

**The Brand of Sustainability:**  
**Exploring the role of oil and gas communication strategies in**  
**influencing public opinion and government policy**  
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Alberta's stewardship of the bit-sands is unfolding largely as a discourse in place branding, a high-stakes, international PR battle to convince the world that the province is a worthy supplier of oil (...) Alberta didn't have the chance to grow its own sense of place, its own identity. We are no longer building a culture as a place, and identity, but as an economic opportunity. (Takach, 2016, p. 152)

The implementation of branding strategies into an organization's communication tactics can be a functional way to create a lasting impression on publics and stakeholders while building meaningful relationships. A brand "evokes emotional connections to specific images and stimulates loyalty among target audiences. Brands are complex concepts comprised of a multifaceted combination of tangibles, such as a logo, and intangibles, such as emotional attachments" (Marland, 2016, p. 36). The oil and gas industry has long been an area of polarizing opinions, from the business operations side to environmental advocates and government regulations. The shift by oil and gas companies towards a new, more green way of operating is being achieved through communication of the brand of sustainability (Generation Energy Council, 2018, p. 2).

The sustainability brand occurs at the federal, provincial and organizational levels and includes renewable energy alternatives, adherence to policies and regulations, technology and supply chain improvements. Canada's reputation as an environmental leader is tied to its

participation in the Paris Agreement and the federal and provincial policies such as the Pan-Canadian Framework on Clean Growth and Climate Change (Generation Energy Council, 2018, p. 5). Additionally, Canada's relationship with the energy industry in its entirety informs its global environmental reputation. Public opinion surrounding this industry is under the impression that oil is not sustainable and is damaging to the environment, therefore changes must be made in terms of policy reform, regulatory adjustments, and advocacy of clean energy technologies in order to shift perceptions (Bagheri et al., 2018, p. 708). Support from the government and lobby groups is also encouraged for lasting implementation. In this paper, I argue that oil and gas reputation management is shaped through the brand of sustainability, executed through communication strategies and information subsidies created by each organization, along with adherence to policy changes and environmental regulations in order to improve and maintain public opinion in Canada.

### **Review of the Literature**

The review of current literature focuses on oil and gas sector brand reputation in terms of public perception and government intercession, as well as sustainability measures taken in order to positively affect opinions as communicated strategically through information subsidies. This research is organized thematically in order to provide a logical exploration of past and present actions in order to accurately premise and predict future behaviour.

Bagheri, Guevara, Alikarami, Kennedy and Doluweera (2018) explore the role of government actions via policy implementation, reforms, targeted public expenditure strategies and improved regulations to encourage "green growth", which describes "a path of economic growth that utilizes natural resources in a sustainable manner" (p. 708). In prioritizing economic development with environmental protection, the Canadian government can utilize an energy

input-output analysis to measure the effects of clean energy efforts while meeting emission reduction targets. The reason for these actions is to improve “the energy efficiency of supply chains” which will help tackle “climate change, but it will also make the country’s production more cost competitive, thereby accelerating the country’s transition to a green economy” (Bagheri et al., 2018, p. 719). This document supports the role of oil and gas communications strategies in affecting government policy and public opinion by showing how Canada can hold up their part of the Paris Agreement, as well as support the oil and gas industry in adapting to the changing attitudes towards fossil fuels and their effects on the environment and the economy as perceived by publics.

Bougette and Charlier (2015) discuss the implications of the energy transition towards promoting renewable energy production through public policies. According to the article, these policies “can generate trade frictions” (p. 407), which can cause pushback on the government’s ability to enact these changes with domestic interests in mind. Trade is an important aspect of any nation’s economy, therefore the policies presented for the energy sector need to consider the national and international reaction. Renewable energy industries are important alternatives that have emerged to “address the challenges of global warming, air pollution, and energy supply diversification” (Bougette & Charlier, 2015, p. 407). This document supports the role of oil and gas communications strategies in affecting government policy and public opinion by discussing the ways policies affect the clean energy transition and how that can be mediated through the positive environmental results.

Mishra (2020) explores the opportunity for Canada’s clean energy sector to uplift the depressed economy due to Covid-19 through sustainability practices and industry expansion. The estimated budgetary deficit of \$252.1 billion for the year 2020-21 (Mishra, 2020) was caused by

sweeping job losses, economic stagnation, and the need for government assistance across almost all sectors. The author discussed oil's future outlook in terms of the shift away from fossil fuels as climate change and environmental stewardship become bigger issues on a global scale, therefore "the Canadian government needs to structurally steer the economy away from its carbon-intensive energy sector and take the opportunity to push for a green recovery from Covid-19's economic crisis" (Mishra, 2020). This article supports the role of oil and gas communications strategies in affecting government policy and public opinion by suggesting that the oil and gas industry can successfully transition to a more sustainable future with the help of government policies on the federal and provincial levels in order to mediate the economic deficit, ensure strategic financial plans are in place and create long-term jobs for the future.

