Oil's Rural Reach: Social Licence in Saskatchewan's Oil-Producing Communities

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ABSTRACT

Background This article investigates the unusually robust social licence that the oil industry enjoys in Saskatchewan, where rural oil-producing communities exhibit what Thomson and Boutilier characterize as "psychological identification" with industry.

Analysis The authors explore what this psychological identification looks like on the ground by examining the corporate social responsibility practices of the oil industry. They probe the beliefs and perceptions of variously positioned individuals living in oil-producing communities through 25 interviews.

Conclusion and implications The research findings point to the need to understand social licence as much more than only the practice of garnering consent for local operations. Rather, the intense identification with industry in the communities studied clearly favoured the reproduction of industry discourses for understanding a wide array of energy issues.

Keywords Fossil fuels; Social licence

RÉSUMÉ

Contexte Cet article porte sur la licence sociale singulièrement robuste dont profite l'industrie du pétrole au Saskatchewan, où les communautés rurales productrices de pétrole démontrent, pour emprunter l'expression d'Ian Thomson et Robert G. Boutilier, une « identification psychologique » envers l'industrie.

Analyse Cet article explore à quoi ressemble cette identification psychologique sur le terrain en examinant les pratiques de responsabilité sociale de l'industrie pétrolière. Au moyen de 25 entrevues, il sonde les croyances et perceptions d'individus occupant diverses positions dans des communautés productrices de pétrole.

Conclusion et implications Les résultats de cette recherche soulignent le besoin de comprendre la licence sociale comme étant bien plus que la simple pratique d'obtenir un consentement de la part de la communauté concernée avant d'entamer des opérations locales. L'identification intense vis-à-vis de l'industrie dans les communautés étudiées favorise plutôt, parmi les membres de la communauté, la reproduction de discours industriels sur un large éventail de questions énergétiques.

Mots clés Combustibles fossiles; Licence sociale; Identification psychologique; Responsabilité sociale

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Introduction

"Social licence" is the idea that a company or industry needs to have broad, ongoing approval and acceptance of society in order to successfully conduct its activities. Contemporary debates about this concept in the extractive industries can be characterized by two extremes. On the one hand, academic literature portrays extractive companies as highly "controversial," receiving low levels of public trust, and in dire need of obtaining, maintaining, and renewing their social licence in order to legitimize their operations (Owen & Kemp, 2012; Spangler & Pompper, 2011; Theodori & Jackson-Smith, 2010). Much of this literature assumes a tenuous relationship between the extractive industries and the communities within which they operate, with the communities barely tolerating the operations of the firm. Here conflict and resistance are seen to be perpetually "simmering" below the surface without regular efforts to renew social licence through various and continuous corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives (Gunningham, Kagan, & Thornton, 2002; Smith & Richards, 2015). From this perspective, social licence is viewed as indispensable to the industry's very survival.

On the other hand, in more popular commentary, "social licence"—particularly in regards to oil and gas—is increasingly characterized as a futile exercise akin to extortion that can never appease the demands of an insatiable environmental movement. According to such commentary, costly endeavours to render oil extraction less damaging to the environment, or efforts to more equitably redistribute oil wealth, are ultimately pointless because industry can never truly "earn" a licence to operate from groups that will only be satisfied with the wholesale demise of the fossil fuel industry (Goldstein, 2016; McKitrick, 2016). Despite these very different perspectives on the efficacy of social licence, both literatures see the operations of the oil and gas industry as fraught with conflict and controversy. The disagreement is not over the existence of conflict, but whether anything can be done to ameliorate these conflicts and restore a modicum of trust between industry and the communities in which they operate.

This narrative of perpetual low-intensity conflict between industry and community that characterizes both academic and certain public commentary is contrary to findings from research on southern Saskatchewan oil-producing communities. Rather than conflict and discord, here industry has achieved a uniquely robust level of social licence, a situation that Thomson and Boutilier (2011) characterize as "psychological identification." This article explores what psychological identification looks like on the ground by examining the corporate social responsibility practices of the oil industry—such as corporate donations, sponsorships, and community engagement efforts—and the beliefs and perceptions of individuals living in oil-producing communities in Saskatchewan. In these findings, a high level of social licence manifests itself as an intense identification with industry, to the extent that the community perceives its interests as mutually aligned and will actively defend industry from criticism through the adoption of key industry discourses on a host of energy-related issues. Given these findings, social licence should be understood as much more than only the practice of garnering consent for local operations. Rather, efforts to obtain social licence, in these findings, produced an ideological view of the world that was shared by differently positioned community members.

Context and methods

This article is based on the authors' research into the ways in which the oil industry shapes the everyday institutions and culture of rural life in Saskatchewan's oil-producing communities. Although the oil industry is not new to Saskatchewan (commercial production dates back to the late 1940s), technological advances such as horizontal drilling, multi-stage fracturing, thermal extraction, and flooding techniques have meant an expanded pace and scale of drilling and production during the past 15 years. Beginning in the mid-2000s, Saskatchewan experienced an oil boom that sent rural oil-producing communities into a period of frenzied growth and only slowed when oil prices crashed in late 2014. For the better part of a decade, oil-producing communities experienced high rates of employment, strained social services, soaring rental markets amid low vacancy rates, and influxes of workers to staff both the booming oilfield and its associated spin-offs, including a large number of temporary foreign workers destined for the restaurant and accommodation industries (Zink & Eaton, 2016).[1] During a time when non-oil-producing rural areas were experiencing economic decline and depopulation associated with agricultural consolidation and corporatization, Saskatchewan's oil-producing communities were experiencing population growth and inflation associated with the influx of oil wealth.

