From the Front Lines to the Front Page:

Environmental Advocacy, Alternative Media and Climate Politics

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Abstract

In this paper we report upon the results of a dozen interviews with B.C. alternative media journalists, editors and publishers, and leading B.C. environmental activists and advocates which explored their perspective on the role that different types of news, and other media, can and should play in shaping public engagement with climate change. We discuss two different approaches to engagement which emerged from our interviews: solutions-focused journalism directed at ‘influentials’, and political mobilization of concerned citizens which builds efficacy. In particular, we focus upon the different approach to ‘conflict narratives’ developed within each approach.
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**Closing the ‘hope gap’? News, alternative media and public engagement**

Summarizing the latest research examining news coverage of climate change (O’Neill et al 2015; Hart & Feldman 2014), Climate Central blogger John Upton (2015) noted that “news cycles tend to be dominated by horror and carnage – a recipe for depression that spills into climate change coverage, fueling what some experts call a ‘hope gap’ that can lead people to fret about global warming but feel powerless to do anything about it.” Both U.S. and U.K. media, Upton explained, “are struggling to produce stories about climate change in ways that are engaging for their audiences. Instead, they’re fueling senses of hopelessness on the issue.” Commenting upon this trend, public opinion researcher Anthony Leiserowitz noted that “we find in our audience research that even the alarmed [those most concerned about climate change] don’t really know what they can do individually, or what we can do collectively. We call this loosely ‘the hope gap’, and it’s a serious problem. Perceived threat without efficacy of response is usually a recipe for disengagement or fatalism.” (Cited in Upton 2015; also see Roser-Renouf et al 2014) A significant amount of academic research has amply documented the many shortcomings, failures and gaps in mainstream media coverage of climate change (e.g. Antilla 2010; Boyce & Lewis 2009; Boykoff 2011; Boykoff & Yulsman 2013; Eide & Kunelius 2012; Young & Dugas 2011). As reviews of the field have noted, much of this work has taken the form of critical quantitative and qualitative analysis of mainly Western, primarily print and online media texts (Schafer & Schlichting 2014; Olausson and Berglez 2014). A smaller number of studies have ventured both upstream and downstream in the discursive flow of news, investigating the production of media content (e.g. Berglez 2011; Smith 2005) and its reception by audiences (e.g. Olausson 2011; Cross et al 2015).

Much less attention, however, has been allocated to those individuals and organizations who operate within the discursive terrain dominated by conventional news (and who are, therefore, intimately familiar with both its possibilities and its limitations) but who are also actively developing alternative communication and journalism practices to address and overcome what Leiserowitz calls the ‘hope gap’. Scholars of independent and alternative media, for example, have long observed their potential to not only offer a critical perspective on dominant economic and political structures, but also incubate and nurture radical, alternative visions of democratic politics, and to develop new models of participatory communication (Downing 2001; Forde 2011). Despite the obvious affinities between critical perspectives in climate communication and the radical practices...
of alternative media, little academic work has investigated the potential such media hold to close the ‘hope gap’.

In one of the few academic studies to address this area, Gunster (2011) conducted a comparative analysis of how mainstream and alternative media in British Columbia reported upon the December 2009 climate negotiations in Copenhagen. Alternative media, he concluded, offered much more hopeful, optimistic and engaged visions of climate politics than the cynical, pessimistic and largely spectatorial accounts which dominated conventional news. While alternative media were deeply critical of the spectacular failure of ‘politics-as-usual’ at the summit, they invited the public to respond with outrage and (collective) action rather than (individualized) despair and hopelessness. Informed by a much deeper, more sophisticated and broadly sympathetic understanding and exploration of the multiplicity of climate activisms, alternative media (re)positioned political action and engagement as viable, meaningful and accessible forms of agency for those struggling to respond to climate change. These portrayals of engagement, he wrote,

not only feed upon the hope, nourished by historical example and consciousness, that democratic pressure can compel [existing] institutions to behave differently, but also awaken the political imagination to the utopian prospect of inventing new institutions and even new forms of politics in response to environmental crisis. Such an expansion of the conceptual and affective spaces for climate politics produces an orientation that is simultaneously more critical and pessimistic about the limits of existing structures and practices, yet also more optimistic about the opportunities for collective political agency and intervention (2011: 492-3).

In a companion study of a year’s worth of alternative media coverage of climate change, Gunster argued that much of this more optimistic disposition can be traced to such media’s consistent attention to inspirational stories of political success: that is, concrete examples of civic activism and engagement, political struggle, innovative and effective public policy, and transformative change in communities, institutions and governments sustain and invigorate feelings of hope. Above all, success stories challenge the sclerotic, hidebound and thoroughly cynical visions of [climate] politics by reminding the public that ... another world is possible. Governments can implement more active climate policies, not simply because they should, but because other governments are implementing (and benefitting) from such policies already; more importantly, citizens can become (more) active in climate politics not simply because they should, but because thousands – millions – of others like them are active in countless different ways. (2012: 272).
In this paper, we build upon this research, reporting upon the results of a dozen interviews with alternative media journalists, editors and publishers, and leading environmental activists and advocates which explored their perspective on the role that different types of news, and other media, can and should play in shaping public engagement with climate change. Our participants work within a diverse array of B.C. based alternative and independent media, political advocacy groups, environmental organizations and think tanks (Appendix I). They play an active role in climate change communication including: the production of media content (e.g. news stories, opinion and editorial pieces, advocacy campaigns, etc.), serving as sources for journalists and reporters, engaging with stakeholders (e.g. industry, government, First Nations, local communities, etc) around energy and environmental issues, and directly communicating with the public in online and offline venues. As such, their knowledge and experience affords them an ideal vantage point to reflect upon the relationship between news and public engagement, as well as the particular ways in which their own communications and journalism strategies and practices operate to narrow the gap between ‘threat perception’ and ‘efficacy of response’. Interviews were conducted between October 2014 and November 2015, typically ranged from 45 to 90 minutes, and covered a variety of topics around communication, politics and climate change. All interviews were transcribed and qualitatively analyzed to identify key points of convergence and divergence in the opinions, experiences and approaches of our participants to these topics.

**Bad news on climate: Indifference, compartmentalization, conflict**

Each of our interviews started by asking participants to reflect upon how mainstream news media represent climate change. Unsurprisingly, all offered a broadly critical perspective on such coverage, identifying a variety of problems, limitations and omissions which inhibit public awareness, understanding and engagement with the issue. Several participants had extensive prior experience working in conventional news organizations (prior to making the transition to alternative media) and most others had worked closely with reporters and journalists in their capacity as spokespeople or expert sources. While those experiences gave participants considerable insight into the practical limits and constraints of conventional journalism, they also served – somewhat perversely, perhaps – to naturalize and even excuse the failures of news media. Frustration, annoyance and outrage were consistently leavened with an implicit sense of resignation: the stubborn inertia of existing journalistic practices, routines and structures was largely ‘naturalized’ as inescapably constitutive of the media landscape in which the production of news takes place.
Many expressed sympathy, for example, for those who labour to produce news under challenging conditions, and admiration for those columnists, reporters and organizations which (occasionally) swim against the current and produce good investigative journalism, sophisticated commentary and sustained analysis of key aspects of climate change. While we did not solicit our participants’ views on media reform, it was instructive that nobody volunteered any ideas about the possibility (or even desirability) of transforming existing news media organizations or the regulatory and policy environments which govern them. Instead, news was largely scrutinized ‘as is’: sharp analysis of the many flaws of news were almost always accompanied by a latent sense of their inevitability.

