEFL. Therefore, any analysis should not ignore what Hopke (2015) describes as Twitter’s “function as a performative, identity-building space, more than as a means to reach external audiences” (p. 2). Given this reality, future investigations into the role and relationship of Twitter users and public debate could consider uncritical “interpretive assumptions” in the data (Bruns, 2017, p. 2). This consideration could lead to an understanding of the less visible discursive political potential working through Twitter activity and greater recognition of how corporate discourses may be colonizing the idea of public interest communications (Ihlen et al., 2018).

⁴ The word Straya is an abbreviation for Australia.

Conclusion

This paper is a critical study of the AEFL global PR campaign at work in the Twittersphere in Australia and its reception by contemporary publics. It examines the transmogrification of the clean coal trope within these conditions and the impacts of tweets linked to a compelling political debate. A study of the social and cultural limitations of Twitter has revealed how it may in turn generate relationships among contemporary publics that unintentionally reinforce fixed binary identities and political meanings. Future research paying attention to neoliberalist public relations activities working in their contemporary settings such as Twitter and their unintended consequences could work to provide greater clarity in understanding the impasses, divisions, and confusion that sometimes characterize critical public debates.

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