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Contemporary Publics, Twitter and the Story of PR: Exploring Corporate Interventions to Promote “Clean Coal” in Australia

Kristin Demetrious

Deakin University

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Abstract

Peabody Energy’s *Advanced Energy for Life* (AEFL) comprehensive global public relations (PR) campaign promoted the idea of clean coal. It is part of a series of efforts deployed by the coal industry since the 1980s to influence the public’s willingness to accept or tolerate its processes and products. This paper will develop a greater understanding of how contemporary publics in a 21st century context react when targeted by the global PR industry. Specifically, it looks at the response to the AEFL campaign in Australia and in particular examines Twitter provocations from January 2014 to January 2016. In doing so, this paper contributes to our understanding of how communicative dynamics such as Twitter and PR may affect public debates. This is critical to helping resolve key policy settings around future energy usage and emissions reduction.

Introduction: “The best PR is invisible”

Social critics and public relations (PR) industry insiders agree that the best PR is invisible—meaning that once a campaign’s mechanics are exposed, their power to persuade publics is diluted. For example, consider Peabody Energy’s *Advanced Energy for Life* (AEFL) global awareness-raising campaign extolling the virtues of coal energy for poor people, launched on February 26, 2014. Kate Sheppard, editor in environment and energy for *The Huffington Post*, described the campaign as follows: “To enter the campaign website, readers encounter a drop-in screen that asks them to agree or disagree with the statement, ‘Access to low-cost energy improves our lives’”

**Please send correspondences about this article to Kristin Demetrious, Associate Professor of Communication, Deakin University. E-mail: kristin.demetrious@deakin.edu.au. Copyright Demetrious 2017. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 3.0 United States License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/us/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.*

(2014, March 29, para. 3). Sheppard highlighted that “Peabody’s proposal to solve this crisis [of lack of energy access] was to ask the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to stop setting pollution limits on coal-fired power plants” (para. 4). Sheppard also noted that “Burson-Marsteller, the world’s largest PR firm, and its subsidiary, Proof Integrated Communications, [were] working behind the scenes on Peabody’s PR effort” (para. 5).

In a few short strokes, Sheppard had deftly exposed a clever, high-stakes PR campaign at play in the global public sphere. According to Schneider et al. (2016, p.137), “The piece ricocheted around the climate and progressive blogosphere.” Following this, World Wildlife Fund (WWF) Europe, an environmental NGO, brought a complaint to the UK Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) about the new Peabody advertisement. It claimed that the campaign breached several rules of the advertising code regarding misleading advertising and environmental claims (WWF Global, 2014).

On August 19, 2014, the ASA ruled that clean coal, one of the main campaign *tropes*—a term designed to influence reader interpretation on a deeper connotative level—was untrue (Advertising Standards Authority, 2014). Based on publicly available documents (at the time of writing), the AEFL public awareness campaign aimed to educate and mobilize “world leaders, multi-national organisations, a wide range of institutions and stakeholders, and the general public” in the United States, China, and Australia in support of coal (Peabody Energy, 2014, p.1). Its three objectives were to: 1) show how coal could alleviate “the crisis of global energy poverty,” 2) sway government policy to support “advanced coal technologies,” and 3) promote technologies to further reduce “power plant emissions” (Peabody Energy, 2014, p.1).

The AEFL campaign invoked the tenor and style of advocacy to advance its three objectives. At this time, it also had an optimum level of political support in Australia, coupled with specific attention by Peabody at a meeting of the G20 (group of 20 major economies) in Brisbane. Peabody’s news release announcing the campaign launch pointedly referenced the incoming right-wing Coalition government (led by Prime Minister Tony Abbot) and the dismantling of the carbon tax scheme set up by the previous left-leaning Australian Labor Party (led by Prime Ministers Julia Gillard and Kevin Rudd). The news release further stated that to counter the suffering that had occurred under the county’s outgoing political leadership, the Coalition should be supported in its efforts to “scale back renewable energy targets, drive down electricity costs, restore jobs and strengthen the country’s competitive advantage in the Australasian region” (Peabody Energy, 2014, p. 2).

With the high-profile Australian meeting of the G20 clearly in view, an Australian progressive think tank, The Australia Institute (TAI), published a report entitled *All Talk, No Action*, a forensic examination of the campaign claims and intense scrutiny of the trope energy poverty (Campbell, Amos & Scarlett, 2014). According to Readfearn (2014a, p.1), the report found “that the industry’s claims are largely misrepresenting the current economic climate and forecasts for the future.” At the time, a major coal development proposed for Queensland, the Adani Mining Project, was being vigorously opposed in Australia due to a raft of environmental concerns, including concerns for the health of the Great Barrier Reef marine park (Barlow & Smail, 2014). Therefore, a number of

critical provocations had potential to influence the campaign's reception and trajectory despite the very specific social and political agenda to create an appetite for coal in the Australian context.

The history of industry PR campaigns

These types of PR campaigns are not new. According to Hudson (2017), "Support for coal's bright future stretches back almost 40 years" (para. 4). Social critics have paid considerable attention to the production of U.S. public relations over the years. Much of this commentary has focused on highly-resourced large-scale campaigns characterized by dubious ethics with ensuing harmful social, political, and environmental effects (Stauber & Rampton, 1995; Beder, 1997; Burton, 2007; Oreskes, & Conway, 2010; Demetrious, 2013).

Since its launch in 2014, several studies of the AEFL campaign have appeared with similar concerns over ethics and harmful effects. Smith (2015, p. 22) discussed the trope of clean coal in the AEFL campaign as a coal industry strategy "to persuade the public that *coal* can be *clean*." He linked this specifically to the PR tactic of greenwashing products and processes to deflect attention from their harmful environmental impacts. He also considered the AEFL campaign in terms of its underlying class-based and colonialist orientation to make impoverished countries "more like ours by supporting coal" (p. 24). Schneider, Schwarze, Bsumek, & Peebles's (2016) study of coal industry rhetoric and neoliberalism included an investigation into the AEFL campaign in the Australian context and focused on the campaign narrative structure and the rhetorical power of the key notion, *energy utopia*.