Most participants prefaced their comments on mainstream news with observations about the sheer paucity of coverage, especially remarkable given the magnitude and complexity of the problem, as well as the urgent need for strong, immediate action. “Limited coverage is part of the issue,” noted P. J. Partington, a Toronto-based climate policy analyst with the Pembina Institute, a clean energy Canadian think tank. “And that has to do with a lot of things, not least dwindling resources to dedicate to files like this .... there have been a lot fewer specialist reporters in the past couple of years that are able to focus on science and environment” (PJ, 2). Beyond limited journalistic resources, a number of participants noted the incongruity between reporting upon the causes, consequences and solutions to climate change, and a commercial media system dedicated to the promotion of consumption and economic growth. “The universal implicit narrative of mainstream commercial media is ‘we want you to buy something’,“ observed Chris Wood, coordinating editor for The Tyee Solutions Society (an organization which helps fund solutions-oriented journalism, see below).

And of course it is, because they’re advertising supported – the entire economic universe in which the mainstream media exists is one which is entirely invested in ‘we want you to buy something'; it’s invested in the dead-center, conventional, industrial-consumer economy. To the extent that climate change necessarily implies that that economy is not survivable, and in fact, may not be survivable in the near term, that is not a story that the mainstream media can accept within its mental framework. (CW, 5)

Combining the political economy and orientation of commercial media, conventional journalistic assumptions about newsworthiness and an environmental phenomenon which is inherently difficult to communicate has generated a perfect storm of media indifference, reflected in the broad collapse of climate coverage over the past five years (see figure charting Canadian news coverage of climate change at Gifford et al 2015).
Many participants were especially frustrated by the inability and/or unwillingness of news media to draw connections between climate change and other issues. In the context of British Columbia and Canada, the most important missing link is between energy and climate. Kevin Washbrook is a founding member of Voters Taking Action Against Climate Change (VTACC), a local grassroots advocacy group, and a prominent climate change activist in Vancouver. Asked to identify the single most important thing news media could do to increase public engagement with climate change, he replied “connect the dots, connect the dots, connect the dots.” (KW, 11) On the one hand, media coverage of energy issues only focus upon their economic and political aspects, but rarely mention climate change. On the other hand, news about climate change “is always about a new scientific study or the negotiations happening somewhere else, and they never connect the dots between that and fossil fuel exports in B.C.” (KW, 2) Instead, he argued, Every time you talk about how urgent it is to take action to reduce emissions and avoid the two degree ceiling, they need to say, ‘And these fossil fuel export projects will play a direct role in increasing emissions’. There is a fundamental connection between what we do here in B.C. and this global, abstract concept .... We need to stop talking about [energy and climate] as two separate things. The Kinder Morgan [pipeline] protests and the energy economy of Canada need to be seen as connected and having direct application for climate. (KW, 11)

Damien Gillis, co-founder and publisher of The Common Sense Canadian – which produces original news and commentary about the relationship between economy and environment – likewise criticized the “siloization of climate change ... the disconnection of it from specific policies, energy policies mostly, transportation policies in government, or developments in the tech sector or business community ... social movements, indigenous communities. There is a lack of big picture connecting the dots .... If you talk about climate change just in that one silo, you’re never going to really solve the problem.” (DG, 2) Making these linkages not only helps people better understand the causes of climate change, but more importantly alerts us to our potential (collective, political) agency: as Washbrook put it, “we are on the front lines of the battle to avoid dangerous climate change .... [and that] creates an opportunity, but it also creates an obligation, because we actually can do something here in Metro Vancouver.” (KW, 3).

For some, this inability and/or refusal to pursue these linkages vigorously – especially between climate change and the fossil fuel industry – was reflective of the political economy of commercial media in Canada and, specifically, British Columbia. Jamie Biggar, executive director of Leadnow.ca – a progressive political advocacy organization which runs national, issue-based...
campaigns – explained that a key “disciplining factor” among news media is “not wanting to challenge the fossil fuel companies” (JB, 3). As a whole, he argued,

traditional media ... are very much a part of the governing class and there is a broad consensus in the governing class about the necessity of the oil sands in particular, and fossil fuel development .... And I think you ... worry that you sound like you are not a serious person if you challenge that .... [And] the fossil fuel companies exercise a fairly significant lever over most traditional media now, as they have become enormous media buyers, enormous ad buyers. (JB, 3)

In a similar vein, David Beers – founder and editor of The Tyee, an independent online magazine with a focus upon sustainability and social justice – noted the difficulties faced by Andrew Nikiforuk, a Canadian investigative journalist who has done a lot of work on the oil sands.

Andrew is based in Calgary, and he was reporting on the oil patch for Canadian Business. And Andrew went down a path that a lot of journalists go down; once they become expert in an area, they begin to synthesize and form an analysis. You can’t help but do that if you’re an intelligent person looking at the same issues over and over again. And the analysis that he came to was inconvenient for corporate media, which was that the oil sands are incredibly emissions intensive, and are affecting the local ecology, the global ecology, and the national economy all in negative ways.

Well, you start writing about that and you don’t really have a home anymore. (DB, 5)

Paraphrasing the sentiments of Rafe Mair, a long time B.C. politician, radio host and environmental activist (and the co-founder of Common Sense Canadian), Gillis argued that an overarching “pro-big business” frame operated as a de facto form of censorship in corporate media: young journalists quickly learn that “you are either going to be censored, or more likely you are going to be self-censored ... you are not going to get published as much, you are not going to get promoted as fast, you are not going to get paid as much, you are not going to get as many opportunities, if you do not play the game, if you do not know the script”. He cited a recent Vancouver Observer story (Uechi et al 2014) which described how Postmedia, which controls most major daily newspapers in English Canada, had pitched itself to the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers as an editorial partner in lauding the merits of fossil fuel development to the Canadian public. “That is a smoking gun that should tell you a lot about the lack of freedom of journalists within that apparatus to speak in certain ways”. (DG, 7) At one level, such criticism suggests a keen appreciation of the impact of political economy upon news content. Yet, as noted earlier, this diagnosis was rarely accompanied with spontaneous prescriptions for structural or policy reform. Instead, the possibilities for better news were largely ascribed to the development of alternative media or a more consistent, coordinated and skillful communications strategy which
might better exploit the values, expectations and needs of news organizations to produce better content.