The new extraction technologies that characterized the recent oil boom in Saskatchewan have elsewhere received criticism and contention from academics and social movements (see, e.g., Carter & Fusco, 2017; Jackson, Vengosh, Carey, Davies, Darrah, O'Sullivan, & Pétron, 2014; Steinzor, Subra, & Sumi, 2013). In other jurisdictions these technologies have been met with significant social opposition. For example, social opposition led to a ban on fracking in New York State and France; and more than 1,000 groups from 64 countries participated in anti-fracking actions coordinated by Global Frackdown in 2015 (see Global Frackdown, 2017). In Saskatchewan, however, there has been little organized opposition to oil extraction either from members of the rural oil-producing communities or from more urban environmental movements. This despite the real grievances that people living in Saskatchewan's oil-producing communities have voiced about living beside oil infrastructure that contaminates their lands and communities (Eaton & Kinchy, 2016).

We conducted research in several oil-producing municipalities in Saskatchewan. The study includes three named communities, each comprised of a city or town and its surrounding rural municipality. The three named communities are the city of Weyburn, which also includes the rural municipality of Weyburn; the town of Kindersley, which also includes the rural municipality of Kindersley; and the town of Oxbow, which also includes the rural municipality of Enniskillen. For these three communities, we identified corporate contributions from the oil industry via a content analysis of newspapers from 2007 to 2016 as well as company websites, annual CSR reports, and newsletters.[2] In this study, the term "oil industry" connotes both the companies responsible for oil production and oil well servicing as well as the associations and clubs responsible for oil advocacy. The oil production and oil well servicing companies that provided donations to Saskatchewan communities are primarily regional and local companies with head offices in Calgary, Alberta, or in Saskatchewan. Crescent

Point Energy and Cenovus Energy are two examples of prominent Alberta-based companies with considerable exploration and development in Saskatchewan, while Valleyview Petroleums is a Weyburn-owned exploration and development company. Local Oilmen's and Oilwomen's service clubs, as well as the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers, are examples of oil advocacy organizations that donated to community programs and infrastructure.

The city of Weyburn is located on the northern edge of oil production in southeast Saskatchewan. According to the 2011 census, it has a population of over 10,000 people and is the ninth-largest city in the province. It is home to many small locally grown oilfield companies and is adjacent to several oil-producing rural municipalities. The town of Kindersley is located on the eastern edge of west central Saskatchewan's oilfields. With a population of more than 4,500, it is a regional service centre and is home to several locally based oilfield companies. Finally, Oxbow is a small town of over 1,200 residents in the heart of multiple oilfields in southeast Saskatchewan (see Figure 1). These three municipalities were chosen to provide communities of diverse size and geographic location.

Figure 1: Map of oil pools and named study areas
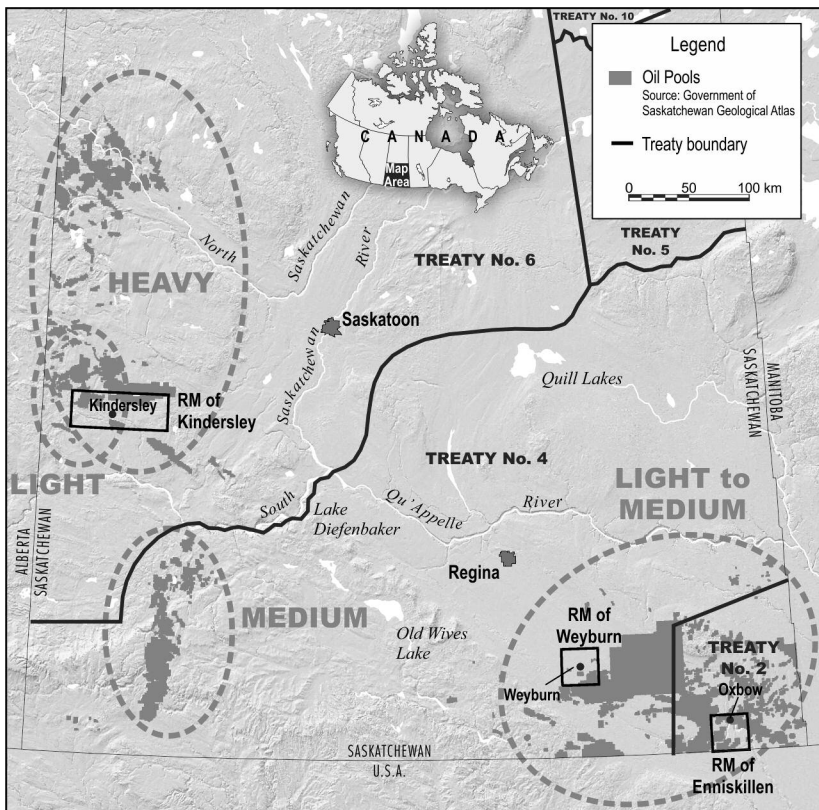
Notes: Map created by Weldon Hiebert. Contains information licenced under the Open Government Licence – Canada. Base map courtesy NASA/JPL-Caltech.

In addition to collecting publicly available information about the named municipalities, we conducted 25 semi-structured interviews in the summer of 2016 with rural and town councillors and administrators, farmers, representatives of landowner organizations, members of conservation organizations, representatives from community organizations and human services, schoolteachers, and representatives of oil companies across several unnamed oil-producing municipalities in Saskatchewan. The municipalities and affiliations of the individuals interviewed remain confidential to protect informants' identities. Interviewees were chosen using purposive sampling based on their experiences with the oil industry and in order to provide a wide diversity of perspectives and locations.

Literature review

Social licence is a concept originating with the mining industry and is the increasingly popular notion that a company or industry needs to have broad, ongoing approval and acceptance of society in order to successfully conduct its activities. As Prno and Slocombe (2012) observe, while social licence may be "issued by society as a whole (e.g., governments, communities, the general public and media), local communities are often a key arbiter in the process by virtue of their proximity to projects, sensitivity to effects, and ability to affect project outcomes" (p. 347). A social licence to operate "derives from communities' perception of a company and its operations, comprised of a company's ongoing acceptance and approval from stakeholders" (Smith & Richards, 2015, p. 89). According to Ian Thomson and Robert Boutilier (2011), a company or industry can achieve four levels of social licence: withdrawal, acceptance, approval, and psychological identification, moving from lesser to greater degrees of public acceptance for a company's or industry's operations. Psychological identification is the highest level of social licence a company can achieve. At this rare level, a community demonstrates "full trust" in a company or industry to the extent that community and industry interests are almost indistinguishable, and the community will actively defend the company against criticism (Thomson & Boutilier, 2011, cited in Smith & Richards, 2015, p. 95).

