

“Clean” and “Coal”: A Rhetorical Analysis of the Campaign to Rebrand Coal

In the 2008 presidential campaign, one of the major issues on everyone’s agenda was the need to invest in green energy. The purported green energy source “clean coal” took center stage as a major talking point for Republicans and Democrats alike. What exactly is clean coal? The term refers to coal produced by new technologies for capturing and sequestering coal by-products that reduces the harmful impacts of coal on the environment. Does clean coal exist? No. The emerging technologies referred to have not moved from concept to reality, despite billions of dollars of investment since 2001 (made possible only with the support of the Bush administration¹). Larry Schweiger, president of the National Wildlife Federation, writes, “carbon capture and sequestration technology does not exist in a single coal-fired power plant in America” and that it won’t “without an aggressive climate cap and invest law,” adding that “the coal industry and its allies have vehemently opposed both of these potential solutions” (2009). As such, the movement for clean coal serves as a thinly veiled promotional vehicle for investment in the coal industry. This paper tracks the battle to persuade Americans to invest in clean coal, describes the two main advocacy groups on either side, and compares their arguments for and against clean coal as presented through public education campaigns on their websites.

The trajectory of the idea of clean coal in the US public imagination can be tracked by proxy by examining frequency of media mentions. For the year 1992, a search for “clean coal” in Google’s news archive turns up 126 mentions. Similar numbers persist for nearly a decade. In 2001, the frequency of the term escalates to 1100 mentions for the year, up over

¹ A cursory review of media articles that mention “clean coal” from 2001 onwards detail the heavy investments made by the federal government during this period.

400% from the previous year. And by 2008, the phrase “clean coal” yields a staggering 6790 mentions annually, nearly a quarter of all mentions found. But this only describes the timeline, it does not elucidate how the idea was disseminated. A closer look at the content and sources of the media mentions helps shed light on who brought the idea to the larger public and why.

Sometime in mid-2006, I was checking my Yahoo email inbox, when I noticed a large banner ad to the right inviting me to support clean coal at learnaboutcoal.org. I couldn't help but give a chuckle of disbelief. How on earth could coal be clean? I clicked on the link to find out who was behind this piece of linguistic sleight of hand. The name at the bottom of the webpage was Americans for Balanced Energy Choices (ABEC). At the time, there was very little information about who belonged to ABEC, but today, ABEC has its own entry in SourceWatch, a wiki that tracks and provides details on PR firms, activist groups and government agencies who shape the public agenda. ABEC is described as an astroturf² advocacy group promoting the interests of mining companies, coal transporters, and electricity producers (SourceWatch 2009).

Today, neither the Learn About Coal website nor ABEC exist, but the clean coal movement continues under a new name and format. According to The Internet Archive's Wayback Machine³, learnaboutcoal.org was active from at least Mar 10, 2006 to Jan 12, 2008. Since the beginning of this year, the URL has redirected to americaspower.org, the main source of pro-clean coal information and ads. ABEC merged with the Center for Energy and Economic Development to form a new coal industry front group, American Coalition for

² According to SourceWatch, astroturf or “democracy for hire” groups present themselves as grassroots-based citizen groups or coalitions but are primarily conceived, created and/or funded by corporations, industry trade associations, political interests or public relations firms.

³ The Internet Archives' Wayback Machine has archived 85 billion web pages from 1996 to now, providing outdated and nonexistent archived copies of old websites for public review.

Clean Coal Electricity (ACCCE), on April 17, 2008 (SourceWatch 2009). ACCCE sponsors the America's Power website and spends an estimated \$48 million a year on outreach and lobbying activities in support of their mission to promote clean coal (Davenport 2009). ACCCE describes itself as "a partnership of the industries involved in producing electricity from coal" and now lists its members on the site – 47 different coal companies (ACCCE 2009). This was not the case, however, when America's Power was first launched, as the sponsor description was still for ABEC, which described itself as "a voice to community leaders in the development of energy and environmental policies" and didn't clarify its intimate ties to the coal industry (ABEC 2007).

The movement to promote clean coal has elicited a coordinated campaign to combat the information being disseminated by the ACCCE. The League of Conservation Voters, Natural Resources Defense Council, National Wildlife Federation, and Sierra Club came together to form the Reality Coalition, which funds and runs the thisisreality.org website. The Reality Coalition organizes its defense around the idea that "In reality, there is no such thing as 'clean' coal" (Reality Coalition 2009). This message is a direct response to America's Power, which bases its argument on promoting coal as an essential and vital engine for the US economy rather than proving the statement that coal is an eco-friendly source of power.