Less explored, however, is the AEFL campaign's reception by Australian contemporary publics as it played out on social media forums such as Twitter. According to Panagiotopoulos, Bigdeli, and Sams:

Amongst the whole range of social media applications, Twitter provides an immediate and flexible tool to disseminate information and communicate through brief public messages. As such, it has been used in the public sector to reach new audiences, build relationships with citizens and other stakeholders, as well as broadcast and share information across networks. (2014, p. 349)

Revers (2015) argues that Twitter is the social media platform most embraced by journalism. He suggests that Twitter is afforded a higher level of legitimacy as both a news source and forum for public debate than other social media sites like Facebook or Instagram. Therefore, research on the reception of the campaign in the Australian context with a focus on the micro-blogging site Twitter addresses a critical omission in the literature that overlooks the changed communicative conditions and the potential effects on reception.

Analyzed with digital research methods, the transnational AEFL campaign is explored as an example of neoliberalist capitalism. Urry defines neoliberalism as the nation state's declining importance together with the development of global trading markets (Urry, in Beck and Willms, 2004, p.7). The research pays particular attention to its 21st century settings and the changing ways in which global PR is conceptualized, produced, and received by contemporary publics. Marshall defines "contemporary publics" as "complex immaterial entities that can attach and detach from

territories, technologies, spaces, and practices” (2016, p.10). In the discussion, I also analyze the Twitter activity in relation to three key events as the campaign public debate developed.

Risk producing PR

The selection of the AEFL neoliberal capitalist PR campaign to promote coal production in the face of heated debate about its place in a low-carbon emission economy takes on greater significance if understood in relation to Ulrich Beck’s risk society thesis. Beck describes the notion of risk as a phenomenon in advanced capitalist society where “the social production of *wealth* is systematically accompanied by the social production of *risks*” (1992, p.19).

Based on this premise, the logic of capitalism changes. Gone is the simple, naïve belief that more and more industrial production equates to progress. Instead, the logic shifts to the externalities and production of risks entailed by this and how these risks are identified, negotiated, and mitigated. In this scenario, there will be a gamut of new developments. For example, we would expect to see a rise in what Beck terms *bottom-up politics*, in which more activists, lay people, and civil groups find a legitimate place in the public conversation. These renegotiated social arrangements in advanced modernity advantage some people and groups by providing many more lifestyle choices around education and employment, for example. However, Beck points out that not everyone is better off. In these conditions, some have less choice and these people and groups may identify with the more familiar social conditions and arrangements for work and economy that existed in the past (1994).

Today, contemporary publics participate in the production, consumption, and distribution of media on many fronts, including workplaces and in domestic environments. They move in and between various media platforms on mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets. Bearing this in mind, contemporary publics are unlike their counterparts in the 20th century who sat at a distance from media production and were generally considered passive and unlikely to influence corporate agendas. As such, neoliberalist PR in risk society dynamically intersects with changed media structures and practices, along with the logic of capitalism, as it seeks to engage with contemporary publics.

In these social conditions, an examination of contemporary publics generating a counterview to the AEFL campaign and/or promoting renewable energy and sustainability themes provides an indication of the social dynamics affecting debate around future social, economic, and political policy. Beck’s thesis also lends weight to the critical importance of power relations and disparities in environmental communicative issues raised by Smith (2015) and Schneider et al. (2016). These ideas position the AEFL campaign centrally within the contemporary context of carbon dioxide emission reductions, arguably one of the most complex and critical public debates of the 21st century.

Mediatization, PR culture, and storytelling

The theory of mediatization offers an important theoretical adjunct to Beck's risk society theory by positing that the media are no longer a separate or independent institution in 21st century society; rather they are broadly diffused throughout their many sectors. Thus, increasingly, a media logic is embedded and dominates thinking and action in society, something especially relevant to individuals and organizations with access to Web 2.0 through social media accounts like Twitter. Hjarvard (2008, p. 107) defines media logic as the adoption of a set of ideas and interactions that conform to news industry values and "a formatting logic that determines how material is categorized, the choice of mode of presentation, and the selection and portrayal of social experience in the media." In other words, a general PR culture has been absorbed as a functional staple business of state, business, and community institutions, as well as individuals and groups.

One of the impacts of mediatization is the establishment of new narrative forms and institutional storytelling. Burgess, Klæbe, and McWilliam (2010) discuss this in relation to the creation of public memory in museums and the co-creation of knowledge through transmedia digital storytelling around, for example, political events such as the Australian government's apology to indigenous Australians. They argue that because stories are so central to the media logic, this idea of narrative is being inter-woven into commercial and official language. The idea of political hegemony wrapped up as storytelling within new digital social geographies thus becomes central to understanding how the neoliberal project is working within different logics, modalities, and discourses in contemporary society (Burgess et al., 2010; Lundby 2009).

Contemporary public resistance to the interweaving of stories and narrative into neoliberal business communication that has a strong political purpose, and the notion of counter-hegemony, is also relevant. Fairclough (1999) argues that when subjects, like the Twitter-using contemporary publics in this research, try to hijack or overturn dominant meanings that are invested with ideology and social contradiction, this activity can be defined as the site of hegemonic struggle which contributes to the change process in often creative and adaptive ways. Exploring this adaptive resistance within these conditions could shed light on influential but uncharted cultural dynamics determining social and political directions.

