SCARE TACTICS: Contracting Out Risk Amplification

Alan Roth, January 14, 2014
Presentation outline

• Credibility struggle: anti-fossil fuel/oil sands activists v.s. oil industry
• Pipelines identified as choke point
• Exaggerated fear of oil sands created by well-funded opponents
• Social Amplification of Risk Framework
• Following the money
• Examples and illustrations
• Conclusion
What's the mechanism?
Social Amplification of Risk Framework
Social amplification of risk model
Social amplification of risk model

PLACE OR PRODUCT

Oil sands

RISK EVENTS

• Climate change fears
• Ducks in tailings pond
• GHG emissions
• Energy and water use
Oil sands

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INFORMATION FLOW

Media
• Journalism dysfunctional
• Black hat stereotype
• Nut jobs

Interpersonal networks
• Online world
• No skin in game

Dramatization
• Biased assimilation
• Social cascades, group polarization

Framing
• Falsehoods, spin, exaggeration

Signals
• Protests, photos, stories
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ENGIO CAMPAIGN

Public Perceptions
Nature of risks
- Cognition, heuristic strategies

Cultural values
- Outrage factors

Blame, trust
- CEOs, politicians vs. enviro activists

Marking
Attribute selection
- Higher GHGs = “dirty”

Image development
- Big $ global programs

Image linkage to place
- TV, print, Internet photos / films

Labeling
- “Dirty Oil” label
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**IMPACTS**

- **Places stigmatized** (Canada, Alberta)
- **Products stigmatized**
- **Economic impacts**
- **Political decision against Keystone**
- **Gateway regulatory process hobbled**
- **First Nations opposition**
Opponents amplify people's fears
Message traction eludes industry

Opponents? Not so much.
U.S. grants to oil sands opponents

- Canadian ENGOs receiving ~$50 million/year
- $300 million USD past 10 years in Canada; U.S. opponents also funded
- Imagery: caribou, loons, dogwood trees, aboriginal motifs, bears
Funding (Tides Foundation)

- $75,000 to Bill McKibben’s 350.org: “mobilizing public in opposition to Keystone XL pipeline and tar sands”
- $75,000 to Forest Ethics “to conduct outreach” … “persuade a minimum of Coke or Pepsi to publicly confirm commitment to eliminate tar sands fuel use…”
- $225,000 to Pembina Institute “to advance … the narrative that oil sands expansion is problematic, and land use decisions that slow expansion…”
- $100,000 to Greenpeace Canada “for continued outreach on pipelines, tar sands…”
Examples, illustrations

CAUTION

BE ALERT
MOVING PARTS
Climate change fear the "perfect storm"
You can’t always get what you want.

(M. Jagger/K. Richards)
Nefarious “Tex Richman” plans to drill for oil below the Muppets Theater.

Industry a “black hat”
Investigative journalism suffering. “Long form” print media losing out to short form “citizen journalism” publications like blogs.

Simplistic journalistic convention for “even-handedness”. Opposing commentator may have no credentials.

Comments of conspiracy theorists, movie stars, foreign-funded activists given equal weight to comments by industry and scientists.

“Equal time for anyone” coverage dumped into online world for Google algorithm to sort out.
Online world: enter @ your own risk

“Should we keep talking about it calmly or go to the Internet and get scared about it?”
End times for America

Risk, amplified, Hollywood style.
Our thinking shortcuts

Heuristics

• Representativeness heuristic: “stereotypes fit ∴ true story”
• Availability heuristic: “easy to recall so must be true”
• Confirmation bias: “make it fit existing belief”
• Affect heuristic: “feels right”
• Anchoring and adjustment heuristic: “last number heard influences our next estimate”
Risk attenuation communications

• Science and risk communication effectiveness not about conveying facts
• Multiple exchanges of many social and cultural signals amplify or attenuate risk concerns
• Message traction includes ability to understand existing beliefs, biases, stereotypes, cultural dogma, familiar story archetypes, etc. as tools
• “Distributed advocacy” … contract out risk attenuation communications?
Discussion