

Sustainability Discourse and “An Inconvenient Truth”

Christine M. Gilbert, Mark Haggerty, Stephanie A. Welcomer*

University of Maine Honors College (Gilbert & Haggerty), University of Maine Business School
Orono, Maine, USA

Christine.gilbert@umit.maine.edu, Mark.haggerty@umit.maine.edu, welcomer@maine.edu

Abstract

This paper examines potential shifts in sustainability discourse catalyzed by the release of the film, “An Inconvenient Truth.” We analyze public discourse about climate change in high-impact newspapers to surface underlying themes regarding sustainability. Editorials in the New York Times and the Washington Post are posited to potentially show shifts in national discourse of sustainability through this prominent and influential film detailing a climate change crisis.

Introduction

Drawing from research analyzing discourse of environmental issues (e.g. Livesey, 2001; Stuart, Schewe and McDermott, 2012) and sustainability (e.g. Banerjee, 2003; Milne, Kearins and Walton, 2006; Tregdga, Kearins and Milne, 2013; Welcomer, 2010) we investigate social constructions of sustainability before and after the release of the film “An Inconvenient Truth (AIT).” Positing that there is a constant “discursive struggle” (Livesey, 2001: 62) as organizations and individuals contest issues of sustainability, we hypothesize that AIT’s cultural impact could influence understandings of sustainability. Because climate change is one of the most significant problems facing all societies and species across the globe (c.f. IPCC, 2014; USGCRP, 2014) that disrupts established business and societal practices, it has been the site of an ongoing discursive struggle regarding its occurrence and potential impact (c.f. Norgaard, 2006; Stuart, et al, 2012). A cultural jolt such as the AIT, which potentially elevated viewers’ awareness and concern (Nolan, 2010), presents an opportunity for public sensemaking about sustainability *vis a vis* the specific issue of climate change. Our research therefore aims to surface understandings of sustainability as applied to an issue, as opposed to theoretical constructions of sustainability (Shrivastava and Kennelly, 2013).

Discourses of sustainability have gained prominence since the 1987 Brundtland Commission report (WCED, 1987), with distinct themes in different strands. Milne, et al. (2006) propose that these strands can be organized into two loose groupings, “weak” sustainability (Turner, 1993) and “strong” sustainability. Weak sustainability is firmly housed within the capitalist system and advocates incremental changes in order for sustainability to be reached (Milne, et al.: 804). Here, business is central to sustainability and is tasked with finding ways to manage and operationalize sustainability principles and processes, relegating natural systems to be a factor in the constellation of business enterprise. In contrast, “strong” sustainability offers a

perspective based on more radical notions of the business-natural system relation and takes as an operating assumption the need to reframe this relation, disassembling the free market model and redistributing power and reconceptualizing resource use in line with natural systems. Undergirding these weak and strong approaches to sustainability are common themes (Milne, et al., 2006; Dryzek, 2013), including power (continue or change the existing hierarchy); the economic system (business is a means to improve the issue or is a cause of the problem); resources (technology will enhance our resource base vs. resources are limited); and nature (inherent value of nature or value of nature is in relation to humans).

Methodology

The *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* were chosen as established and credible sources for sampling who also offer contrasting political perspectives. Both are daily newspapers with national and international readership and are among the nation's largest media outlets (Izadi and Saghaye-Biria, 2007: 148). Two databases were used to collect the articles: The Washington Post Proquest Website and Proquest Newstand. Across newspapers, databases, and time periods search keywords were "global warming," "climate change," and "energy," with the search refines to include only editorials or op-eds. Editorials offer a number of benefits: explicit opinions expressed, which makes identifying themes more iterative and grounded (Rupar, 2007: 595), the voice of the general public, rather than the elites (Hoffman, 2011:10), "...is 'one of the widest circulated opinion discourses of society' ..." (Rupar, 2007: 599).

The searches were run in annual time frames, so for example the search for the year 2004 was done from 5/1/2004 – 12/31/2004 and the search for year 2006 was 1/1/2006 – 1/31/2006 (May, 2004 is 24 months prior to the May 2006 release of AIT and is the start-point for our analysis, extending to May 2008). The *New York Times* yielded 236 articles and yields from the *Washington Post* were 149 articles, totaling to 385 editorials that met the search criteria. At this time, 87 articles have been analyzed and thematically coded (23%). Using a codebook, thematic coding was done using an iterative process.

Findings and Discussion

The six most common codes for both the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* individually and combined from 5/1/2004 –to 5/1/2008 are: expert implementation of policies (n=164, 17.6% of total codes); the need for a less hierarchical system of power (n=92, 9.9%); value of nature is linked to humans (n=91, 9.7%); economic incentives and/or putting faith in the market (n=80, 8.6%); the instrumental value of nature (n=77, 8.2%); and the call to use renewable resources (n=67, 7.2%). These codes appear with the highest frequency prior to and after the release of AIT (see Table One).

Table 1: Rank Order of Most Frequent Codes in NYT and WP

Theme	Total Frequency	% of Total Codes	Per Article NYT	% Change after AIT	Per Article WP	% Change after AIT
Reliance on Experts	164	18%	2.1	32.9%	1.6	24.4%
Hierarchal Power	92	10%	1.3	66.8%	0.7	-33.0%
Instrumental Value of Nature	91	10%	1.4	-27.9%	0.6	-18.0%
Economic Incentive or Market	80	9%	0.7	375.7%	1.3	-37.1%
Intrinsic Value of Nature	77	8%	1.0	-49.8%	1.0	-63.2%
Renewable Resources	67	0.9	27%	-4.9%	0.6	-46.9%

The most common code in both the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* is advocating for expert implementation of policy by either government officials or experts to achieve sustainability. This theme is exemplified in a New Your Times editorial: "...The world's scientists have done their job. Now it's time for world leaders, starting with President Bush, to do theirs..." ("The Scientists Speak").