### **Critical Analysis of Current Oil and Gas Brand Management**

The Canadian oil and gas industry engages in reputation management by presenting the brand of sustainability to publics and stakeholders through advancements in clean energy technology which "address contemporary environmental challenges such as global warming and air pollution that stem from the current reliance of the energy system on fossil fuels" (Malen & Marcus, 2017, p. 7). These actions, along with the importance placed on these sustainable advancements, creates a response by governments to implement policy measures on behalf of the oil and gas industry. Examples of policy responses include "the provision of subsidies for clean energy research and development and the creation of market demand for such technologies through the use of such policy mechanisms as feed-in-tariffs and renewable portfolio standards" (p. 8). Government action in conjunction with energy sector advancements is crucial in brand reputation management and shaping public opinion by presenting consistent key messages to stakeholders.

The study by Malen and Marcus determined that new clean energy technology is more likely to be accepted in locations where the government promotes development of that technology along with market opportunities through supportive policy (p. 14). Results of the study highlighted “the role of policy in creating local economic ‘wins’ that are essential to maintaining public support for government action promoting clean energy” (p. 14). In these ways, the brand of sustainability is achieved by the oil and gas sector through a shift towards clean energy technologies with support from local governments.

Another way oil and gas industry reputation management is executed is through communication strategies and information subsidies created by each organization. This public reporting includes annual reports, media releases, press conferences, seminars and various other reports to publics and stakeholders. The purpose of public reporting via information subsidies is to “convey information to the public on the agency’s stewardship of its mission and its use of taxpayer funds” (Lee, Neeley & Stewart, 2012, p. 16). The business plan presented by the Minister of Energy (2019) is an information subsidy example and provides a detailed description of prospective programs and initiatives to be presented from 2019 to 2023 in Alberta (Minister of Energy, 2019, p. 61). This document supports the role of oil and gas communications strategies in affecting government policy and public opinion by providing a list of ministry outcomes that include key objectives, initiatives to support those objectives and performance metrics so the public can gauge how successful these initiatives were. The Minister of Energy created communication between the energy sector in Alberta and publics in order to show the steps being taken to improve the future for the province and its citizens.

The Generation Energy Council (2018) provides a communication tactic that can be used by the oil and gas industry to create positive public opinion regarding the state of the Canadian

energy future. The information subsidy was called Generation Energy and was “an open and inclusive nation-wide dialogue with stakeholders, experts and individual Canadians to envision what a low-carbon energy future would look like for Canada over the course of a generation” (Generation Energy Council, 2018, p. 2). Generation Energy pledged to follow the commitments of the Paris Agreement and the Pan-Canadian Framework on Clean Growth and Climate Change. It also outlined a timeline to follow that included policies and changes towards sustainability, efficiency and emissions reductions. The Generation Energy Council created five principles “to transition to a low-carbon energy system” which included “responsibility, sustainability, prosperity, collaboration, and inclusivity” (p. 12). This document supports the role of oil and gas communications strategies in affecting government policy and public opinion by discussing the efforts being made on behalf of the industry, the commitments in place to ensure compliance (i.e. the Paris Agreement and the Pan-Canadian Framework) and the actualization of Canada’s competitive advantage through new clean energy technologies that will make the nation “leaders in energy transition” (p. 45).

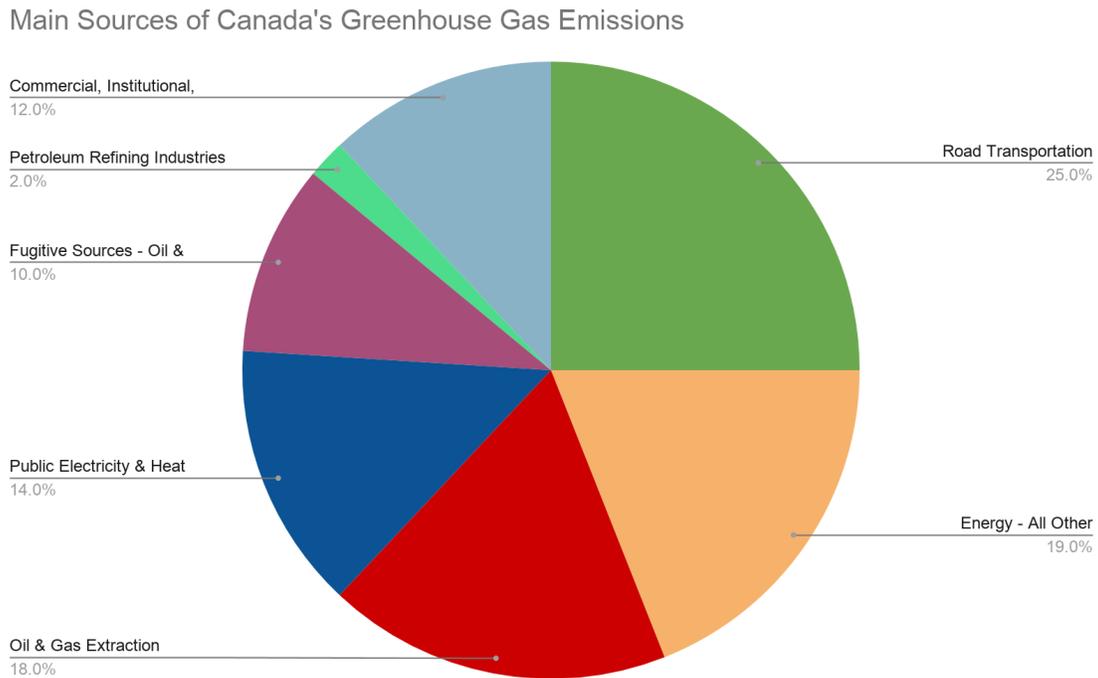
The Government of Alberta (2018) provided a press release outlining the action taken at the time to improve the province’s oil value by moving it by rail “as part of a made-in-Alberta strategy to keep more value from our resources” in response to Canada’s “decades-long failure to build new pipelines” (Government of Alberta, 2018). This press release supports the role of oil and gas communications strategies in affecting government policy and public opinion by outlining the steps being taken by the province to increase the value of local oil revenue while continuing “to address the energy price differential crisis with its made-in-Alberta strategy that adds value through more upgrading here at home, creating thousands of jobs and attracting billions of dollars in new private investment” (Government of Alberta, 2018). This document

