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Exploring discourses of 'necessary' energy use in the UK media: implications for demand-side policy and governance

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Setting the context

The challenges:

- Climate change
- Energy security
- Rising energy bills

To some degree, it is now widely accepted that demand-side reduction and management should be part of the 'solution' to these challenges

But much debate about how this broad principle should be pursued:

- What types of policies and strategies?
- What are 'legitimate' forms of governance?
- And to what extent should energy demand be reduced, or the timing of demand shifted?



The print news media is an important discursive arena for this debate:

- Its discourse to some degree **reflects** wider society, what it perceives to be the views of its readership and political actors
- **Shapes** and **transforms** the discourses circulating in society, and therefore influences the knowledges and perspectives of publics and policy makers
- Often include statements from politicians, technocrats, other actors. Statements to the newspapers acting as key “sites of argumentation” (Runhaar et al., 2006)



Our research particularly examined the discourses of “necessary” or “essential” energy use and demand that circulated in the UK print news media in 2013

These discourses are important because they help define what is considered possible or justifiable change, and therefore what is seen as legitimate policy interventions (Dobson, 2007; Murtargh et al., 2014)

Sampling strategy

Sources: representing a range of political perspectives. Both tabloids and broadsheets:

- Telegraph, Mail, The Sun, Daily Mirror, Guardian

Timeframe: 1st January 2013 – 31st December 2013

- To understand the current ‘state of play’
- Longer timescale not feasible with our resources

Search method: keyword search using ‘LexisNexis’ database

- ‘Energy or electricity’, connected with normative descriptors:
e.g. ‘need, necessary, essential’ and variations

Method of analysis

756 articles resulted from the search, after removing duplicates and those not relevant

Initial analysis of broad narratives and topics of articles. Articles categorised into one of seven themes:

- Energy security
- Energy prices
- Carbon emissions
- Supply technology
- Fuel poverty
- Demand reduction policies
- Power-cuts

Method of analysis

175 articles selected for in-depth qualitative analysis

Informed by ‘framing analysis’ approach (Dryzek, 2005; Entman, 1993).

Examined the articles’ ‘storylines’, and the usage of specific wording and grammar (Stibbe, 2014), to explore how they communicated ideas of ‘necessary’ energy use, either explicitly and implicitly.

Discourse 1: Need as demand

- *Widespread in articles discussing issues of energy security or CO2 emissions*
- *Referring to the needs of the country or economy*
- Presented **all** energy demand and energy use as ‘necessary’, particularly the UK’s **present patterns and levels of energy demand**
- Particularly necessary energy uses were often not specified
- Current levels of energy demand were essential for economic growth, ideas of ‘progress’ and civilisation, and citizen freedom

*As the National Grid have said, we have enough energy to meet our **needs** this winter. Our infrastructure can deliver more than we **need** and has coped well during recent very cold winter spells.”*
(Daily Mail, 7/10/2013)

*A £14BILLION nuclear power plant got the green light yesterday ... The move is important as the plant will generate 7% of Britain's **electricity needs***
(Daily Mirror)

What types of governance strategies are legitimised by this discourse?

Draws attention to supply-side measures - all energy demand 'needed', therefore *must* ensure all demand is met.

*The one thing the planet cannot afford is climate change ... **variable renewables are not able to provide the reliable electricity we need day in day out, which never falls below about 20,000MW in the UK.** So it's coal, gas or nuclear for this segment of our power demand. Unless carbon capture and storage really takes off - and even then it does not eliminate carbon emissions from fossil fuel use - the choice is simply nuclear power or high greenhouse gas emissions. (The Guardian)*

The government is seen as responsible for ensuring adequate supply, by encouraging private investment and providing policy clarity

...And *de*-legitimised?

Demand-side measures almost entirely ignored. State responsibility is not seen as being to limit, control or reduce demand.

- Reproduces idea that demand is unquestionable

Where demand-side governance is addressed, very limited:

- some recognition of scope for flexibility in timing of demand, and for increasing energy efficiency, but seen as ‘last-ditch’ solutions

Demand-side management also directly problematised: economic growth, ideas of ‘progress’, and individual liberty

*WITH FACTORIES and businesses this week asked to ration power use by the electricity network to prevent **blackouts**, the announcement of UK shale gas reserves ... comes just in the nick of time. (Telegraph)*

Discourse 2: Need as ordinary consumption

- *Widespread in articles focussing on energy prices*
- *Referring to the 'needs' of households, in particular the 'ordinary' consumer*
- Presented the energy used by 'ordinary' households as 'necessary'. Far above average critiqued as 'wasteful'.