The next two most mentioned themes are the discourse surrounding power and hierarchy, and the instrumental value of nature. Nature as having instrumental value typically identifies the importance of nature due to its relationship with humans or as a resource to be exploited. Economic incentives and the reliance on the market mechanism are perceived to be effective methods to ameliorate climate problems, forwarding the potential for change based on a belief in a market economy. This discourse places the power of change into the market, either through free-market practices or implementation through government regulation, and embodies notions of sustainability and a growing economy. These beliefs are expressed in the following:

Done right, however, there might be ways to use tax incentives and credits to persuade domestic manufacturers to make more efficient cars, and to persuade consumers to buy them. It is also true that, with the help of aggressive policy changes, both cleaner coal technologies and new biomass fuels, which make use of agricultural byproducts, could produce a much higher percentage of American energy ("Kerry Energy Facts").

Economic incentives are promoted and the attendant implementation path is via a less hierarchical power systems, thereby promoting a weak sustainability or sustainable development model.

Editorials in both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* discuss sustainability in a similar fashion, focusing on hierarchal power structures, an instrumental view of nature, and change by putting faith in the market - all of these support a model of weak sustainability (Dryzek, 2013). Discourses of strong sustainability - focusing on resource limits, requiring renewable resources, and ecological justice – were relatively uncommon.

Summary numbers of the changes in the frequency of the codes in the New York Times after the release of AIT are presented in Table 1. The largest increase for a single code is reliance on economic incentives and the market, which went from 3 instances before May 2006 and 33 after (16 articles before and 37 after); the per article average increased from .188 to .892. Expert implementation of policy increased from an average of 1.688 occurrences per article to 2.243 (the most frequently occurring code before and after May of 2006) and instrumental value of nature decreased from an average of 1.688 occurrences per article to 1.216 (the third most frequently occurring code after May 2006, but second most before). These two themes – reliance on experts and the instrumental value of nature - were central before and after AIT and map into weak sustainability. The theme calling for a less hierarchical decision making process was the second most frequent code after AIT, having an average per article occurrence of 1.459. This code relates to both models of weak and strong sustainability, here called “trans-sustainable”. The code noting the inherent value of nature had an per article average of 1.563 before AIT and after dropped to .784, making it still relevant, but almost a 50% decrease in occurrence; the largest decrease in Table 1. This theme relates exclusively to strong sustainability.

The only theme that increases in frequency in the *Washington Post* is that of relying on experts for a solution. The call for expert implementation of policies went from having an average occurrence of 1.364 per article to 1.696. (Table 1 reports this 24% increase.) The theme of advocating for the use of economic incentives or putting faith in the market had an average per article occurrence of 1.727 and declined to 1.087 after AIT. These two codes remained an important part of the discourse before and after AIT. The strong sustainability theme advocating for the inherent value of nature exhibited the largest decrease. The frequency of this discourse decreased from a 1.182 per article average before AIT to .435.

The frequent appearance of the top six thematic codes has a lot to say about the construction of sustainability. Of the six codes, three are exclusively connected to weak sustainability or sustainable development (expert implementation of policies, economic incentives, instrumental value of nature), two are “trans-sustainable” themes that help create both weak and strong sustainability less hierarchical power, renewable resources) and only one is part of strong sustainability (intrinsic value of nature). The themes creating the discourse of sustainability have focused more on weak sustainability, such as expert implementation of power and economic incentives. This “closing” conversation is strongest in the *Washington Post* and slightly less so in the *New York Times*. *The New York Times* had the theme advocating for less hierarchical decision-making become the second most prominent theme after May of 2006; this is a “trans-sustainable” theme. The discourse calling for experts providing solutions remained *the*

most common code on average before and after in both the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*. This adherence to a hierarchical, top-down model of decision-making is striking. By deferring all of the power and responsibility to those at the top of the pyramid, it takes responsibility away from the general public (Szerszynski, 2010:11). These results suggest that during this timeframe the discourse reinforced an expert driven model of understanding and a reliance on market provided solutions for continuing economic growth.

Conclusion

To what extent did the discourse change as centered around May of 2006 and the release of AIT? Mapping the per article average *change* for the *New York Times* we found that the most substantial change was regarding economic incentives, which increased 376%. Economic incentives was the second most common code for the *Washington Post*, but prior to May 2006 was the least common code surfaced for the *New York Times*. It seems that after May 2006, the *New York Times* modeled itself more similarly to the *Washington Post* in terms of increased faith in the market, emphasizing a model of weak sustainability. The *Washington Post*'s two most common codes before AIT were the need for expert implementation of policies and the need for economic incentives. Similar to the *New York Times*, the expert implementation of policy consistently appears in high numbers and remains the most common code after May of 2006. This code also had the *only* average increase for the *Washington Post*. The largest decrease came from the code for the inherent value of nature, which is also the only strong sustainability code identified. This mirrors the decline for this code in the *New York Times*, even though the drop was not as dramatic as that of the *Washington Post*. To see the only strong sustainability code fall suggests that this theme had much less of an influence on the conversation around sustainability after the film was released. We find then, that as a sustainability-related issue – climate change – is introduced and elevated to national prominence, sustainability discourse shifts as well, consolidating around a more weak sustainability construction.

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