Ben West, executive director of Tanker Free B.C. and one of the most prominent, public representative of the environmental movement in the province, agreed that news media miss a lot of opportunities to connect climate change with other issues. “In every single interview I do, I some way try to bring it back to climate change, and that’s very often not what makes it into television.” (BW, 2) He described, for example, his involvement in an extensive profile of the oil sands on The National, the flagship news program of Canada’s public broadcaster: “I actually talked about [climate] a fair deal in the interview [for the profile] – maybe the words might have come out of my mouth once on screen out of a ten minute piece which was part of a three day special. And that was just kind of shocking to me ... how they couldn’t have made at least one of the featured people a climate scientist, or put more of the focus on climate” (BW, 3). He noted the same tendency with stories on extreme weather, such as intense flooding in Calgary and Toronto in the summer of 2014, often failing to explore the connections with climate change. But West also admitted that advocacy groups have themselves contributed to this compartmentalization: “a lot of us in the environmental movement have kind of backed away from making things first and foremost about climate, because we’re simply getting more success by talking about other aspects of projects [e.g. oil spills, tanker traffic], even if one of the main motivators for us is actually the climate implications” (BW, 3). Drawing links to extreme weather events, especially when they have devastating impacts upon people and infrastructure, has also been difficult: “we were worried about looking like we were capitalizing on people’s misfortune” (BW, 2). A communications specialist with a large B.C. based environmental organization agreed that while extreme weather events such as Hurricane Sandy have advanced the conversation about climate change, both news media and the environmental movement also have a “fear of being accused as opportunistic” (ENGO, 3) if these linkages are made in the immediate aftermath of tragic events.

In the rare moments when climate change does break through to the front pages, our participants suggested that it is invariably filtered through the prism of conflict. Geoff Dembicki is the lead sustainability writer for The Tyee and has written extensively about the politics of climate, environment and energy over the past decade. Media coverage of climate change, he suggested, has increased as the confrontational politics associated with carbon infrastructure projects have intensified, giving news a familiar template through which to represent the issue.
And while I think it’s good that climate change is getting more attention, and protests against pieces of infrastructure are getting covered, and those critical voices are being brought into the mainstream media, the result is that the entire mainstream narrative around climate change is almost always defined by conflict. So it’s one group fighting another, one country calling out another country for not achieving targets, and it results in this very pessimistic frame where it’s hard to feel that anything you do can have a real impact. (GD, 1-2)

For Dembicki, conflict narratives are not only a barrier to agency and efficacy, they also lock key stakeholders and constituencies into a polarizing message track which prevents them from communicating with the public (and each other) in a thoughtful and constructive manner. Instead, their core communications objective becomes supplying news media with content that can be easily slotted into conventional journalistic formulas and, consequently, will generate media attention. While these patterns may produce good copy, they ultimately marginalize and exclude important issues from public discourse.

During the recent B.C. election, I found it extremely difficult to get any traction on liquefied natural gas [LNG] – even though the premier was talking about it all the time, it was public knowledge that this was going to completely destroy B.C.’s climate targets. One study suggested that the impact of an LNG industry in BC on climate would be bigger than the oil sands, and I thought for sure people would respond to that. But what I think is that people had been reading so much coverage of certain types of symbols, such as the tar sands or Gateway, and symbols framed in certain ways, that it was hard to get a sense of urgency about something like LNG because it just wasn’t on people’s radar. And I would ask environmental groups about it at press conferences, and they were not even that enthusiastic to talk about it, because it didn’t fit with their objectives, with the frame they had put on climate change. (GD, 2-3)

The rhetorical inertia of conflict narratives, compounded by their easy and productive articulation with dominant routines and patterns of news production, helps create a self-reinforcing cycle in which this simple form of storytelling displaces more complicated and less predictable accounts of climate change. It fortifies the “prevailing view in the mainstream media and among the public that any progress on climate change is going to be fought over bitterly and will be decided through conflict,” (GD, 4) which ends up producing a real “blind spot” with respect to solutions that can emerge out of design, technology or policy innovation.

For their part, representatives of advocacy groups also described the conflict frame as both pervasive and problematic. Kevin Sauvé, communications lead in the B.C. office of the Pembina Institute, argued that a reliance upon the ‘usual suspects’ in climate change stories ended up
excluding a wider variety of sources who could help the public engage with climate change in novel and constructive ways.

Sources tend to be the same when it comes to ... who’s being represented: environmental groups pitted against politicians, environmental groups pitted against industry – often missing some very key players that are ... at the forefront of climate. So, particularly, when it comes to things like adaptation, we’re not looking at the people, the decision-makers, say, in communities that are actually taking the research from science and then using that research to make decisions on a daily basis about the work that they do in planning communities ... that’s a real missed opportunity in the mainstream media, because I think that these people stand to actually make climate change very tangible for everyday people, in the sense of the work that they do, as well as the impacts that they’re seeing and have seen, gradually and incrementally over time. (KS, 2)

Unfortunately, these adaptation stories cannot compete with the drama, emotion and “good guys and bad guys” (KS, 3) which drive conflict narratives and, in turn, intensify polarization around climate change. For stories about climate science, noted Partington, “conflict has served to ... reinforce people’s pre-existing opinions on the matter, and hasn’t served to advance understanding in any way, because people just look at the piece, and they agree with whoever it is they already agreed with. So I think finding a way to present [climate science] that’s less confrontational gives people the space to think about the issue more, and maybe learn something from it ...”. (PJ, 5)

**Cultivating enlightenment: Seeking solutions, investigating complexity, mobilizing influential**

Reflecting upon his own experiences working for a daily paper, Beers explained that there was “this weird situation in newsrooms, where you had all these journalists that were trained in the ethos of investigation and finding things out for the common good, but their only mandate was to find out what was just going to hell, what sucked.” (DB, 2) Not only was this a profound waste of the skills, capacity and mandate of journalists, it also failed address the needs of those audiences who want and need to learn about solutions – not simply out of idle curiosity, but because they require good information and timely analysis to guide their own thinking about problem-solving in their personal, professional and political lives. In response, Beers and others at The Tyee prioritize “solutions-focused journalism” which shifts media’s focus away from an obsessive but superficial fixation upon bad news (e.g. conflict, scandal, disaster, etc) towards a sustained investigation into the diversity of solutions through which people and governments can begin to tackle problems which otherwise appear irresolvable. Identifying and diagnosing problems (such as climate change)
is not, Beers suggested, what is missing from the news; rather, the problem is that’s the place where most reporting tends to stop.

At a certain point ... everybody agrees there’s a problem, and there’s a pent up anxiety and anxiousness to show the way .... [F]or there to be a rich and vibrant democratic conversation, you can’t just give vent to people’s angers and frustrations. You have to present people with a positive alternative, that together, if we can form a rough consensus, we can possibly streak towards. At which point, the conversation becomes really much more affirming, because everybody’s bringing towards it their own knowledge, their own perspectives, their own hopes, their own investment of energy .... That’s just a lot different from everyone sitting around watching TV and saying ... ‘That sucks, all politicians are bad, scientists are evil ...’. (DB, 3)

Instead, “we offer our services as journalists to go about exploring and investigating what might be a solution to a problem that we all agree that we face.” (DB, 2) And the value of such journalism is not simply measured by the hope that it injects into public discourses otherwise dominated by gridlock and pessimism. It also keeps faith with the basic mandate of news to provide an objective, accurate and useful description of the world in which we live. “To really show people how policy works, how government works – how government, business, NGOs can work together to solve something – you really have to not just report on when it goes to hell. You’ve got to report on how it’s going right, or might go right.” (DB, 2)