Methodology

I accessed Twitter data for this research through Tracking Infrastructure for Social Media Analysis (TrISMA). TrISMA is a cross-institutional project funded through an Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage, Infrastructure, Equipment and Facilities (LEIF) grant that establishes a powerful new framework for tracking, storing, and processing the public social media communication activities of Australian users at very large scale and in close to real time (TrISMA, 2016). I curated these data to incorporate all Australian-based Twitter accounts active in 2016, retrieving archival activity from 2008 and extending through activity in 2017, the time of this research.

The final analyses drew on a 2016 TrISMA dataset of the Australian Twittersphere. Given the campaign's launch date of February 26, 2014, and active profile over 2015, Twitter data analyzed were across a two-year period from January 1, 2014, to January 1, 2016. I searched the database using regular expressions to retrieve all content that mentioned the key terms listed between the timeframe of analysis. To assist me with the data collection, I worked with Alexia Maddox, a digital sociologist with expertise in this area.

Although all information used for this study is in the public domain, as part of my ethical approach to digital data collection I chose not to identify some account holders. Therefore, generally I de-identified Twitter account screen names or handles and replaced some words within the tweets to impede searchability. The exception to this was high-profile individuals experienced in public debates, such as news commentators, politicians, or NGOs.

From this data set, the research sought to understand how the Australian public engaged with the AEFL campaign. As discussed, of all available social media Twitter provides a high level of legitimacy, flexibility, and connectivity to facilitate public discussion (Revers, 2015; Panagiotopoulos et al., 2014). In the Australian context, Grant, Moon, and Busby (2010, p. 599) argue that "Twitter is becoming, ever more, the political space...in which ideas, issues and policies are first announced, discussed, debated and framed." In addition, they put forward that the value of Twitter for research purposes is that it "allows a deep understanding of who people are talking to, what they are reading and what they are passing on in the online world" (Grant et al., 2010, p. 597).

This research sought to understand how contemporary publics in Australia reacted to the US-based AEFL campaign from its launch. Specifically, it asked:

1. If and how key campaign tropes *clean coal* and *energy poverty* gained traction with contemporary publics over this period?
2. What peak events were evident on Twitter over this time and which of these were the most significant?

I searched Twitter data using the keyword *coal* to bring up all related discussions during the period of analysis (Figure 1). It is noted that a limitation of the search term *coal* was that it picked up tweets that included words like *coalition*. This focus on *coal* as a search term was supported by limited results returned by reaching for other keywords (*advanced energy for life*, *peabody*) and hashtags (*#AEFL*, *#cleancoal*, *#energypoverity*). It also should be noted that Figure 1 presents tweet

data by the hour (this is suitable when exporting transcripts as it keeps the tweets in order of production). However, Figure 2 presents tweets by month summaries, which is suitable for a summative overview. The graphic in Appendix A also presents tweets by month summaries for comparative purposes.

I benchmarked the data to a larger set spanning from 2014 to 2017 to discern longer patterns and trends in the Twitter discussion using the search term clean coal. As per Figure 2, there is very limited Twitter engagement with the trope during the period of the campaign. However, this contrasts with the high level of engagement evidenced in 2017. I profiled the data using the software program Tableau and select periods of time were targeted either due to high levels of engagement or key events in the campaign.

Hence, I profiled three periods of engagement, referred to here as events. They include:

- Event 1: August 18, 2014 (421 tweets). This event is themed around the Australian Broadcasting Company's (ABC) Four Corners report entitled *Battle for the Reef* (Wilkinson & Russell, 2014, August 18) in which AEFL tropes were used by a key Australian politician and Environment Minister Greg Hunt MP.
- Event 2: November 2014 (344-318 tweets). This period includes the Brisbane meeting of the G20 at which Peabody Energy makes representations. It also includes the release of the TAI report, *All Talk and No Action*, which analyzed the veracity of the AEFL campaign claims.
- Event 3: June 15, 2015 (3,484 tweets). This event is themed around an ABC Four Corners report, *The End of Coal* (Thompson & Richards, 2015, June 16), which explored the demise of the coal industry in Australia in light of the need to lower carbon dioxide emissions.

To understand the content and tenor of the discussion during these events, I accessed full transcripts of tweets produced for these dates for cross-checking. This not only enabled a more nuanced understanding of the discussion, but also provided the opportunity to understand the momentum of the debate as it was propelled by hashtags.

In addition, I researched digital news records and other sources like reports and media releases to develop a detailed chronology of the AEFL campaign over the period under review. This provided a timeline of events against which to compare and contrast the peaks of engagement profiled on Twitter. Without calibrating the Twitter data to the campaign chronology, there was a risk of interpreting the peaks and troughs in the Twitter data as reflective of how the campaign played out in the public sphere. While at times they may correlate, the alignments are not immediate and can have a longer period of emergence. An example is the UK Advertising Standards Authority (AKA) ruling on the use of the trope clean coal, which although highly significant did not have an immediate engagement response in Twitter.

Analysis: Advanced Energy for Life: disinformation and political pressure

Peabody Energy's AEFL campaign aimed to take a moral high ground by claiming clean coal is key to ending the energy poverty crisis in developing countries. In line with this, the AEFL campaign targeting Australia focused on two dominant tropes: energy poverty and clean coal. The research finds that neither of these terms was productive with contemporary publics within the Twittersphere. Instead, what is seen over the period of two years on Australian Twitter is relatively negative public opinion which ridicules and dismisses the campaign as unethical PR industry spin or accuses it of being akin to the PR efforts of big tobacco.