Companies attempt to build social licence by diminishing the negative externalities of corporate operations, while encouraging the positive through actions known as corporate social responsibility (CSR). CSR is an "umbrella term" for a host of theories and practices designed to encourage business to *voluntarily* operate in a manner that meets or exceeds the ethical, legal, commercial, and public expectations that society has of business (Blowfield & Frynas, 2005). Corporations engaging in CSR recognize that their operations impose costs on society that are not normally factored into business calculations. CSR attempts to acknowledge these "negative externalities" of corporate operations and to incorporate their impact on communities, workers, and/or the environment into firm decision-making. For example, a firm might voluntarily adopt environmental standards that exceed current legal regulatory minimums to demonstrate to the public its commitment to the environment.

CSR also emphasizes the "positive externalities" that can result from corporate operations and encourages firms to intentionally produce more of these positive outcomes (Enoch, 2007; Hamilton, 2003). Thus, a corporation might build health clinics

or schools, provide educational materials and training, or contribute to other needed infrastructure within the communities where it operates. Proponents of CSR argue that such efforts serve to enhance the reputation of the firm so that it is better situated to respond to the risks of doing business. Successful CSR allows companies to build a "stock of trust" that can be drawn upon in the wake of major environmental incidents, negative publicity, regulatory threats, or other potential reputational damage (Knight & Greenberg, 2001; Yates & Horvath, 2013).

As summarized above, the literature on social licence and CSR focuses on material incentives, community engagement, and garnering consent. So far, it has done a poor job of explaining *how* social licence is socially constructed and produced, something we hope to clarify with our case study. For clues about the social production of social licence we turn to another literature, prevalent in rural sociology, that examines how companies, elites, and communities themselves use a variety of coercive and non-coercive measures to promote and maintain a "community economic identity" that is tied to extractive industries (Bell & York, 2010; Cabrejas, 2012; Tovar, Arnal, de Castro, Lahera-Sanchez, & Revilla, 2011). In response to potential threats including growing environmental movements, community resistance, and the declining importance of extractive economies and extractive industry employment, Bell and York (2010) show how industry appropriates cultural icons and maintains a high level of visibility in order to connect the cultural identity of the community with the industry. These efforts at "economic identity maintenance" (p. 112) are used to thwart political opposition to industry and maintain legitimacy, even in communities where environmental impacts are felt acutely and extractive industry employment has waned.

Importantly, Bell and York's insights about community economic identity emphasize the social and ideological construction of economic dependence, whereas other literature has treated economic dependence as material fact (see, e.g., Freudenburg, 1992). Even where extractive industries contribute relatively weakly to employment and local economies, a lack of economic alternatives and a constructed community identity around extraction can contribute to a local culture of silence and even to active suppression of criticism and resistance to industry. Elites are important actors in the social construction of community economic identity and environmental risk. Following Lukes' (2005) description of the third dimension of power, where power is used to shape people's perceptions, cognitions, and preferences so they are prevented from having grievances, authors such as Shriver, Adams & Messner (2014) have explained how corporations, government officials, and regulators shape how grievances are perceived or not perceived among oppressed populations by controlling information, shaping environmental assessment and community engagement practices, and mounting public relations campaigns. Matz and Renfrew (2015), for example, investigated how one public relations initiative created by the oil and gas industry in relation to the development of fracking in the Northeast Marcellus (in Pennsylvania and New York) mobilized frames of patriotism, environmental imagery, and technological and scientific innovation to represent the industry as positive for the community while those who opposed the introduction of shale gas were cast as irrational obstructionists. Similarly, Schneider, Schwarze, Bsumek, and Peeples (2016) demonstrate how fossil

fuel industries regularly propagate a series of rhetorical strategies designed to cast critics as naïve, reckless, and dangerous while representing industry as a moderate, rational, and even progressive force. More interventionist attempts by elites to suppress opposition and build community economic identity include the use of manufactured grass-roots "astro-turf" campaigns, the vilification of opponents, and even economic retribution (Bell & York, 2010; Matz & Renfrew, 2015).

It is not only elites that contribute to the construction of extractive community economic identities. For example, in Laciana, a long-standing coal mining area in Spain, locals are using violence (ranging from insults to physical violence) against those opposing the practice of mountaintop removal. Here Cabrejas (2012) reports that a prevailing "culture of silence" prevents criticism of industry and is actively enforced by community members themselves. Indeed, "[t]he mere presence of environmental activists, it seems, is perceived as a threat. Even proposals for alternative socio-economic activities are seen as a threat. Workers' terror of losing their jobs is the most common motive promoting attacks [against environmentalists]" (p. 429).

CSR initiatives in Saskatchewan's oil patch

The oil firms operating in Saskatchewan engage in a host of activities that fall under the rubric of corporate social responsibility. However, beyond the more conventional displays of corporate benevolence that one would expect—such as sponsoring sports teams, contributing to food banks, and donating to local hospital foundations—we found that oil-producing communities also rely on industry for the provision of essential services and infrastructure that have historically been considered the sole purview of government. In fact, oil-producing communities rely extensively on oil industry money for the provision of essential needs such as fire and emergency response, health, recreation, and human services plus other critical infrastructure. The following section shows how the three named communities studied are dependent on oil industry largesse for both basic infrastructure and services.[3]

Fire and emergency services appear to be a frequent target for oil company philanthropy in Saskatchewan. Indeed, many oil-producing communities only have access to vital equipment and training for fire and rescue thanks to direct aid from the oil industry.[4] In particular, funding for equipment required to respond to oil-related incidents and emergencies appears to be a priority (see Table 1). Oil industry largesse is also crucial to the maintenance of health services in Saskatchewan's oil-producing communities. In this study, many of the largest oil firm donations were earmarked for critical public health infrastructure and equipment. For instance, Crescent Point Energy contributed $4.5 million for the construction of a new hospital in Weyburn—the largest single corporate contribution identified in our study period. Oil industry money is also integral to equipping local hospitals and health centres with important diagnostic equipment (see Table 2).