After The Tyee established itself as a credible source of alternative news and analysis (and was attracting a significant audience, especially amongst progressive opinion-leaders), Beers was approached by charitable foundations seeking to fund sustained coverage of key issues which fit their research and advocacy mandates. Cautious about straying into the territory of public relations, Beers instead founded The Tyee Solutions Society (TSS), a non-profit organization which partners with others to fund “catalytic journalism”, “solutions-oriented reporting that uses traditional investigative techniques to empower citizens with the information needed to seize opportunities for positive change. TSS reporting examines and explains the facts and identifies achievable solutions impacting the lives of Canadians”. (Tyee Solutions Society 2015) As Beers explained, “if an organization within its mandate needs to answer a question they can contract the Tyee Solutions Society to have journalists try to answer the question through the format of journalism.” Such work “doesn’t have a predetermined answer .... it doesn’t have an advocacy slogan attached to it. That’s what journalists are good at doing, they’re good at chasing questions.” (DB, 21) As of May 2015, the TSS has produced 17 investigative series (each involving a dozen or more news stories) within four broad areas of focus: education and youth, energy, food
security and income inequality. In addition to publishing the stories in The Tyee, the TSS works with other media partners to increase distribution of the reporting, as well as through public engagement events which facilitate collaboration between citizens, policy-makers and elected officials. While these investigative pieces are distinct from the ongoing news and commentary produced by The Tyee, they have made a significant contribution to the organization’s objective of empowering the public through an emphasis upon solutions.

Beers identified three different, but complementary approaches through which solutions-focused journalism can “catalyze concrete positive change.” (DB, 6) The first is “living the solution”, in which individuals describe their own experiences with a particular form of behavioural, institutional or social and political change. Exemplary of this approach was The 100-Mile Diet in which Alisa Smith and James MacKinnon wrote in The Tyee about their attempt to subsist on a diet consisting only of food sourced within 100 miles of their home. The popularity of the online articles led to a best-selling book (Smith and MacKinnon 2007) and helped spawn a global movement devoted to dietary localization. Second, journalists can investigate and publicize innovative, local, small-scale experiments which are often highly successful but largely invisible to the broader public. In these cases, the analytic focus becomes questions of scale, reproducibility and barriers: if a specific practice, technology or policy is so effective, how can it be applied more broadly, and what social, economic or political barriers are preventing such expansion? Finally, Beers noted the importance of exploring solutions in other jurisdictions, which are often neglected due to the parochial sensibilities (and shrinking resources for news-gathering) of mainstream news. Learning about and from other places can shake up public acceptance of the status-quo, and enliven political debate about the full range of choices available to citizens and governments. How, for example, has Norway managed the development and governance of its energy resources (and the profits from them) compared to Canada? What might Vancouver learn from the cycling policies and infrastructure of Portland, Copenhagen or Amsterdam? While much of this information already exists in reports from NGOs and academic studies, the creativity and expertise of journalists as storytellers, combined with their ethical and professional commitments as fact-checkers, can give their reporting upon solutions a credibility and rhetorical appeal which can get the public interested, engaged and excited.

Beyond producing solutions-oriented content, Beers also acclaimed The Tyee’s ongoing role in developing and sustaining journalistic capacity. Steady employment for journalists is
no small thing these days. Especially work that allows you to have a beat, and write in a sophisticated way .... There’s very few jobs like that left in journalism. So we’ve provided a home for that. And sometimes I think of ourselves as one of those monasteries during the Dark Ages ... where journalists are in there making illuminated manuscripts and waiting for the Enlightenment. It’s a really dark time for journalism, and somebody’s got to keep doing beat-driven, in-depth, sophisticated journalism, just to keep it going .... I think we’re building capacity among the journalistic set. (DB, 11)

For example, when Nikiforuk was marginalized by mainstream media given his increasingly critical writing about the oil sands (e.g. Nikiforuk 2010), he joined The Tyee as its first ‘Energy and Equity’ writer-in-residence in 2010-11, allowing him to “widen his scope to examine all angles of Canada’s morphing into a petro state” and “push deeper beyond the day’s fleeting headlines chronicling disasters and commodity price swings” (Beers 2010). In addition to writing dozens of articles and commentary pieces, Nikiforuk’s residency led to the publication of The Energy of Slaves (2012), which used the analogy of slavery to explore how our largely invisible dependence upon oil has shaped our lifestyles, morality, economy and political system. Operating with a much smaller budget, The Vancouver Observer similarly conceives of itself as providing a supportive environment for nurturing and amplifying journalistic capacity. Linda Solomon Wood, the Observer’s founder, editor and publisher, explained that “we have a small team of reporters, who are either usually right out of journalism school, or they’re in their twenties .... [and we’ve] become a place for people who are young and evolving to have a chance to really create the portfolio and do something of significance.” (LW, 1) She also noted the editorial freedom available to volunteer and freelance writers, such as Carrie and Barry Saxifrage, a couple who have done pioneering work in both the visualization of climate change (e.g. Visual Carbon 2015) and documenting the resistance to the Enbridge Northern Gateway pipeline (Saxifrage et al 2012).

For Dembicki, the combination of journalistic autonomy and a focus upon solutions enables a shift beyond more simplistic conflict frames which pit one group against another. Such frames, he argued, are often symptomatic of a lack of journalistic resources, experience and knowledge, prevalent because they allow one to produce content easily, quickly and cheaply. Conversely, Dembicki’s gradual accumulation of experience and knowledge on the energy/climate beat has allowed (and motivated) him to tell a much more sophisticated and, ultimately, hopeful set of stories about solutions.

I’ve been ... looking at the whole climate change debate as this ... big system of interlocking parts that all depend on each other, and there are certain parts that are just locked together and are not
moving, and that’s when you look at the international climate change conferences, or our debate over coal or the tar sands or pipelines. And all the media attention is on those parts that aren’t moving because they’ve somehow become imbued with the biggest political stakes, economic stakes .... And so I’ve tried to find all the parts that are moving quite a bit faster .... the clean tech industry .... China .... designing [energy efficiency] IT software .... (GD, 6-7)

Especially important for both Dembicki and Beers are the identification of points of possible compromise and consensus – ‘moveable parts’ – which are otherwise obscured by ongoing conflict between different stakeholders. One of the most surprising revelations for Dembicki in his series ‘Greening the Oil Sands’, for example, was the fact that “the oil industry and environmental groups both support a carbon price, but they’ve never come together on the same stage and said, ‘Prime Minister Harper, this is something we all support’. And the reason for that is because they’re always just fighting all the time .... because they’re fighting so much [both groups] can never see where they have similar objectives.” (GD, 14) For Beers, this was “a huge story. It’s one of the most censored stories ever. So finally Bloomberg comes around and goes, ‘Ah, this can’t be true’; phones up everybody and finds out it is true, and then they did their own story .... [F]ine-grained and credible journalists can be seen as honest brokers of that conversation in ways that activists and highly invested NGOs cannot.” (DB, 10)