RT @Twitterparticipant1: Big Coal hasn't given up yet. New PR campaign relies on “disinformation and political pressure” to push fossil fuels

RT @Twitterparticipant2: The PR company running the coal lobby's “energy poverty” campaign is the same one that worked for tobacco companies

(Event 2: November 2014)

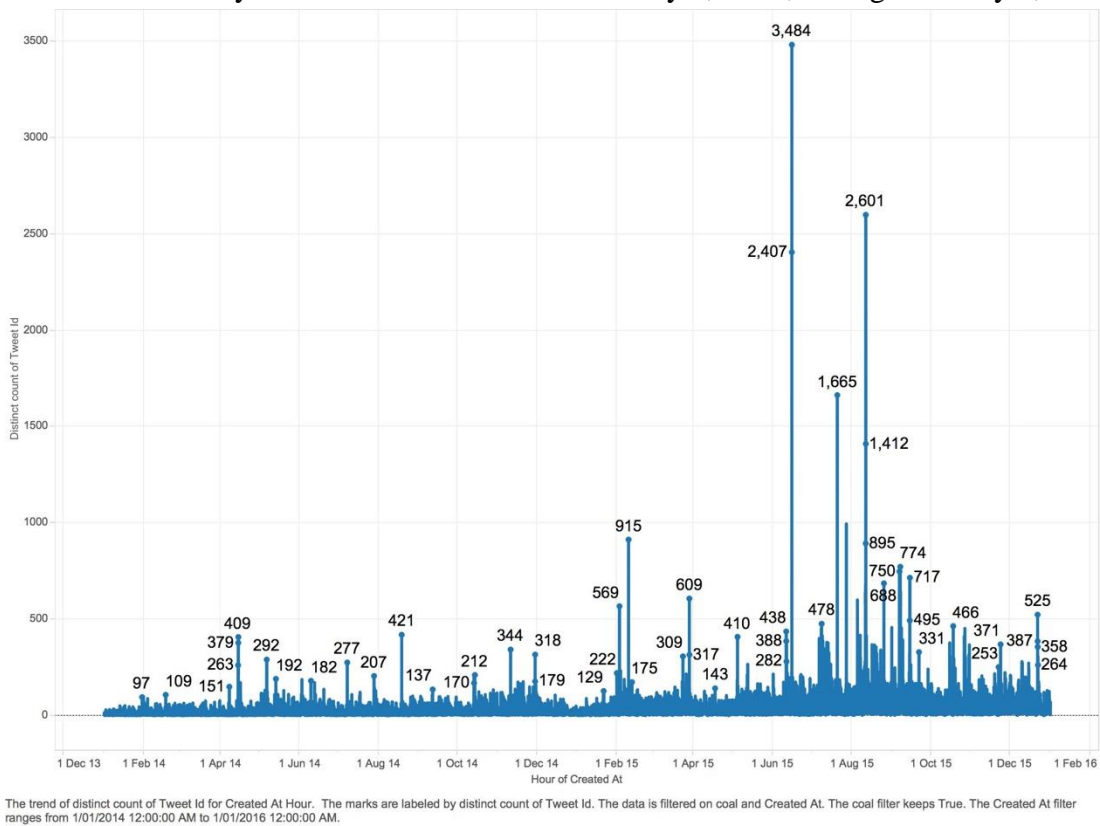
Such negative sentiments, however, need to be understood in the context of the UK ASA ruling and other international exposes of the AEFL campaign—such as the Kate Sheppard piece in *The Huffington Post* on March 29, 2014, shortly after the campaign's launch. The campaign, if evaluated on the basis of increased support for ending energy poverty and using clean coal, did not gain traction with the Australian public overall in the period from 2014 to 2016. I identified three events over the timeline for investigation.

Event 1: Battle for the Reef

Event 1 focused on the nature and count of Twitter activity on August 18, 2014 (421 tweets), the highest spike of the year. Most of the activity on Twitter containing the word coal was related to Federal Environment Minister Greg Hunt's comments made in defense of an approval granted to expand the Abbot Point coal port for the Adani Coal Mine in Queensland. This approval allowed three million cubic meters of dredge spoil to be dumped inside the Great Barrier Reef marine park. During reporters Marian Wilkinson and Ali Russell's *Battle for the Reef* program, Hunt reiterated the general AEFL trope *energy poverty* in slightly different words by saying:

Our task now is to ensure that the breakthroughs in technology and the reduction in emissions, which can be done through better technology, occurs. But if you're asking us to stop 100 million people in India having for the first-time electrification or having significantly extended electricity—the great goal of bringing humanity out of deep, grinding poverty—we're not: a) able to stop that as a country and b) we shouldn't be condemning people to poverty (Wilkinson & Russell, 2014).

Figure 1. Tweet count by hour for the term “coal”: January 1, 2014, through January 1, 2016



This local and contested environmental issue was seen as crucial for the health and future of Australia’s Great Barrier Reef. Hunt’s comments generated pessimistic and contemptuous responses on Twitter, such as:

RT @Twitterparticipant3: Wait, did Greg Hunt just claim that we need to dig up coal; destroy our Reef, all to resolve global poverty? #4corners ... RT

@Twitterparticipant4: Oh wow. Greg Hunt turning coal into saving some of humanity from poverty. Does he even hear himself? #4corn...

(Event 1: August 18, 2014)

Somewhat surprisingly, there was minimal immediate reaction to the UK’s ASA decision, with no engagement spike around the day of its release. The ASA decision “told Peabody Energy that it can no longer freely dangle its ‘clean coal’ mythology in front of consumers without explaining itself” (Readfearn, 2014b, p.1). Notwithstanding, the chronology shows that that this ASA ruling was an important counterpoint to the AEFL campaign claims over the longer term.

Event 2: G20 Brisbane Summit

Further data retrieved revealed the power of independent organizations and quality local media investigating environmental affairs in gaining attention and credibility with the Australian Twitter-using public. This was illustrated in Event 2. An analysis of tweets around the G20 Brisbane Summit on November 15 and 16, 2014, showed a relatively modest interest of two spikes of 344-318 tweets (Figure 1).