*"A MILLIONAIRE boss of British Gas uses **twice the energy that struggling families do - just to heat his swimming pool** ... Kim Catchpole, 52 ... summed up the dismay of the firm's eight million customers, saying: "How can [he] have any idea how hard it is when he **wastes double what I spend**"." (The Sun, October 19)*

- 'Energy' in general was seen as needed, but heating was also sometimes recognised as an especially important service

What types of governance strategies are legitimised by this discourse?

Government responsible for ensuring that households can afford an 'ordinary' level of energy consumption:

- Regulating energy companies, ensuring competition
- Nationalising the energy supply sector (The Guardian, Mirror)
- Increasing supply
- **Demand reduction:** Increasing domestic building energy efficiency

...And *de*-legitimised?

Current standards, practices and energy consumption of 'ordinary' households beyond scope of justifiable governance:

- **Health and well-being:** Non-efficiency reductions would mean people using less than they 'need', or turning down heating
- **Individual liberty:** Household consumption is a largely 'private' issue

'No 10 says people should consider wearing jumpers to keep fuel bills down'

'Use less gas to cope with cost, customers told'

However, a few articles present consumption that is far above 'ordinary' (i.e. 'needed') levels is **excessive** and **wasteful**. Possible support here for measures that attempt to reduce this consumption?

Discourse 3: Need as essential services

- *Found in articles concerned about energy prices, but with more explicit and particular concern for the elderly and other 'vulnerable' groups*
- *Less prevalent than discourse 1 or 2*
- Presented particular energy uses as essential – heating was often mentioned – and also particular *standards* of these services
- People needed '**enough**' that they could maintain a decent level of health, well-being, and be able to participate in society

What types of governance strategies are legitimised by this discourse?

State and energy company responsible for ensuring vulnerable groups can afford adequate warmth:

- Making targeted financial support available
- General measures to ensure energy is affordable
- Occasionally 'radical' measures, such as restructuring the energy market, renationalising energy supply

A few articles suggest scope for policies that encourage demand reduction beyond only efficiency, for those using 'more than they need' for a healthy life:

*[A] spokesman from the price comparison website uSwitch said people did need to change their behaviour “We've enjoyed plentiful and fairly cheap energy in this country for many years and as a result people have sometimes got into a mind set of having their homes **warmer than need be and wasting energy** ... But there needs to be a balance between people wearing a vest top in winter and those who are **so cold that they are becoming ill.**”*
(Daily Mail, 1/10/2013)

“When did we all start thinking it was all right to walk around our houses in the middle of winter with our shorts and T-shirts on? When did that become a sensible activity?”
[Ian McCaig of First Utility said] [...]
He stressed that he was not suggesting people should go back to being “huddled together” for warmth, and recognised that there were consumers in fuel poverty who could not just turn down their heating.
(Telegraph, 19/5/2013)

To summarise

- Three main discourses of ‘necessary’ energy demand use in the newspaper coverage we studied
- Each have different implications for demand-side governance and the policy measures that are considered legitimate. But in the two most prevalent discourses, the possibility of demand reduction was significantly ‘closed-down’ and constrained (Stirling, 2008)
- Surprisingly little difference between the newspapers in terms of how these discourses circulate, how demand is framed – a shared ‘common-sense’

Comparing the discourses

| | Need as demand | Need as ordinary consumption | Need as essential services |
|-------------------------------------|---|---|--|
| What's needed | Energy, electricity, gas | Energy; heating and lighting | Heating, lighting, cooking |
| How much | Whatever's demanded | Consumption of ordinary households (except inefficiencies) | 'Enough' for a healthy life |
| When needed | Whenever demanded | All year, but especially during cold spells or during certain events | All year, but especially during cold spells |
| Why needed | Economic growth, 'progress', freedom | Health, 'progress', freedom | Health, well-being, participation in society |
| Whose needs | The country | 'Ordinary families'. Vulnerable groups conflated with everyone | Everyone, but particular concern for the vulnerable and elderly |
| Legitimate energy governance | Largely limited to ensuring adequate supply | Increase energy efficiency, regulate energy companies and promote competition | Targeted measures of financial and efficiency support to the vulnerable. Potentially scope to reduce consumption through changing some everyday norms |

Thanks for listening

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