Other participants shared similar ambitions to shift climate discourse away from conflict towards solutions. Sauvé, from the Pembina Institute, was especially enthusiastic about a transition from ‘he-said, she-said’ frames to “solutions-focused narratives.” (KS, 5) He described, for example, an ongoing campaign entitled ‘Green Energy Futures’ featuring weekly profiles of a community or a person ... that’s doing something related to renewable energy – that is already on the ground, this is happening, this is for real. This is something that is not pie-in-the-sky technology, it is not wishful thinking, it is actually grounded in research, it is grounded in practice. And it is not just scientists, it is everyday people that are either very innovative or very concerned or very enthusiastic .... it’s not just the story about politicians and environmental groups banging heads all the time. (KS, 9-10)

Likewise, West explained that “we are increasingly shifting our framing to be about alternatives. So really showing choices ... [providing] a pathway to reduced demand. And it is not pie-in-the-sky, unicorns and fairytales. It is talking about buses and trains and building codes and land use plans .... It’s all pretty normal stuff that we’re all familiar with, it’s really just a matter of political choices, and by and large it’s stuff that’s overwhelmingly popular.” (BW, 3-4) Both underlined the necessity for solutions-based discourse to become more concrete, practical and local in order to
resonate with audiences. Otherwise, as West observed, “too often the ... alternative energy conversation is in these very broad brush strokes, and it isn’t local/specific enough .... We’ll fight a specific pipeline in a specific area, but then we’ll talk about green energy all across the world without much more detail than that.” (BW, 8) Awareness of concrete alternatives creates the space for conversation, deliberation and awakening our political imagination to new ways of organizing social life. “In Canada, the clear narrative for most people is ‘This is just the way things are,’ and I think we really need to get more pilot projects actually built that show that there are better ways of doing things, that really tie this back to climate change so that it’s ... top of mind for people when they have conversations and they think, ‘Well, why aren’t we talking about high speed rail like they’re doing in Europe, and Asia, and Latin America, and all over the place ...’.‘” (BW, 13) People need to be able to more easily imagine themselves (or their children) employed in green jobs, their communities, cities and regions enjoying the benefits of more sustainable infrastructure, and their governments responsive to democratic participation in collective choices about the future. Solutions need to become as ‘real’ to the public as the carbon intensive lifestyles, habits and infrastructure they will replace.

By definition, alternative media do not address ‘mass’ audiences, but instead are directed towards individuals and communities which share a common set of progressive social values, including commitments to sustainability and social justice. Within this broad demographic, however, The Tyee especially prizes and targets ‘influentials’, that is, individuals who are “in a position to make positive change”. (DB, 1) This objective flows out of an understanding of social and political change as driven by politicians who are responsive to signals from influentials within their base.

I would identify an influential as a twenty-two year old with three thousand Twitter followers. I would also identify an influential as a deputy minister, or a policy director at a think tank, or a mid-sized business operator, or a Native elder, or a school principal. Just somebody who basically is a nexus, stands at the center or at the top of some kind of wider network. That the politician says, ‘I don’t see how I can survive without the support of that network’. (DB, 13)

For Beers, good information – and, in particular, new information about under-reported solutions – can, in the right hands, catalyze policy innovation. Referring, for example, to a Tyee investigative series exploring how shipping containers could be recycled as building material, Beers enthused about how an influential might respond: “Wow. I didn’t realize that we had all these shipping containers in town, and I didn’t realize that the only thing in the way was some laws, or somebody would build a building with this. I didn’t realize they’re doing this in Europe already and making
this beautiful thing.’” (DB, 14) Ideally, revelation generates enthusiasm and excitement; solid journalistic practices supply sophistication and credibility, and, together, they encourage and enable influentials to champion solutions actively and effectively within their networks and institutions.

“Our job,” Beers summarized, “is to act as a kind of pollinating bee, and move among people who are experts and influentials in an area, and see if through the act of journalism, you can actually catalyze some concrete positive change”. (DB, 6)

Dembicki similarly identified engaging with opinion leaders – “influential people in universities, media, business” (GD, 10) – as a priority. “My ideal reader by default is someone who’s closely engaged on these issues: probably an academic or business person, or even another journalist. And those are the people who tend to have the most positive reactions to the type of reporting I do. Because it’s tricky to focus so heavily on some of these moving parts ... because they scatter people’s pre-held notions about climate change.” (GD, 7) He was especially pleased, for example, that the complexity of his work on ‘greening’ the oil sands allowed those actually working in the area to engage with the series in a constructive fashion. For Beers, attending to the genuine complexity of solutions (and the discursive and political space in which they can be implemented) requires abandoning, or at least tempering, the polemic stance which often dominates debates over climate and energy, and which might have more instinctive appeal to progressive audiences.

We could have come to the conclusion that the tar sands were just fundamentally wrong and destructive and therefore we had to throw everything we had at telling everybody every day just how bad they are, until someday finally we all agree that they were bad and they had to be shut down. But what are the odds? Any sane person would assess the amount of political and financial capital that’s invested in the oil sands and say, ‘The Tyee saying that the oil sands are bad’ is not going to change anything. So what if, instead, we put information out in the world that showed how the oil sands could be part of a transition. Well that’s a complicated story to tell, right? (DB, 9)

Media don’t just produce content, they also produce audiences. For The Tyee, that means cultivating audiences with the deliberative capacity, intellectual appetite and political flexibility to appreciate, understand and engage with complexity and ambiguity, and be open to having their views and assumptions challenged by different perspectives and new information. It is “a gathering place where you can feel dignified and imagine that you’re going to be enlightened ... rather than just be pandered to, or have your buttons pushed ...”. (DB, 11) One should not over-emphasize this idea of an impartial ‘solutions broker’ frame: there is little question that an open and vigorous commitment to progressive values, politics and constituencies animates The Tyee’s journalism and
editorial philosophy, distinguishing it from conventional news. Yet the focus upon enlightening influentials also suggests an approach to social change which prioritizes getting useful information into the right hands over more confrontational strategies of political mobilization and activism.

Sauvé, from the Pembina Institute, shared a similar preference for targeted advocacy communication which can serve as a resource for decision-makers. “We’re very differentiated in the sense that we actually are looking for influencers. It’s less now about this big sweeping public communication and raising alarm bells en masse, and more ‘who do we need to speak with, who do we need to talk to about this policy recommendation x and policy recommendation y?’” (KS, 6)

While he acknowledged and valued mass communications strategies, Sauvé suggested they may have diminishing efficacy: first, the general public has been ‘pushed’ as far as it will go on the issue; and, second, “the more time I spend speaking to certain decision makers, the less I am convinced that they’re now swayed entirely by public thinking on climate change”. (KS, 8) Scepticism about democratic accountability, in other words, means that scarce communications resources may be better deployed “influencing the influencers, particularly for right now, because this is likely where we’re going to find the most effective channel for moving the levers [of change]”. (KS, 9)