Coinciding with the November meeting of the G20 in Brisbane, TAI released its report, *All Talk, No Action* (Campbell et al., 2014). As discussed, the report subjected the AEFL campaign to intense scrutiny and paid special attention to validity of the trope *energy poverty*. Readfearn wrote that the TAI “has put a looking glass up to the industry’s claims to a glistening future and found what it claims is little more than self-serving industry spin” (2014a, November 12).

Contemporary publics in Twitter at this time actively referenced the authority of TAI and its report, echoing skepticism of coal industry rhetoric in their tweets:

RT @Twitterparticipant5: how #coal PR on energy poverty is, just PR... a look at the rhetoric v. reality from @TheAusInstitute

RT @Twitterparticipant6: The Australia Institute says #coal industry doing almost nothing to ease “energy poverty”

(Event 2: November 2014)

The traction this report gained overall in the Twitter discussion demonstrates the relevance and power of sub-political shifts in legitimacy discussed by Beck (1992). TAI, operating outside government and business, successfully established itself as a trustworthy source of key information and counterpoint to the AEFL. The fact that it carried weight in the discussion can be seen in the measure of contemporary publics’ reactions—which showed indifference to the AEFL campaign except when it was exposed as spin (as was the case in Event 1).

Event 3: The End of Coal

The Twitter reactions to two media provocations aired on ABC in 2015 were comparatively more significant than the reaction to Event 2. The first media event was a discussion panel forum, *Spills, Bills, Coal & Kills*, which aired February 9, 2015. The second media event was a Four Corners documentary, *The End of Coal*, broadcast June 15, 2015. Both programs enlisted a hashtag to engage with Twitter audiences. For comparison, a spike of 3,484 tweets responded to Event 3, an expose of coal by Four Corners June 15, 2015, as opposed to only 344 and 318 Tweets during Event 2.

The significance of this comparison between Events 2 and 3 comes in light of the considerable resources and focus directed at the G20 and Australian context by Peabody Energy to further naturalize its tropes and gain hegemonic acceptance. According to Readfearn (2014c, p.1), in *The*

Guardian, “The G20’s Energy Sustainability Working Group held a meeting in Brisbane which included a day-long workshop on ‘energy access.’ Charles Meintjes, the president of Peabody’s operations in Australia, gave a presentation at the meeting which included many of the Advanced Energy for Life’s talking points...Meintjes’ presentation told the workshop that 3.5 billion people live without adequate access to electricity.”

Results

Overall, the data revealed that despite these spikes in tweeting activity, the discussion of coal was a relatively small part of the public conversation (see Appendix A). However, it should be noted that on the whole this does not evidence a lack of interest in coal and energy production issues in the Australian public sphere. By 2017, clean coal develops a significantly higher peak in Twitter use (see Figure 2). While the research does not specifically focus on the events triggering this Twitter spike, an examination of Twitter transcripts over the peak during February 15 to 25, suggests that the spike may be related to the use of the campaign trope *clean coal* being invoked cynically in ways similar to the three Twitter periods under review.

Arguably, the intense focus by contemporary publics and the pressure and resistance around the trope *clean coal* during this period is significant for a number of reasons. First, the term *clean coal* is an enduring site of hegemonic struggle that has become highly volatile on Twitter because of its potential to sustain or restructure power relations around energy policy. Second, contemporary publics using Twitter recognize this and are actively attempting to reframe and reproduce the reframed meaning of the trope. For example:

RT @ Twitterparticipant7: “Clean coal” is a PR term. It has been described as 'Orwellian' an oxymoron and a myth. In Aus, we call it bullshit....

RT @ Twitterparticipant8: Arguing#Coal Can Be #Clean Is Like Saying #Smoking Can Be #Healthy

Lastly, the overall high usage of *clean coal* on Twitter in 2017 suggests that contemporary publics understand the term’s political potential to affect the way people are positioned in the ideological debates over energy. By revealing the contradictions and making visible the institutional and ideological provenance of clean coal and relationships in the Australian setting, contemporary publics are working to neutralize its potential effects and delegitimize its power (see Fairclough, 1999).

Contemporary publics and Twitter: sticky stories

The mediatization proposition that stories and narrative are a central defining element of 21st century media logic is amply evidenced in the AEFL campaign (Burgess et al., 2010). Hence, it is possible to explore the campaign to gain a greater understanding of how the neoliberal project is conceptualizing and structuring its PR operations in transmedia settings. AEFL's trope to promote coal production to end energy poverty was adopted by a number of high-level politicians over the period. This includes Environmental Minister Greg Hunt and Prime Minister Tony Abbott when he said that "coal is good for humanity" (Massola, Ker & Cox 2014, p.1).

Nonetheless, according to Schneider et al. (2016, p. 178), rhetoric and references to "energy utopia" in the campaign suggest "a potential point of vulnerability in the neoliberal-project." They argue that the exposure "draws attention to the fact that market forces have not adequately accounted for the environmental and social costs of coal. Given this track record, industry advocates scramble to find alternative rhetorical appeals to suture neoliberalism's contradictions" (Schneider et al., 2016, p. 178).