While health receives a significant share of oil philanthropy, education was also a favoured target of oil company largesse. Although the majority of funding for schools comes from the provincial government, communities are expected to fundraise substantial amounts for any needed upgrades or expansions. For example, Oxbow's new Prairie Horizons School required a community fundraising effort of $1.2 million to ex-

Table 1: Contributions to fire and emergency services

Donation	Company	Recipient (contribution details)
$150,000	Cenovus Energy	Weyburn Fire Department (safety training trailer)
$20,000	CNRL	Sun Country Health Region, Weyburn (ambulance)
$10,000	Enbridge	Oxbow/Enniskillen Fire Department (fire truck and other equipment)
$8,000	Cenovus Energy	Weyburn Fire Department (thermal imaging camera)
$5,000	Alliance Pipeline	Oxbow/Enniskillen Fire Department (Jaws of Life)
$2,500	Enbridge	Weyburn Fire Department (12 H_2S gas monitors and radios)
$2,000	Talisman Energy	Oxbow/Enniskillen Fire Department (rescue airbags)
$2,000	Vermillion Energy	Oxbow Community Emergency Support Program
$1,000	Oxbow Oilmen's Club	Oxbow Healthcare Auxiliary (ambulance garage)
$1,000	Carson Energy	Weyburn Fire Department (Jaws of Life)
N/A	Crescent Point Energy	Weyburn Fire Department (rescue dummies)
N/A	Cenovus Energy	Weyburn Police Department (all-terrain vehicle)

Table 2: Contributions to health and health services

Donation	Company	Recipient (contribution details)
$4,500,000	Crescent Point Energy	Weyburn Hospital Foundation
$250,000	Penn West	Penn West Diagnostic Wing at the Kindersley Hospital (digital x-ray and ultrasound equipment and for hospital renovations)
$10,000	ARC Resources	Sun Country Health Region, Weyburn (electrocardiogram monitors)
$10,000	ARC Resources	Kindersley Hospital (medical equipment)
$5,000	Weyburn Oilfield Technical Society (OTS)	Weyburn Hospital Foundation
$3,500	Oxbow Oilmen's Club	Galloway Health Centre Oxbow (diagnostic Ear, Nose & Throat set)
$2,500	ARC Resources	Kindersley & District Health and Wellness Centre (hospital equipment replacement)
$2,500	ARC Resources	Kindersley Hospital

pand the gymnasium and build a multi-purpose room. The vast majority of these funds were supplied by the oil industry, with some firms committing over $100,000 to the school. The industry is also a valuable source of awards and scholarships for students in oil-producing communities (see Table 3), offering career paths for young people that may allow them to remain in their communities. The experience of rural depopulation due to the decline in agriculture has left many families deeply fearful

Table 3: Contributions to education

Donation	Company	Recipient (contribution details)
$100,000	CNRL	Oxbow & District K–12 New School
$100,000	Redhawk Well Servicing	Oxbow & District K–12 New School
$50,000	Mayco Well Servicing	Oxbow & District K–12 New School
$25,000	Crescent Point	Weyburn Comprehensive School (scholarships for petroleum engineering or geology)
$10,000	Oxbow Oilmen's Club	Oxbow & District K–12 New School
$10,000	Enform	Southeast Regional College, Weyburn (scholarship to support the Oil & Gas Rig Worker program)
$8,000	Aldon Oils	Weyburn Family Place (children's playschool programming)
$5,000	Conoco-Phillips	Westcliffe School, Kindersley (playground equipment)
$5,000	Conoco-Phillips	Prairie West College, Kindersley (welding training bursaries)
$5,000	Penn West	Oxbow & District K–12 New School
$5,000	Ex-Cal Well Servicing	Oxbow & District K–12 New School
$2,000	Weyburn Oilfield Technical Society Oilwomen	Southeast Regional College, Weyburn (Scholarships for female students)
$1,000	Hansen Oilfield Consulting	Oxbow & District K–12 New School
N/A	Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP)	Oxbow Prairie Horizons School (Energy in Action program)
N/A	Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP)	Weyburn Queen Elizabeth School (Energy in Action program)

for the future viability of their towns. The oil industry—when it is flourishing—offers a respite from this narrative of decline, further connecting rural futures to the future of the industry.

The boom-and-bust cycle of the oil economy regularly produces and exacerbates social problems that can overwhelm existing human services in many of these communities. Crisis and family support services are often taxed to their limit due to the rapid in-migration of workers, soaring costs of living, substance abuse, and family breakdown that often accompanies an oil boom. Industry appears to recognize the necessity of funding such services to support their own employees and families in the communities where they operate (see Table 4).

Oil industry philanthropy is also vital to the cultural and recreational life of rural oil-producing communities. Much of the infrastructure to facilitate recreation and leisure in these communities is provided by the oil industry as well. As Table 5 outlines, funding for the construction and maintenance of sports and recreation centres, parks,

Table 4: Contributions to human services

Donation	Company	Recipient (contribution details)
$25,000 plus	Valleyview Petroleums	Weyburn Wor-Kin Shop (Platinum sponsor support services for intellectually disabled)
$20,000	Cenovus Energy	Weyburn Care-A-Van Society (wheelchair-accessible van)
$10,000	Longhorn Oil & Gas	West Central Crisis & Family Support, Kindersley
$10,000	Legacy Oil & Gas	Weyburn Wor-Kin Shop (support services for intellectually disabled)
$6,000	Cenovus Energy	Weyburn Salvation Army Food Bank
$5,000	Conoco-Phillips	Kindersley & District Food Bank
$5,000	CNRL	Oxbow Community ChildCare Centre (sprinkler installation)
$2,500	ARC Resources	West Central Crisis & Family Support, Kindersley
$1,500	ARC Resources	Kindersley & District Food Bank
$1,500	Cenovus Energy	Weyburn Public Library (Books for Babies)
$1,000	ARC Resources	Kindersley & District Food Bank
$500–$5,000	Cenovus Energy	Weyburn Wor-Kin Shop (Bronze sponsor)