**Inspiring efficacy: Transforming conflict, engaging communities, normalizing activism**

Is an emphasis upon conflict inevitably corrosive for efficacy, agency and hope? While all of our participants were critical of the predictable and formulaic patterns of conflict which dominate conventional news, some argued that conflict narratives are an inescapable and, in fact, essential part of good climate change communication. And rather than distracting audiences from engaging with solutions, conflict stories which intensify polarization, cultivate and focus outrage and celebrate struggle can facilitate the transition from awareness and concern to political engagement and activism. Biggar, executive director with Leadnow, explained that there are two kinds of archetypal narratives which have taken shape around climate politics. The first emphasizes the failure of politicians and traditional institutions to address climate change, represents stakeholders (industry, government, environmental groups, First Nations, etc.) as gridlocked, and positions the public as disgusted but helpless bystanders to dysfunctional processes. “That is a very demotivating, disempowering story that leads to cynicism.” (JB, 4) And it is the story of climate politics which tends to drive conventional news agendas (Gunster 2011). However, he noted, “there is another story in which institutional leaders are somewhat secondary, and what is actually primary is a fight
between global fossil-fuel companies and place-based, but global civil society.” (JB, 4) This second story is not only a more accurate representation of the current state of climate politics, it is also much more empowering, because in the second story what you talk about or highlight is victories and defeats, but what you are highlighting is normal people who are getting involved, often successfully, against enormous odds. And that is really inspiring. And it fits with people’s zeitgeist of the times, which is that things are really wrong in ways that are hard to articulate, and the levers of control of our society seem more and more distant. So where are there people who are taking things into their own hands and being successful? That is a much more motivating conflict story. (JB, 4)

Indeed, Biggar argued that a “huge part” of public engagement in climate change “is figuring out what is an accessible conflict that you can get people into in order to challenge and hopefully transform what is going on. And, of course, the major answer to that is opposing pipeline projects, and other forms of dirty energy projects, where there is a physical, concrete thing on the ground that you can literally, physically stand up against and have a whole bunch of levers for trying to stop.” (JB, 2, emphasis added) In other words, rather than dismiss all stories about conflict as alienating, one can distinguishing between the paralyzing, cynical conflict frames recycled by conventional news, and the accessible, generative and mobilizing conflict narratives favoured by social movements and activists.

As one who regularly oscillates between the worlds of journalism (as publisher, editor and writer for The Common Sense Canadian) and advocacy (as a documentary film-maker and anti-LNG activist), Gillis offered a similar perspective on the relationship between conflict and engagement. The motif of conflict lays at the heart of his most recent film, Fractured Land, which profiles a young B.C. First Nations lawyer, Caleb Behn, battling the expansion of fossil fuel extraction in his community’s traditional territory. Conflict within and between nations and communities, conflict within families, conflict within ourselves, conflict with nature: for Gillis, it is precisely the mediation of Behn’s experiences through these themes that gives the film its power to engage audiences, as well as stimulate deeper reflections upon the culture, polity and economy in which we live. “The conflict that I’m really talking about is the conflict of values and ideas, and it is natural for that to exist within an individual, and within a community, and within a country. It is healthy for people to be conflicted about the kind of big choices they are making in their life or as a society. And so we should not shy away from that.” (DG, 3) Invoking the concept of dialectic, Gillis argued that the clash of opposing ideas is often essential for social innovation and progress: “people hunger for that, and it is very human to question ourselves and question these things, like a kitchen table
debate”. (DG, 4) He contrasted this with the “conflict between two dogmatic positions” which tends to drive news formats, especially segments which feature political commentary and debate. “How uninteresting, how predictable and unproductive and essentially useless that dialogue is; it is not even a dialogue, it is just two talking heads presenting previously contemplated and articulated opinions that have nothing to do with facts. There is no drama in that ....” (DG, 4) The real problem with news media’s preoccupation with conflict, then, is not conflict per se, but the ritualistic manner in which it is staged as political spectacle, a meticulously scripted affair in which citizen-audiences have no role to play but bear witness to the fact that nothing ever seems to change.

Biggar explained that one of the biggest revelations from his experience heading up Leadnow as a political advocacy organization was the power of unscripted opposition, both as a means of generating public engagement with issues and having a meaningful impact upon the political process. He credited Ben Brandzel, founder and director of Online Progressive Engagement Networks (OPEN), for the idea: “if you are going to actually change a decision, you have to create unscripted opposition that you did not expect. So it has to be of a different kind or a different intensity: that actually changes the political calculus. The same people doing the same thing does not.” (JB, 5) Biggar identified four attributes of stories which are more likely to catalyze such opposition: first, “a sense of bad dealing, that there is stuff going on behind closed doors”; second, “a bit of mystery” and unpredictability, a sense in which outcomes are not predetermined; third, “direct, tangible impact on real people and places that you care about”; and, finally, “a hero or heroic group that is taking on the folks who are engaged in bad dealing, and who will have a tangible impact on these very specific people in a place”. (JB, 7) Based upon his own experience, Biggar argued that stories built out of these components were not only more likely to be quickly and extensively circulated through social networks, but this distribution then generates political energy which organizations such as Leadnow can help coordinate and focus in a politically effective manner (through campaigns, protests and other forms of direct action). “It is hard for us to create energy. What is much easier is to create vehicles for the energy that already exists to be expressed and channeled as effectively as possible.” (JB, 6)

Both Gillis and West have extensive experience with town-hall meetings as venues for communicating with the public around the politics of climate and energy. For them, cultivating political efficacy requires engaging with local communities, creating spaces for individuals to come together as a community and realize that others share their values, principles and, in many cases,
their outrage. Gillis in particular spoke eloquently and at great length about the political energy generated as people gather to express their anger and frustration about industrial and economic development which threatens the places and people they love. Irrespective of whether such fora are about pipelines, fracking, LNG, coal export terminals or other forms of development, they all tend to embody the four features Biggar ascribed to unscripted opposition. In 2002, the provincial electrical utility, B.C. Hydro, was instructed to purchase new power from ‘independent power producers’ (IPPs) which inaugurated a rush by private, for-profit companies to develop ‘run-of-river’ projects. While such projects generate clean, renewable electricity, they often have significant ecological impacts upon local environments, destroying fish and wildlife habitat and spoiling pristine watersheds. Consequently, such projects often attract significant resistance from local communities. Gillis described, for example, a 2009 meeting in Kaslo, a small community in the interior of British Columbia, which was scheduled to allow industry and government representatives to explain and promote a plan to construct such a project on a local river.