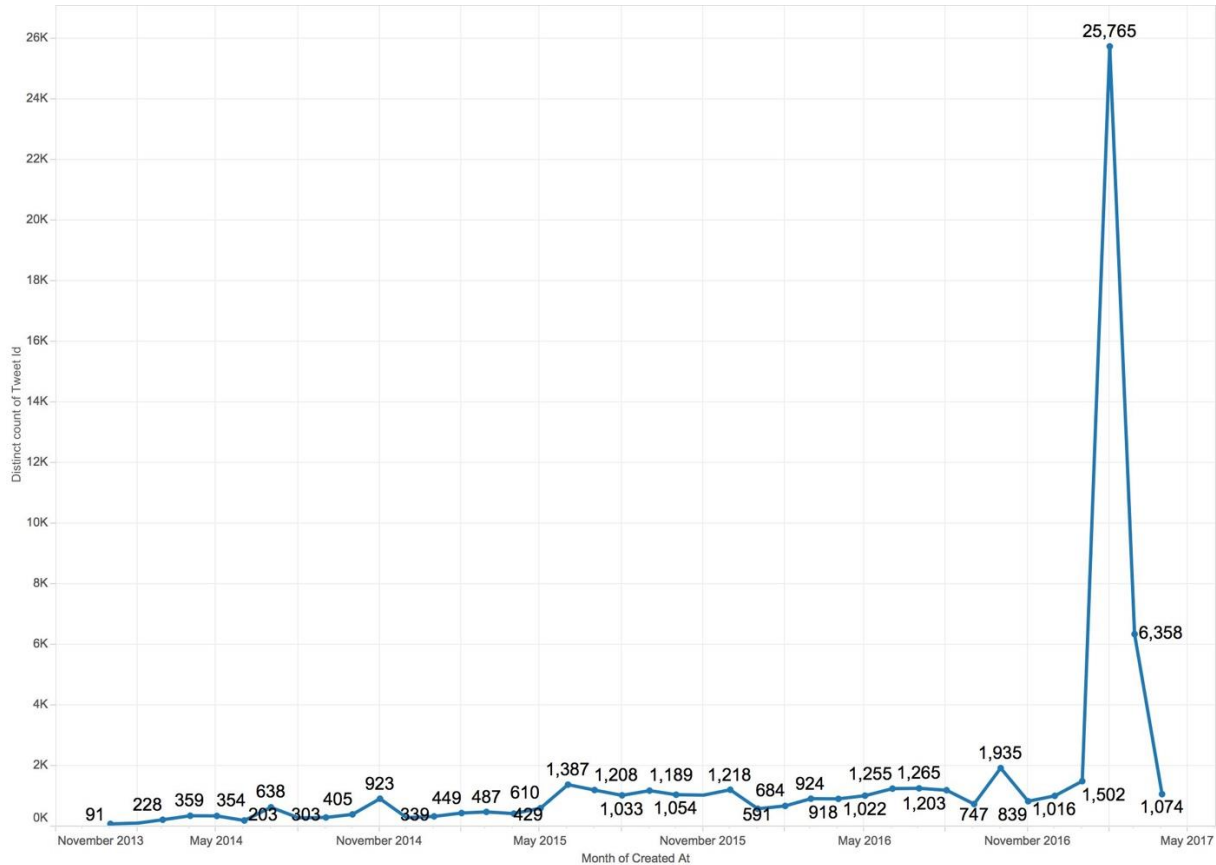
This research found that points such as these were consistently raised in the public discussion and typically illustrated by tweets such as:

RT @Twitterparticipant9 @PeabodyEnergy going on offense, pushing "clean #coal" on world's poor w disingenuous PR campaign

(Event 1: August 18, 2014)

In accord with the ideas of Burgess et al. (2010), there is evidence of a strong emphasis on storytelling in the high stakes and politically-motivated AEFL campaign. The colonization of discourse through the power of the trope *energy poverty* lies in its connotations of human virtue and struggle, faith, and inspiration to achieve a better future, as well as the underlying colonialist assumption of "mankind" doing good for impoverished countries by "making them more like ours" (Smith, 2015, p. 22). Peabody's PR design to engage support for coal production by invoking the grand story of human struggle in overcoming poverty suggests a complex campaign framework to suit contemporary publics in mediatized conditions.

Figure 2. Baseline of “clean coal” discussion over entire time of data collection in TrISMA for comparison purposes



The trend of distinct count of Tweet Id for Created At Month. The marks are labeled by distinct count of Tweet Id. The data is filtered on clean coal and Created At Month. The clean coal filter keeps True. The Created At Month filter keeps 40 of 130 members.

Therefore, key advice for aspiring PR practitioners coming from the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA, 2017, p.1) says that “stories are an essential part of communication and have the power to influence the perception of your organisation, ideas, products or services. The challenge for professional communicators is to uncover and create compelling stories that make a lasting impact.” This is relevant to understanding the design choices of the AEFL public relations campaign to represent coal as advocacy for third world poverty alleviation and social change in the 21st century setting. While the PRIA advice about telling stories to influence perceptions of organizations presents a relatively simple proposition, the composition of contemporary publics with access to technology and using media logics in risk society is rather more complex. This is a point possibly overlooked by Burson-Marsteller and its subsidiaries that designed the campaign.

In the 20th century, PR exported from the United States and utilized in Australia was sometimes part of a global template of successful tactics and strategies put into play when perceived threats to and erosions of corporate privileges were identified (Burton, 2007, p. viii). Examples of industries that used identical global PR templates in Australia include tobacco, asbestos, forestry, and chemical. Tactics included deliberate delays (for example, in relation to asbestos compensation claims); denial of the science (asbestos and tobacco); suppression and

obfuscation of key information; media blitzes with opinion pieces; and advertising and intelligence gathering on and discrediting of critics (Demetrious, 2013). It is therefore unsurprising that PR strategies and tactics deployed by PR companies representing large commercial sectors such as the tobacco industry during the mid to latter parts of the 20th century galvanized widespread distrust and hostility in citizen activist groups. The legacy of this mistrust is evident in the disparaging tweet content in relation to PR accessed for this study.

News reports suggesting that the AEFL campaign bought social media followers and likes from 2014 through 2016 fueled this mistrust of PR. This unethical manipulation of inflating grassroots support mirrors similar pre-internet PR behavior. Once exposed, it added to cynicism about Peabody's tactics and approach to communication as spin.