Table 5: Contributions to leisure and recreation

Donation	Company	Recipient (contribution details)
$250,000	Cenovus Energy	Weyburn Triple C Centre (Community, Culture and Convention)
$200,000	Crescent Point Energy	Weyburn Colosseum (Purchase naming rights to the Crescent Point Place)
$100,000	Encana	Weyburn Leisure Centre (outdoor pool)
$120,000	Crescent Point Energy	Nickel Lake Regional Park, Weyburn
$50,000	CNRL	Oxbow Aquatic Centre
$40,000	Encana	Jubilee Park, Weyburn (outdoor ice rink)
$35,000	CNRL	Oxbow Baseball Park
$20,000	Encana	Jubilee Park, Weyburn (storage garage and equipment)
$10,000 to $15,000	Encana	Weyburn Leisure Centre (free swimming for children every Monday)
$5,000	Talisman Energy	Oxbow Curling Rink (refurbishing)
$2,500	TransGas	Kindersley Walking Trail Committee
$2,000	ARC Resources	Smiley Recreation Board, Kindersley
$1,500	Oxbow Oilmen's Club	Oxbow Swimming Pool
$500	CCS Midstream Services	Kindersley Walking Trail Committee

playgrounds, and pools as well as programming often comes from industry. In addition, Table 6 identifies other important investments in community infrastructure supplied by the oil industry in these communities.

Table 6: Other contributions to community infrastructure

Donation	Company	Recipient (contribution details)
$45,000	Saskatchewan Oil & Gas Show	Weyburn Airport (jet fuel storage)
$40,000	Crescent Point Energy	Weyburn Legion Hall (new roof)
$10,000	Encana	Goodwater Hall, Weyburn (replacing furnace and air conditioner)
$1,000	Oxbow Oilmen's Club	Oxbow Friendship Club (new floor)
N/A	Cenovus Energy	Weyburn Airport (jet fuel storage)

In interviews conducted across several oil-producing jurisdictions in Saskatchewan, community members reinforced the degree to which their communities rely on oil industry philanthropy to provide essential infrastructure and much-needed services. Certainly, part of this philanthropy is designed to secure the immediate interests of oil firms by ensuring that communities have the requisite infrastructure and services that the industry depends on to operate effectively. A production superintendent for a local oil firm told us:

> Like, we'd donate to the swimming pool, to the fire departments, the ambulance was stuff that we supported too, because that was close and dear to us with having so many employees, we wanted to make sure our employees are well looked after in the event that they needed that service.

But these examples of philanthropy are also a means to garner publicity and community goodwill. This aspect of industry philanthropy was not lost on our respondents, as one local fire chief noted: "[Oil companies are] donating to the community and it's not just the fire departments, but rinks and ball diamonds and stuff like that. It gets their name out in the community and they like the advertising, and it is a tax deduction for them as well."

While respondents recognized the promotional dimension of industry philanthropy, it is often couched in the "win-win" rhetoric that perceives a mutuality of interests between industry and community that is emblematic of a robust social licence and successful CSR (Enoch, 2009). As one elected official we interviewed observed:

> [Oil firms] want to have something that is highly visible. And something that is used all the time so that every time you walk into [name of community centre] there's the sign: [with the corporate name]. And you walk in the school, and they've got a great big wall where they have all the contributors. It's very important to the oil companies to get that exposure. I suppose they're doing it for good, too, but they're doing it for advertising. They're doing it—even their shareholders—shareholders want to have high visibility. So it's a win-win; they get the visibility, we get the money, and the community gets something good.

Even when respondents recognized the self-interested nature of oil philanthropy, this recognition did not appear to diminish the stature of the industry in their communities. Respondents were quick to praise the industry for its charitable efforts, with many recognizing that certain infrastructure and services simply would not exist without oil industry largesse. One of the teachers we interviewed made this explicit:

> Well, our school, we raised a lot—like, the people in the town raised a lot of money, oilfield included—to build a whole brand new—it's kind of like a second gym… So yeah, because we raised about a million dollars and had it not been in oilfield country, that million dollars likely would not have been raised.

Similarly, a local fire chief discussed the difficulties experienced by non-oil-producing jurisdictions where the oil industry cannot be relied on for funding and equipment:

> I know if you get north of Number 1 highway, and the oil revenue runs out, and it's very hard for them to fund the fire department and to buy good graders for the roads, and to pay the maintenance crew decent money. And so I can see that being a challenge, to fund a fire department or to get them the equipment that they need.

It is important to note that the industry is not perceived as merely providing these communities with access to certain necessities or luxuries that non-oil-producing communities may find difficult to afford. Rather, respondents regularly viewed the prosperity of their communities as directly tied to the prosperity of the oil industry. Many linked the very survival of their communities to the existence of the oil industry. As one teacher explained: "I know … for my personal opinion … the industry has been phenomenal for our community. It all trickles down … everything … everything we have in our community comes from the oil industry." Another community volunteer and former oil company administrator said: "We had a giant flood that wiped out the ball diamonds and they got rebuilt, and that didn't happen because of the teachers at the school, because the teachers wouldn't be here if the industry wasn't here. No one would be here."

As the above demonstrates, interviewees were keenly aware of how much they rely on the oil industry, to the point that some respondents could not imagine their communities being able to exist without it. Oil industry charity quite literally allows people access to health, education, recreation, and other services that they might not otherwise have. Here, the economic identity of the community (as identified by those working both within and outside of the industry) is synonymous with the oil industry.

Community engagement efforts (aligning values and interests)

Beyond acts of corporate benevolence that produce "positive externalities" and generate the legitimacy and credibility needed to acquire a robust social licence to operate, corporations also engage in specific acts of community engagement designed to cultivate trust and align the values and interests of the community with that of the industry. Our content analysis of the three community newspapers and corporate newsletters revealed that most of the larger oil firms regularly host a variety of community engagement efforts, such as company-sponsored open houses, public tours of operations,

school field trips, awards events, et cetera. A production superintendent at a local oil firm explained:

> So we've had—one thing that we used to do and [oil firm] has done it a couple of times, is we have open houses. We open it up to the public, so if you have some questions or concerns, bring it up and we'll provide you with the answers and stuff like that. So that's helped kind of bring the local people together and understand what the oil patch is all about.