Well, people were so fired up, and right away, people took the microphone and just took over the meeting. And they said, basically, this is how it is going to go. And one person after another ... the First Nations said we are going to sue your asses off if this ever happens, and the other people were perhaps not quite as explicit as G****** from Cascade Falls .... ‘You will never, ever build this project. Equipment will go missing. Shit will happen. We fucking guarantee it.’ And you believed him, and it was 1,100 people, one after another. And guess what? That project never got built. And I filmed it and put it on [The Common Sense Canadian website, see Gillis 2010]. It is like a force multiplier, an echo effect .... an amplification effect, a feedback loop. (DG, 19)

Gillis spoke about filming other, similar events, including a highly publicized public hearing into a similar run-of-river project which was held in Pitt Meadows, a Vancouver suburb. He described how Rafe Mair, a former B.C. politician, talk-show host and environmental activist, would get up to the microphone at these meetings and he would start swearing, and throwing out his classic Rafe rant, ‘this whole thing is illegitimate, you are not really asking our opinion, you’re asking us what colour you would like us to paint the power lines’ .... [W]hat I learned from that, and tried to capture in documenting those events, is that it gave people permission to be pissed off .... because it told people that: a) they’re not alone, there are 1,000 other people here who feel just like me; and b) ... you would see like an old grandmother or ... maybe a meeker person who had never really spoken at the microphone, and they thought, ‘Yeah, what he said, that’s how I feel’, and then they would get up to the microphone, and all of a sudden they had permission to be like that. (DG, 20)

In reporting upon these events, Gillis noted that “it is really important to portray these sorts of public actions as the fun, inspiring forms of engagement that they are”. (DG, 20)
Gillis acknowledged a similar dynamic at work in his own unique blend of “factual reporting and editorial comment” (DG, 8), in which his open and honest passion for particular stories and issues attracts the interest and enthusiasm of audiences precisely because he is expressing, validating and legitimating political emotions which many may feel but rarely see reflected in conventional news formats. Referring to ongoing discussions between the provincial government and the LNG industry (which has successfully lobbied for lower royalty and tax rates), he explained

and now I am a British Columbian, and I am pissed off. I am pissed off. Fuck you for trying to hoodwink me. I do not like being bullied. I do not like being scammed. I am trying to be … BC everyman …. And this to me is as close – this is highly subjective – but it is as close to objective truth as I can get in this realm. Because it is based on facts, it is based on two to three years of in-depth research that predicted correctly what is happening right now. And now I am fired up. And I am angry about it. And I feel the appropriate response is to editorialize. (DG, 10)

Objectivity, for Gillis, does not flow out of a (false) balancing in which the claims of industry proponents are arrayed against those of industry critics; instead, it emerges out of a rigorous and detailed investigation of an issue, combined with an open, transparent and passionate response to the results of that investigation. This hybrid of reporting and editorializing allows Gillis to create passionate, engaging journalism which not only informs his readers, but often generates the ‘political energy’ that brings them into the political process. As an example, Gillis described an interview with Eoin Finn, a leading B.C. anti-LNG activist (and retired KMPG partner) in which Finn explained – to Gillis’ surprise – that his own involvement in the issue originated in a public talk about LNG which Gillis had delivered several years earlier (and distributed through social media). He “came to the event, went away with a light bulb on but then he … did his own reading and research and created his own presentation …. there are so many other people that are doing the same thing, these sunshine rays intersecting. So magnify that a thousand times … and that is what social engagement looks like.” (DG, 17) For Gillis, journalism, social media, community engagement and political activism are all at their most powerful when there are thick, dense linkages and networks between them, each amplifying the effects of the other, and each laying the foundation for the others’ success. His political and professional work blends all of these elements in novel, ‘unscripted’ and productive ways, illustrating how communication which works across and between conventional silos can fertilize new opportunities for public engagement. And Gillis himself serves as an advertisement for the effects of such engagement at a personal level: when people suggest that covering this type of politics must be depressing, he counters “no, I am actually a pretty happy, fulfilled, motivated person. Because the antidote to that anxiety about powerlessness is doing something.” (DG, 20)
Where Gillis primarily emphasized the catalyzing effect of political emotions such as anger and defiance, West’s experience with town halls was more conversational and deliberative in character. “Town hall meetings,” he explained, “have been really critical to this work, because it’s a two-way conversation. As much as people come and hear presentations, they also have a real opportunity to engage not only in the questions and answers, but often small community groups will actually form after town halls, and that becomes a vehicle for ongoing organizing effort and ongoing conversation at the local level. (BW, 8) For West, the most exciting prospects of this form of engagement involve giving communities the opportunity to participate in decision-making processes; rather than simply consulting people about proposals which have already been planned behind closed doors, such meetings can engage communities in open-ended conversations about climate and energy futures framed around the need to make – often difficult – political choices about different forms of development. “Part of the reason people believe there is no alternative [is] because they keep getting told there is no alternative.” (BW, 12) Effective public engagement helps shatter that myth as people learn about the range of options and alternatives which do exist, especially within their own communities. Most of the town halls West has participated within were organized in communities located along the route of a proposed pipeline expansion. The most common theme in discussions during those events was not, however, the threat of spills or the impacts of climate change: instead, most wanted to hear more about alternatives to reduce demand, and the possibility of making different, collective choices around energy (and, in particular, transportation). Aging infrastructure, West argued, furnishes an ideal focal point for such conversations because rather than explaining ‘green’ projects in the abstract, one can frame debates around much more concrete, specific choices: do we want to build more highways and bridges, or do we want to invest in mass transit? Do we want to build new coal and gas power plants, or do we want to kick-start the transition to renewables? This is “a much better way to have the conversation, because if we just talk about green energy, it puts the environmental movement on the defensive .... I think it is better to be saying, ‘Well, here’s the flaws of this, here’s the flaws of that. What would you like to see happen, and where do you want it to go, and how can we actually make this benefit local communities as much as possible?’” (BW, 10) Based upon his experiences with dozens of town hall meetings in B.C. (primarily on pipeline expansion), West suggested there is a real appetite for these types of open-ended, future-directed, solutions-oriented, choice-making conversations at a community level.
Clearly there are important parallels here with The Tyee's vision of solutions-focused journalism, but for West, Biggar, Gillis and others there was a much greater emphasis upon cultivating ideas and experiences of political efficacy more broadly among individuals and communities, as compared to pollinating pre-existing networks of influencers with ideas and information. A communications specialist with a large B.C. environmental organization foregrounded efficacy as the missing link in reaching people who are aware but largely inactive around climate change. “What I’ve found with that group is that ... the reason more than not that they’re not engaged is a lack of belief in their own self-efficacy. So they don’t believe that their actions will make a difference.” (ENGO, 10) While information about solutions may attract their attention and support, shifting them along the engagement continuum requires narratively grounded communication which prioritizes questions of values, experience, emotions and identity. An issue-based approach is not enough. We have to actually also say, ‘And if you do these things, it will help here and here’s how, and here’s how it will make your community better, and here’s how you will feel, and here’s how other people will treat you, and all of those different value pieces .... We’ve spent some time as a community [ENGOs] having a somewhat crass understanding of this, in terms of, say, economic pay-off for energy efficiency and things like that, but there’s a much deeper, nuanced understanding of the value proposition of engaging with this issue, of how do you feel when you stand up and are a part of your community, when you take leadership in your community, when you are an advocate among your peers. (ENGO, 10)

In his study of alternative media coverage of climate, Gunster suggests that behavioural research on social norms may hold important clues about how to increase levels of political engagement. Such research distinguishes between the effects of injunctive norms on the one hand (prescriptions for how people should behave) and descriptive norms on the other (descriptions of how people are behaving), noting that the latter tend to be far more effective in motivating behaviour.