For example, on November 21, 2014, EcoWatch reported that a level of fraud was occurring in the AEFL's Facebook and Twitter accounts by over-inflating grassroots support for their campaign. EcoWatch's article, *Big Coal Buys Facebook 'Likes' in Lame PR Stunt*, discussed a "pay to play" model "where companies with the deepest pockets can buy all the 'likes' and followers they can afford" (EWContributor, 2014, p.1). Dubbed pay-per-care, the article noted that companies can buy large volumes of "likes and followers and quickly manufacture the appearance of a worldwide outpouring of support for the product or idea they are trying to sell. Companies pay to make it look like people care."

On February 19, 2015, Sarah Kessler of the environmental NGO, The Sierra Club, repeated the claims that the campaign continued to try to present AEFL as a grassroots movement by buying support for its Facebook and Twitter social media pages. She quoted The Sierra Club's Justin Guay, the associate director of the organization's International Climate and Energy program as saying, "It's [Peabody's AFL campaign] a sham...It's a desperate, last-ditch attempt by this company—and really, this industry—to justify its existence in the 21st century. People see right through what they're trying to do. It's only going to backfire" (Kessler, 2015, p.1).

In another example, on May 19, 2015, journalist Suzanne Goldenberg of *The Guardian* reported on the fake personal story of Linda Jing. Jing was featured in a video, *From Candles to Computers*. Goldenberg wrote that Jing was presented as:

a girl from a poor village forced to study by candlelight because there was no electricity until coal-fired power plants arrived, transforming her destiny and that of China but contrary to the impression the video viewer might form, she was brought up in relative prosperity...Nor does Jing reveal that this is a video produced at the behest of Peabody Energy, the world's largest privately-held coal mining company. Such exposures suggest a continuation in PR of a fixed mindset that publics are passive and can be easily fooled. (Goldenberg, 2015, p.1)

In the same article, Goldenberg discussed Peabody's chief environment adviser, who was previously a co-founder and president of the think tank the Centre for the Study of Carbon Dioxide and Global Change. She described the think tank as having attacked climate science (Goldenberg, 2015). She also claimed that much of the material on the AEFL website touting a pro-coal vision

comes from ultra-conservative think tanks such as the U.S.-based Heartland Institute (Goldenberg, 2015).

However, bearing in mind the characteristics of mediatization, individuals and sub-political groups publicly communicating in the Australian Twittersphere must also be considered vehicles which carry powerful stories that provide counter-positions to those of industry. This is especially true for industries such as fossil fuels, which carry hazardous, intergenerational risk that threatens global ecosystems and environment (Hjarvard, 2008; Beck, 1992). The following tweets illustrate how the coal industry and PR are represented as immoral and dangerous social actors in the compelling story to save the planet and humanity from scheming and shameless multinationals and their destabilizing instruments:

@Twitterparticipant10: How do you feel about your co running Peabody's coal is good for humanity PR campaign when evidence shows coal a killer.

RT @Twitterparticipant11: How Big #Coal is shamelessly plotting to stay alive (with help from the same PR giants that prop up Big Tobacco)

(Event 2: November 2014)

The AEFL campaign suggests that highly-resourced global PR campaigns are on the move. To be fully understood, they need to be considered as neoliberal political interventions, not only in light of new and changing social and political conditions, but also in regards to the ratification of the 2016 intergovernmental Paris Agreement to combat climate change and adapt to its effects (United Nations, n.d.).

The counternarrative to this PR was elevated to high levels in the Twitter discussion. It raises the prospect of transmedia digital storytelling of a different ilk, which could further add to the vulnerability of coal industry PR and campaigns such as AEFL described by Schneider et al. (2016). Namely, the AEFL campaign is seen as part of a continuing narrative since the 1970s of covert neo-liberalist PR exercising undue influence in critical global debates. This not only weakens the credibility of the corporate sector with contemporary publics by adding a new chapter of mistrust to the story of unethical PR, but weakens the PR industry itself. Given that PR seeks to be charged with the responsibility of organizational reputation and image management (David, 2016), dealing with its own disintegrating standing should be a key priority.

Conclusion

The online micro-blogging platform Twitter, replete with the notions of mobility, sharing, connectivity, and followers, has come to define new communicative styles in mediatized risk

society. However, the AEFL campaign shows that, while ridiculed and exposed by Twitter-using contemporary publics, the impacts of well-designed PR campaigns should not be underestimated. The AEFL campaign, while encountering resistance from contemporary publics on some fronts, notably media provocations, found itself in the news for buying likes and followers, creating fake news, and being untruthful and hyperbolic. Despite this, by 2017 the campaign trope *clean coal* had gained greater traction in the Australian Twittersphere, although the tenor of the discussion suggested that this was because contemporary publics had a heightened awareness of the potential of its hegemonic effects to transform subjective positions (Fairclough, 1999).

Nonetheless, an appearance of critical deliberative discussion via Twitter may mask another reality in the longer term. Noise and confusion, claim and counter-claim, worked favorably for 20th century highly-resourced public relations campaigns. Then, conditions worked to obscure power relationships and cloud the veracity of ideas—providing more likelihood of success for their long-term hegemonic acceptance.

Drawing on this, it is reasonable to assume that the coal industry engaged with the AEFL campaign, not so much as a realistic end goal in and of itself, but as a delay tactic. It utilized the campaign in much the same way as the tobacco and asbestos industries did in the face of indisputable scientific evidence that pointed to the harmful effects of their products and potential for industry demise. In this scenario, any win is a win. This shows that neoliberal public relations in the 21st century, while working with different modalities, is active in similar ways to that in the 20th century. As such, this paper argues that further research is required around greater social and industry ethical oversight of corporate communication that seeks to influence social debates of key policy issues, especially those involving global risk producing industries like fossil fuels (Beck, 1992).