positively frames the provincial government's efforts to make a better reality for citizens, thereby positioning themselves towards improved public opinion based on the measures of oil by rail.

### Discussion

The brand of sustainability is supported by reports and statistics outlining the actual sources of environmental concerns. In accurately addressing where things like greenhouse gas emissions originate from, the oil and gas industry creates open, two-way communication between the organization, publics and stakeholders that encourages discussion via acknowledgement and the search for solutions.

**Figure One: Main Sources of Canada's Greenhouse Gas Emissions**



According to MacArthur et al. (2020), the main source of greenhouse gas emissions in Canada (see Figure One above) is road transportation at 25 per cent, followed by energy at 19 per cent and oil and gas extraction at 18 per cent (p. 2). Canada ranks among the top 10 global greenhouse gas emitters, due in part to a 158 per cent increase in bitumen extraction and synthetic crude oil from the oil sands (p. 4). A shift towards more renewable energy is important because “it can mitigate climate change and contribute to transformative societal change” (p. 3). The goal of a cleaner oil and gas industry can be achieved through public confidence, driving innovation, skill and talent attraction and development, competitive business environment and government policy and regulations (Generation Energy Council, 2018, p. 40).

An example of government policy implementation that could support the brand of sustainability in the Canadian energy sector would be accelerating investment in clean energy solutions to create jobs. The oil and gas sector in Canada accounts for 26 per cent of total emissions while receiving \$2.8 billion per year in federal and provincial subsidies (Mishra, 2020). The International Energy Agency has “suggested that the recent drop in oil prices creates a great opportunity to lower or remove subsidies for fossil fuel consumption” (Mishra, 2020), and in doing so, the federal and provincial governments could use the money saved and revenue from carbon pricing to “scale up production and infrastructure for electric vehicles, increase electricity supplied by renewables and implement robust efficiency measures” (Mishra, 2020). According to a joint study by Efficiency Canada and Clean Energy Canada, government support of initiatives and adoption of measures laid out in the Pan-Canadian Framework would create 118,000 annual jobs in the energy sector and boost GDP by one per cent between 2017 and 2030 (Mishra, 2020).

## Conclusion

This paper discussed how oil and gas reputation management was shaped through the brand of sustainability, executed through communication strategies and information subsidies created by each organization, along with adherence to policy changes and environmental regulations in order to improve and maintain public opinion in Canada. Using Marland's framework, the branding in politics is a valuable tactic in regard to changing perception of reputations and advancing agendas. The Canadian oil and gas industry's master brand is one of sustainability; the sub-brands include economic strength, longevity, job creation, and maintenance and support for the environment; the core message is environmentally-responsible economic growth; the key message themes include job creation and security, positive climate change policies, profit and support for Alberta industry.

The five main oil and gas organizations in Canada include Suncor, CNRL, Cenovus, Husky and Imperial; all of these firms communicate their key messages and sustainability brand through information subsidies like annual reports and climate risk reports. These reports are public statements that discuss how each organization perceives and manages climate risk by "following the recommendations made in 2017 by the Financial Stability Board's Task Force on Climate-related Financial Disclosures" (Hussey, 2020, p. 20). The five leading Canadian oil companies continue to see profits while considering how climate change effects, policies and regulations will affect future assets and business strategies.

Government action in conjunction with clean energy sector advancements are crucial in brand reputation management and shaping public opinion by presenting consistent key messages to stakeholders. In order to maintain the brand of sustainability, it is suggested that oil and gas companies continue to participate in strategic communications with publics and stakeholders via

information subsidies and adherence to government policies and regulations in order to support a stronger economy and an environmentally-friendly future.

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