Showing people that others – and, preferably, others like them, with whom they can identify and empathize – are engaging in a particular form of action is a far better means of persuasion than simply explaining or asserting the need for or the benefits of that form of action .... According to this logic, the best means of increasing civic engagement would be to represent such behaviour as common, widespread, pleasurable and politically effective: in short, as normal (Gunster 2012: 262). Moral injunctions to ‘get active’ in climate politics are common feature of environmental communication, and they may have some impact in terms of activating values and beliefs which can motivate people to get engaged. But they also risk amplifying feelings of guilt and frustration.
as people experience and feel pressured to participate in activities which are unfamiliar to them, or which they perceive will set them apart from their peers. Stories about the experiences of people who already participate in climate politics – which not only describe why they are active, but how that experience makes them feel, has affected their identity, and changed how they understand and engage with the world – can provide a much easier point of entry into political engagement. Such accounts help bridge the gap between passive and active forms of citizenship, smoothing the transition from the former to the latter as people come to understand different forms of democratic engagement as normal activities which people just like them are doing (and enjoying) in order to express and act upon their desire to do something about climate change.

Washbrook, a local anti-coal activist and one of the founders of VTACC, explained that “for me, what works the most is, what I think resonates with people the most is .... I really try to present myself as an ordinary, middle-aged man with kids – I am not a young radical. And I am doing this because I think I have a moral obligation to, because I know how bad it is, and the choices are either turn away and ignore it or do something about it.” (KW, 5) He noted that sharing his own personal story is not something that comes easily to him – “I do not really enjoy talking about myself, I do not enjoy being part of the public realm” (KW, 7) – but he also discovered that grounding his activism in his own biography and even lifestyle afforded him a moral credibility, and gave audiences an entry point into his politics, that staying at the level of issues and facts did not. Washbrook and his family, for example, have chosen not to fly, and they largely rely upon mass transit or cycling for local transportation. “People are endlessly fascinated by that:  ‘Well, how do you get around?’ And I noticed now that when I give a talk – that because people have said this kind of thing – that I talk more about myself, situating my talks in my own experience, and people come up to me afterwords and say, ‘I was pretty sceptical of you, but the fact that you do not fly is pretty impressive’.” (KW, 7) He was quick to emphasize the limits of ‘lifestyle’ activism and the need to frame such choices as exemplary rather than judgmental or moralizing, as a narrative hook to draw people into thinking about why he feels so strongly about climate change, rather than establishing some kind of minimal threshold for behavioural change. “Do not sweat the details,” he always advises audiences, “do not worry about the little things; the most important thing to do is just get engaged”. (KW, 8)

Even more important than reinforcing the virtues and necessity of political engagement, however, is providing people with practical and accessible advice about what to do and how to get involved. Eveland and Scheufele describe this as “mobilizing information”:
content that goes beyond information about the political system or political actors to enable citizens to understand problems related to their communities and to engage in various forms of participatory activities. In other words, mobilizing information integrates political issues and conflicts into the context of the larger community and provides information on whom to contact, how to donate money, or where to voice one’s opinion. (2000: 220)

As Washbrook explains, “we are not saying to people: ‘Go out and get engaged’. We are saying, ‘Council is voting Tuesday night on this, why don’t you send council an email today, here are their email addresses, here are some of the big points to write, and send us a copy so that we know that you’ve done it. That was great, now we are going to go speak at the Port of Metro Vancouver AGM. You should come down, we are going to meet outside at the doors at two o’clock and talk for a bit then go inside.’” (KW, 9) Washbrook’s motivation to found VTACC arose out of a frustration with how many global environmental groups primarily address audiences as potential donors: “we thought there must be more of a role for individual people, so we just started doing stuff .... We happened to be in [Premier] Gordon Campbell’s riding so we did this rally against proposed coal plants in BC ....” (KW, 10) This experience – as an ‘ordinary guy’ starting up an activist group – lies at the core of one of Washbrook’s most hopeful and empowering messages: “people need to realize how easy this [political engagement] is”. (KW, 10)

For Gillis, making political engagement meaningful and accessible involves telling stories about those who are already engaged. With respect to the run-of-river projects described earlier, he explained that his objective was to “put a person to a river for every one of these [proposals]”. (DG, 18) In one case, it was “a bunch of these crazy kayakers who had been putting their lives on the line to invoke the Navigable Waters Protection Act” to prevent development of the river. It was “through their eyes that I engage with their particular river .... I filmed these guys going like crazy and I talked to them why they were doing what they were doing”. (DG, 18) In other places, it was horse ranchers, local farmers or even religious communities: and in each case, these individuals and groups were not simply portrayed as victims, but as “really interesting people ... living out their resistance”. (DG, 19) The highly decentralized structure and practices of Leadnow means that the group has to lean heavily upon the political labour and instincts of volunteers to organize, coordinate and lead local campaigns across the country. Such campaigns often begin, Biggar explained, with

people signing a petition and then we are, ‘Okay, there is going to be an action, and we are going to email you and we are going to ask if people can host events.’ Okay, so now we have hosts. Now, we are going to email everybody else and ask them to go out to those events. Now we have a
whole bunch of events. What you find is that it is surprisingly easy, and that it generates enormous numbers of first-time leaders. People who have never done anything before. (JB, 8)

Underlying this organizational model is an elementary faith in the capacity and desire of ‘ordinary people’ to get involved in issues they care about, a faith that has been richly rewarded in the case of Leadnow. “You have to trust these people .... 'OK, person who we have never met before, go lead a rally for us in front of an MP’s office. There is a lot of trust in that. And what we find is that that trust is very rarely misplaced.” (JB, 8) Beyond the specific impacts any given campaign or event will have, they also produce new stories of political awakening, struggle and success which can, in turn, be fed back into social networks, creating synergistic feedback loops of communication and activism which enhance perceptions of (collective) efficacy and hope. One of Leadnow’s most powerful and effective messages, Biggar noted, took the form of a testimonial from a campaign volunteer explaining how and why she had become involved in the group and describing her experiences, including how they made her feel. Stories of political participation (and associated experiences of empowerment and solidarity) – especially from ‘ordinary’ people with whom audiences can empathize – are among the most powerful communications strategies for countering the political cynicism that individuals cannot have any meaningful impact upon the political process.
Appendix I: Interview Participants

Alternative media
David Beers, Founding Editor, The Tyee [DB]
Geoff Dembicki, Lead Sustainability Writer, The Tyee [GD]
Damien Gillis, Editor, The Common Sense Canadian and documentary filmmaker [DG]
Chris Wood, Coordinating Editor, Tyee Solutions Society [CW]
Linda Solomon Wood, Founder, Editor and Publisher, Vancouver Observer [LW]

Environmental advocacy NGOs
P.J. Partington, Climate Policy Analyst, Pembina Institute (Toronto) [PJ]
Kevin Sauve, Communications Lead, Pembina Institute, BC [KS]
Ben West, Executive Director, Tanker Free B.C. [BW]
*Communications Specialist, B.C. Environmental Advocacy NGO [ENGO]

Political advocacy NGOs
Jamie Biggar, Executive Director, Lead Now [JB]
Kevin Washbrook, Founder, Voters Taking Action on Climate Change (VTACC) [KW]
Alan Dutton, spokesperson, Burnaby Residents Opposing Kinder Morgan Expansion (BROKE) [AD]

* All participants were given the opportunity to participate anonymously in this research. One participant chose this option, and this individual has been identified as a communications specialist with a B.C. based environmental advocacy organization.

In-text citations refer to the page number of the transcript.
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