The Reality Coalition campaign has a clear mission, to directly respond to the America's Power campaign. The facts presented on the campaign's website relate directly to its argument. America's Power supports investment in the coal industry, which can only happen with the possibility of coal becoming a cleaner energy source. Therefore, it must create the idea of clean coal, but it without a central truth of coal actually being clean. The campaign's marketing strategy is based on creating warm feelings for coal as a major element of the American economy, and the facts on its website support this indirect argument.

The America's Power website is designed in an eco-friendly palette of white, blue and green, and includes a striking logo of a plug being inserted into a piece of coal to symbolize its main message that coal is the engine powering the United States economy. The audience for the site appears to be mainstream middle Americans, with a focus on those from coal-producing states like Wyoming and Texas. The main sections of the website are labeled The Facts, Ask the Experts, Issues & Policy, News, Who We Are and their blog, titled Behind the Plug. These are the typical sections found on any political or grassroots campaign, but a closer look at the section called The Facts reveals problems with its title.

The landing page for the section doesn't actually list any facts, but instead focuses on directing readers to their state's electricity profile to see the prominent role coal plays in powering the electricity grid. A link to the actual facts page is included on the page and is accurately called "factoids;" the bulk of the 17 bullet pointed statements do nothing to support the idea that coal is clean and safe for the environment. Most of the statements prove that coal is cheap, plentiful, and popular, but only one directly relates to proving that coal is safe for the environment. Unfortunately, the statement is not clear: "Today, America's coal-based generating fleet is 70% cleaner (based upon regulated emissions per unit of energy produced) thanks, in part, to \$50 billion invested in new technologies." The statement does not explain the timeframe or to which specific new technologies the investment was directed. And while "70% cleaner" sounds good, if the base emissions were bad to begin with, 70% better may not mean much. As it is not given a source, the statement cannot be clarified or proven, leaving it a meaningless statistic. None of the statements on the factoids page are sourced, in direct contract to the Reality Coalition's website.

The Reality Coalition's website is designed in a cutting-edge combination of black and yellow, with clever flash elements that invite a very different audience from America's

Power. Their audience could be expected to be more media savvy and appreciative of a creative approach to the issues, probably younger than the America's Power audience. The main sections are Reality Blog, The Facts, Watch the TV Spot, About Us, Get Involved, and Share Reality. The Reality Coalition website's fact section is strikingly different from that of America's Power, without an intermediary landing page to distract readers. Each of the 14 statements is clearly sourced, and each one relates in some way to its main argument that coal is not clean and is not a good energy alternative now or in the future. There is a link to an additional page of Details, which lays out their argument in full.

So who is winning the battle to rebrand coal? As of December of 2008, there is data available to show that the ACCCE campaign has made significant advances. The Hawthorn Group of Virginia, who designed and implemented the ACCCE's campaign, touts its successes in its newsletter, noting that "In September 2007, on the key measurement question—*Do you support/oppose the use of coal to generate electricity?*—we found 46 percent support and 50 percent oppose. In a 2008 year-end survey that result had shifted to 72 percent support and 22 percent oppose. Not only did we see significantly increased support, opposition was cut by more than half" (Hammelman 2008). Much of The Hawthorn Group's successes came from timing and targeting; the height of its activities came during the presidential campaign when it was at virtually every rally possible. Another observation from the newsletter: "devising and implementing a strategy that focused on going where the news was happening and the crowds were gathering gave us greater results than trying to make people and news come to us" (Hammelman 2008). There is no doubt that the Reality Coalition faces an uphill battle to turn the tide of public opinion. The Reality Coalition website is aimed at a somewhat different demographic from the ACCCE's target, so it also remains to be seen how successful their targeting is.

The outcome of the battle for investment in coal is similarly murky. The key decisionmakers are largely government-based and the transition to the new administration is still underway. While the Obama campaign consistently discussed clean coal as a major component of his green energy platform in the run-up to the election, it is debatable whether investment will be as heavy on coal in the future. The Department of Energy still defines clean coal as "a new generation of energy processes that sharply reduce air emissions and other pollutants from coal-burning power plants." The Reality Coalition website, however, notes a significant turning point for stricter standards for carbon emissions: the Environmental Protection Agency has decided to reconsider carbon dioxide regulation, which the campaign views as "a serious wake up call to the coal industry." We can only hope that the new administration takes its cues from facts about environmental impacts and not factoids.

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