Such efforts are usually characterized by industry as a means to build relationships with the community and other key stakeholders. These events allow firms to showcase their contributions to the community, provide unmediated information on operations and performance as well as disseminate industry viewpoints.

The oil industry recognizes that schools are a particularly attractive site for community engagement efforts that can enhance social licence for the industry overall. The Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP), in partnership with local oil firms, has brought its Energy in Action (EIA) program to schools across Saskatchewan over the past decade. The EIA program is self-described as "an energy and environmental literacy program for students primarily in grades four to six in under-serviced schools in rural communities, where there are oil and natural gas operations" (CAPP, 2012a). The program consists of in-classroom presentations that deliver "industry context" on key themes of natural resources, energy needs, and environmental stewardship. CAPP (2012b) explains the motivation for the program in an online video:

> Energy in Action is community engagement in action. Building understanding, growing roots in the community, reinforcing reputations, ensuring our social licence to operate. Skilled educators and a curriculum linked to energy realities opens eyes and opens minds. Energy in Action works.

Regardless of the content of the curriculum—which is meant to portray the industry in a sympathetic light—EIA should be viewed as a powerful intervention in the daily lives of children, which cements the relationship between community and industry. Indeed, in many of these communities, the day of the program is viewed as a community-wide event, further solidifying the community's economic identity as tied to industry.

Research showed that oil companies also engage in less formal and more intimate forms of community engagement in Saskatchewan by making representatives available to meet with local groups that might have questions or concerns about their operations. A local nature group explained how they invited a representative from Cenovus Energy to make a presentation to their group about the environmental regulation of oil and gas. Praising what they perceived as an increased stringency in environmental regulation of the industry, group members explained that the application for a licence to drill is now "quite involved" and that "[the company's applications are] a lot thicker now than they ever used to be on every project. So, yeah, it's quite good, I think." Overall the group suggested, "We think the oil companies are doing an adequate job; we're not sure how much they do cuz we don't know enough about their work areas,

but certainly we've been quite impressed with their abilities." These types of community engagement efforts should be viewed as a significant subset of CSR, designed to target specific stakeholders and further industry perspectives among key stakeholders in affected communities (Bowen, Newenham-Kahindi, & Herremans, 2010).

Discussion

The perceived economic dependence on the oil industry, coupled with concerted CSR initiatives and community engagement strategies, have allowed industry to obtain an exceptionally robust social licence to operate in Saskatchewan. As mentioned at the outset, Thomson and Boutilier (2011) consider "psychological identification" to be the highest level of social licence a firm or industry can achieve. At this level,

> [r]ather than "us and them," the relationship between community and company represents a "we" marked by co-ownership in the project. At this point, the community will defend the company against outside criticisms or attempts to impede project movement, making this level unique and stronger than others. Very few companies have actually succeeded in taking their community relations to this level. (Cited in Smith & Richards, 2015, p. 95)

This level of social licence was observed in our interviews where participants represented industry not as an intruder or outsider to be tolerated, but as a valued member of the community itself. Indeed, the notion of "industry as community" was widespread among our respondents—regardless of their relationship to the industry, and despite serious grievances expressed by some. For example, a production superintendent at a local oil firm was emphatic about the tight connection between community and industry:

> Years ago, there were no donations, there was no nothing. I think there was a "we and they." But now, through donations and a lot of people that I know that are in the oil patch, they volunteer either for the fire department or a lot of volunteer hours coaching for kids' sports and stuff like that, so that helps as well, right? It's no more a "we and they." It's really come together.

The discourse of industry as part of the community is further entrenched due to the local roots of many of the companies that make up a substantial portion of what people understand to be "the oil industry." As one community volunteer emphasized, "Big oil—there's no such thing as 'big oil.' It's all of our friends and neighbours and people running our towns and supporting us." Similarly, a teacher remarked:

> We've got tons of different oilfield companies that have been started by people who grew up around here, and they just want what is [best] for the people that they have working for them. Whatever they can do for the community, they're great community-minded people… All the swimming pool boards, the ball boards—they've got family… As for the bigger ones … it all trickles down eventually, right? They've got workers working in these communities, so they want them to be able to have the best that they can possibly have, I guess.

Any sense of division between industry and community is further eroded due to the multiple direct relationships that people in oil-producing communities have with the oil industry. As the following interviewee, an employee at an oilfield service firm, emphasized, virtually everyone has some direct or indirect family or friendship tie to the oil industry: "In this area, pretty much everyone has some [connection]—either their husband works in the oilfield or they work in the oilfield somewhere along the line … Usually everyone has some sort of a connection, right?"

This intense community identification with industry leads to a significant reticence to criticize any aspect of the industry publicly. The minority of interviewees who did voice serious grievances with the industry all spoke about the reluctance to raise concerns in communities where criticism of the industry was not tolerated. A community economic development officer we interviewed explained the unwillingness to criticize an industry that is so important to the community:

> I think [locals are] scared to, and it's not just that. Anything said against the oil companies or oilfield. If I were to go on Facebook right now and write something on there that said something negative about the oilfield, I'd get jumped on like ugly on an ape, where they would just go, "Well, what about all this?"

Similarly, a representative from an occupational health and safety company reported there is no real place to air public grievances against the industry because of the ubiquity of industry ties: "It's always shut down [criticism of the industry]. You don't talk about it … If you put yourself out there, then you will be chastised, plain and simple … Whether it's yourself or your family member, whatever, somebody has got a tie to the industry, so everyone feels vulnerable and implicated."