The mapping of Australian Twittersphere within this period suggests the campaign mostly faltered and failed to engage contemporary Australian publics. Peabody's attempts to valorize its case for clean coal through moral appeals to end the crisis of energy poverty were largely counter-productive and dismissed as industry spin. Moreover, the contemporary publics' skepticism of Peabody's campaign in representing its objectives as activism and advocacy by attaching an emotional narrative of human struggle and morality aided general ridicule of the campaign and comparisons of Big Coal PR to Big Tobacco PR. Nonetheless, over the longer term, the public conversation on Twitter incorporating the term clean coal grew. Moreover, the research found the changed communicative conditions of the 21st century provided Peabody with myriad new ways to advance its campaign objectives, despite public cynicism.

Therefore, the paper concludes that socially complex and unethical PR, rather than an obsolete relic of the 20th century, remains a powerful and active operative in the public sphere and highly influential in global political interventions. Despite this, as Schneider et al. (2016, p. 178) suggested, there are points of vulnerability in the AEFL campaign. This research found that investigative media events by the Australian public broadcaster, focusing on local issues such as the proposed Adani coal mine and impacts for the Great Barrier Reef, resonated and had a high level of influence in developing counter-hegemonic positions and arguments. Hashtag

communities that formed around key challenger themes raised in these digital forums mobilized more participants.

The research suggests that in working to achieve a more inclusive and constructive public debate, contemporary publics in opposition to campaigns such as AEFL may need to consider the accumulative value of such media provocations to buttress public and social legitimization. In turn, this could influence political support and ultimately policy development that determines energy use and emission controls. However, drawing on Beck's (1994) ideas about globalization winners and losers, governmental policy decisions supporting green, low-emission technology will have a range of effects as economies transition toward new technologies. In particular, this may directly affect workers, employment, and stability, especially in old industrial and manufacturing settings. Therefore, engaging with those who do not share in the advantages of globalization in risk society to create dialogue and establish points of commonality is critically important in moving public debate toward greater consensus on energy policy. This is true even though it may appear somewhat counterintuitive to do so.

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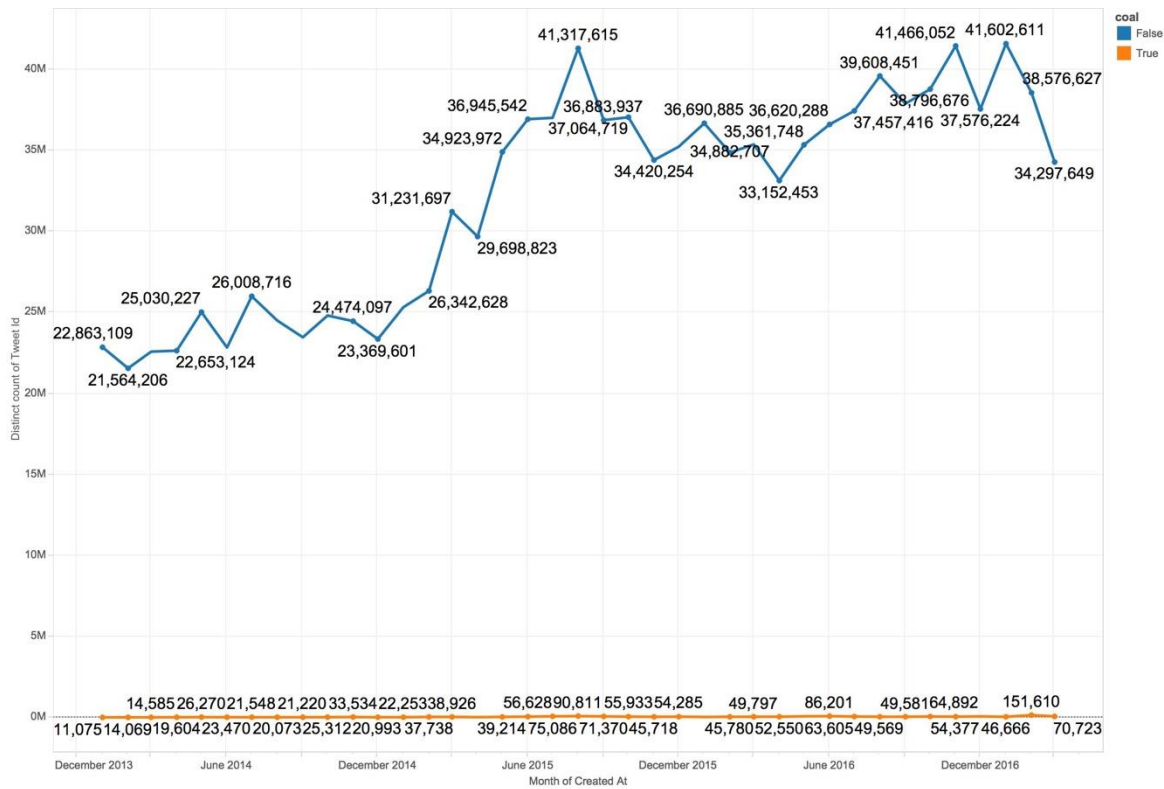
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Appendix A

Orange line represents coal discussion and blue line represents all discussion on Australian Twittersphere. Blue line is contextual only to show the low proportion of coal discussion in contrast to total discussion of all topics.



The trend of distinct count of Tweet Id for Created At Month. Color shows details about coal. The marks are labeled by distinct count of Tweet Id. The data is filtered on Created At Day, which ranges from 1 January 2014 to 27 March 2017. The view is filtered on coal, which keeps no members.