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Fort McMurray and the Canadian Oil Sands: Local Coverage of National Importance

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ABSTRACT

Understanding resource-based communities (RBCs) as potential casualties of Canada's economic proclivity towards resource extraction projects may help us to generate political support for these communities at both local and national scales. The media has a critical role to play in promoting the development of this type of political discourse. This study examines how traditional print media coverage affects Canadians' perceptions of the Athabasca oil sands. A quantitative media analysis examines scope and thematic content of articles appearing in major Canadian newspapers between 2003 and 2013. We find that most coverage concerning the Athabasca oil sands over this period appears predominantly in western Canadian newspapers, with coverage primarily focusing on specific events. We argue that this geographic disparity in coverage does not provide Canadians with the adequate coverage necessary to

develop an informed opinion on what the implications of ongoing oil sands development are at both a local and a national scale.

KEYWORDS:

Media analysis | newspapers | content analysis | agenda setting | oil sands | Canada | Fort McMurray

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Notes

1. We use the more benign term “oil sands” rather than the politically charged “tar sands.”

2. Tailings ponds consist of a layer of toxic top water overlying a viscous layer of sludge containing toxic interstitial water as well as particles of unprocessed bitumen and clay fines (Nix & Martin, 1992).

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