In communities that lack economic alternatives to oil, industry wields tremendous economic power, since its investment decisions can determine the economic fate of the community. It is, therefore, not surprising that even legitimate criticisms or complaints that might subject the industry to scrutiny are viewed as serious threats by members of the community itself. The costs of airing grievances in such an environment are too much for some to consider. A group of landowners emphasized that even farmers with "issues on their land" do not like to condemn the oil industry. Referring to the surface lease payments farmers receive from industry, one landowner said "Money talks."

Social licence as ideology

Criticisms of the industry are not only suppressed within the communities studied, they are also actively challenged, especially when they are deemed to emanate from sources outside of the community. One of the more interesting discoveries of our research was the degree to which respondents talked about energy and energy-related issues through the types of frames that the fossil fuel industry regularly propagates. This section argues that social licence should be viewed not merely as generating various degrees of consent, but also as an ideological project. This is consistent with a Gramscian notion of hegemony where a "congruence of material and ideological forces … enables a coalition of interests to maintain a dominant position in society" (Levy, 1997, p. 129). For both Gramsci and our case, the dominant position is not main-

tained primarily through force—although elites can and do compel through coercion when they deem it advantageous—but through ideological and cultural dominance capable of securing popular consent. The ability to mobilize and maintain an effective and stable hegemony requires not only certain material concessions to subordinate groups—such as the industry's provision of jobs, revenue, essential services, and infrastructure—but also "discursive frameworks that actively constitute perceptions of mutual interests" (Levy & Egan, 2003, p. 807).

This section shows how this "mutuality of interests" is particularly resonant in communities where the "community interest" and "industry's interest" are effectively blurred to the point of being almost indistinguishable. Gramsci suggested that insofar as the ideas of dominant groups are internalized by subordinate groups, they become "common sense," a taken-for-granted conception of the world rarely challenged that legitimizes the status quo as the "natural order of things" (Boggs, 1999 p. 161). In our case of psychological identification, individuals adopt ideological common sense understandings of broader energy issues that affect the industry and themselves.

The ideological alignment of our participants with industry became evident when they were asked about specific criticisms of the industry. In responding to such criticisms, participants adopted many elements of common industry frames and rhetoric that other researchers have identified (Bell & York, 2010; Matz & Renfrew, 2015; Schneider et al., 2016).[5] This is not to claim that respondents uncritically recycle oil industry talking points, but that certain elements of established industry arguments regularly enter into their reasoning when asked about these issues. For example, and consistent with another study of the Weyburn region (Boyd, 2015), on the issue of anthropogenic climate change there was significant skepticism among our respondents as to its validity. Once again, this perspective was prevalent regardless of a participant's relationship to the industry. When asked about climate change, one rural councillor responded:

> I'm not the best climate change person to talk to because I don't necessarily buy into all of that, and I struggle with … I struggle with the fact that Canada is taking responsibility for so much of an issue that we are actually a very small emitter in the grand scheme of things.

The idea that Canada—despite having some of the highest per capita greenhouse gas emissions in the world—is a "small emitter" relative to other countries has been a favourite talking point of both industry advocacy groups and the premier of Saskatchewan (Morrow, 2015; Oil Respect, 2017). More importantly, contained within respondents' doubts about climate change are elements of what Schneider et al. (2016) identify as the "industrial apocalyptic" strategy.[6]

> This consists of a set of rhetorical appeals that powerful, but fundamentally misinformed outsiders—usually urban environmentalists and/or eastern politicians—use climate change as a justification to impose onerous regulations or taxation on the oil industry, while being wholly ignorant of the catastrophic economic and social consequences such constraints will entail. (p. 27)

As a community volunteer explained:

> I would say the prevailing opinion is those who are making decisions about things like climate change are making them on broad brush stroke generalities, the opinion is they don't know what they are talking about, the opinion is they've got the data wrong… It's fear-based, because someone like Justin Trudeau who didn't get any votes this side of the Manitoba border is talking about making broad sweeping changes that are literally going to put our entire communities in financial jeopardy.

Similarly, an employee at an oilfield service company expressed her doubts about climate change and feelings of being unfairly singled out in relation to urban areas:

> Well, no one really knows what the weather was like how many years ago. I think us being in the rural area see the cities and all the pollution they're creating, right? We feel like we get hounded on for what we're doing more so than what goes on in industrial areas in other cities. There's lots of pollution there. I think we're fairly regulated and we abide by the rules. I know I'm environmentally conscious.

Our respondents utilized other elements of the "industrial apocalyptic" strategy, such as the notion that all the trappings of modern life are dependent on fossil fuels and without a viable alternative, those who would advocate for the winding down of fossil fuel use would have us court catastrophe. When asked about the possibility of a post-carbon world, one rural councillor remarked: "You can't just turn the tap off oil and say, 'There's no more oil. Find a different way to power your car. Find a different way to get some of your plastics. Find a different way to run some of the generating plants that you need to produce hydro.'" Similarly, a rural landowner argued: "The bottom line is the world lives on this energy. None of us are immune. Everybody uses it, so we've got to get along and figure out—unless something replaces it, we don't have much choice."

Participants also regularly demonstrated elements of what Schneider et al. (2016) identify as "the hypocrite's trap" (p. 107), a rhetorical strategy that attempts to disarm critics of the fossil fuel industry based on the critic's own consumption of or reliance on those same fossil fuels. As one community volunteer explained:

> So it's this sense of how would you get from here to a place where there was no oil and just that whole sense of betrayal where for somebody who is using what we're producing to actively—to rally, to protest, enact changes against it: David Suzuki with his diesel-burning bus driving across the country telling everybody that fossil fuels are bad. And you go, "That's the problem. It's that hypocriticalness." Nothing—the world runs on oil.

Similarly, a local oil company owner remarked:

> So there's lots of these [environmental] groups that are kind of lobbying or they're sort of lobbyists, but I think they're totally missing the point. I always kind of chuckle—even if it's on Twitter—when you see everybody is in some bay in Vancouver and just up the coast and there's oil tankers going past them—because it's happening right now as we speak—and everybody is sitting in a kayak that's made from petroleum, right?

Finally, participants often displayed what might be classified as a "technological-optimism" frame, a belief that technological advances—particularly those initiated by the oil industry—would render current environmental concerns untenable. Schneider et al. (2016) identify this as the "Technological Shell Game," a "rhetorical process of misdirection that relies on strategic ambiguity about the feasibility, costs and successful implementation of technologies in order to deflect attention from environmental pollution and health concerns" (p. 4). Importantly, Schneider et al. note that this rhetorical device emphasizes the notion that fossil fuel corporations are already at the "frontier" of technological innovation and environmental responsibility (p. 95), making further regulation unnecessary and even detrimental to future innovation.

Similarly, Matz and Renfrew (2015) demonstrate how industry regularly utilizes the frame of modern technology and scientific rigour to promote the environmental cleanliness of industry and legitimize unconventional shale gas development. A small (non-oilfield) business owner described this sentiment:

> The culture is so married to our ability through technology to master nature. Everybody thinks we'll have no problem—we'll geo-engineer our way out of this climate change issue through efficient fracking technology. We'll be able to extract for years and years without really thinking about the fact that we're burning this shit.

There was a fairly uniform consensus that the industry was only getting better and better at reducing its environmental impact. Discussing how both agriculture and oil extraction in the area were progressing in regards to the environment, a volunteer with a local conservation group said, "Our machinery is getting better. And our farming practices with the no-till and whatnot, so we're getting better. Like the oil companies are getting better, we're getting better." Another stated, "I would like to say that, blowing our own horn … that we're doing it on our own, not because we're mandated to." Some respondents believed that current technologies were *already* rendering the oil industry's environmental impact negligible. Discussing the carbon sequestration used for enhanced oil recovery by Cenovus Energy, one administrator for a rural municipality believed the initiative was substantially reducing the amount of carbon the industry produced. "But Cenovus is injecting as much CO_2 into the ground every day as we produce as a province."

The regular use of industry-propagated frames by respondents points to the possibility that obtaining a high degree of social licence may extend beyond merely generating consent for industry operations. Indeed, it appears to influence the way communities make sense of and understand the prevailing energy issues of the day. The intense identification with industry that these communities demonstrate appears to favour the reproduction of industry discourses for understanding energy issues over others. This may be an important consequence of a high degree of social licence that has yet to be fully explored in contemporary research on the subject.

Conclusion

This article probed the unusually high degree of social licence that oil companies enjoy in several Saskatchewan communities. It showed that this level of social licence is the

result of perceived economic dependence, industry's CSR efforts to provide essential services and infrastructure, and regular community engagement efforts to disseminate industry perspectives. As demonstrated by interviews, an intense "psychological identification" with industry exists, where community members perceive their interests as mutually aligned with industry and will actively defend it from both internal and external criticism. Furthermore, community members have appropriated industry-propagated frames as a means to make sense of and understand larger energy-related issues such as climate change and decarbonization. The literature on social licence, with its priority on industry generating varying degrees of consent merely for local operations, seems inadequate to accurately capture the dynamic at play in these communities.

Perspectives that focus on the ideological construction of consent offer a more precise theoretical lens to comprehend the complex engagement with industry in these communities. For example, literature in rural sociology emphasizes the efforts of elites and community members in constructing and enforcing a community economic identity centred on industry. Furthermore, Gramscian notions of hegemony and common sense help to explain how study participants could not imagine a future devoid of fossil fuels in some shape or form, and therefore saw any possible alternatives as hopelessly and naïvely utopian. Such a closure of imagination and a constriction of political expression threatens the very nature of democracy. To the extent that questioning dominant discourses has been successfully stifled, oil-producing societies, and the planet, have become less healthy.

Besides contributing to the literature on social licence, this study has important implications for policy and activist communities. It found a significant gap between the views of people on the ground in oil-producing communities and wider environmental and policy discourses (centred primarily in urban areas) on carbon pricing and climate change. If policymakers and activists wish to engage rural oil-producing communities, they may have more luck connecting on issues of land, health, and social impacts of the oil industry rather than on the issue of climate change. Furthermore, this research suggests the urgent need to articulate a concrete vision of an alternative green economy for rural Saskatchewan. Without such a concrete vision, rural communities will continue to side with industry when faced with the choice between unrealized green plans from politicians and urban environmentalists versus the everyday material benefits that the oil industry delivers.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. In 2005, Saskatchewan's accommodation and food services sector employed 45 temporary foreign workers (TFWs) but by 2012 that number was 2,300, making that sector the largest employer of TFWs

in the province (Stevens, 2014). In the summer of 2014, the average rental price for a two-bedroom apartment in the city of Estevan, in the heart of Saskatchewan's oil patch, was $1,275 per month, more than the average price for similar accommodation in Vancouver, Calgary, and Toronto (Simes, 2014).

2. Anonymous donations or otherwise unverifiable contributions by industry make it impossible to identify all contributions. Furthermore, interviewees pointed to numerous personal donations made by the owners of oilfield companies that are not listed in our sample.

3. Industry contributions to oil-producing communities included in the tables were primarily obtained from the Weyburn Review, the Oxbow Herald, and the Kindersley Clarion between January 2007 and January 2016. Further contributions were identified from media releases and newsletters from Canadian Natural Resources Limited, Crescent Point Energy, Enbridge, Cenovus Energy, and the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers.

4. We observed this targeted philanthropy to fire and emergency services not only in our named communities, but also throughout the oil-producing regions of Saskatchewan. Similarly, Ellis, Theodori, Petrzelka, and Jackson-Smith (2015) observe in their study of the Eagle Ford oil-shale play in Texas that industry representatives regularly prioritize engagement and philanthropy to emergency responders.

5. Following Entman (1993) we understand "frames" as schemas that media provide to audiences for interpreting events. "To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation" (p. 52).

6. Schneider et al. (2016) study the rhetorical strategies of the coal industry, but observe that coal's strategy may "foreshadow rhetorical strategies of other [fossil fuel] industries, particularly those who are coming up against environmental opposition as well as legal and social pressure to measure the costs of externalities as they negotiate significant economic and cultural shifts in the age of climate change" (p. 5).

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