Greta Thunberg in Canada: Climate Activism, Mediated Imagery, and Public Sphere

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Abstract

The significance of the ongoing climate debates is characterized by discursive media representations that disseminate mediated constructs of images and ideas to the public sphere. By analysing the recent accounts of Greta Thunberg's visit to Edmonton, Alberta, this research paper examines the effect of media representations in forming public opinion. It argues that celebrating the emergence of a new Thunberg-era climate discourse through mediated images has reinforced political, cultural, and economic scepticisms that led to repercussions in the form of agitations in the democratic process. Exposure to discourses in the form of activism, counter-activism, and propaganda has had an impact on the oil-based economy of Canada, especially in the results of the 2019 federal election. Through the focused visualization of mediated imagery, these discourses can play an agenda-setting role in shaping public opinion, even in the presence of a refeudalized public sphere.

Key Words: Greta Thunberg, Media, Imagery, Public Sphere, Climate Change, Activism, Propaganda

Greta Thunberg, the globally renowned climate crisis activist, visited the city of Edmonton, Alberta on 18 October 2019 to participate in the city's second climate rally, with the first having taken place on 27 September 2019 (CBC, 2019; Lawrence & Dyer, 2019). The rally drew a police-estimated crowd of 4,000 people, but organisers suggest the number was closer to 10,000 participants. The climate strike with Greta Thunberg featured local activist groups such as Climate Justice Edmonton, Indigenous Climate Action, Beaver Hill Warriors, and Edmonton Youth for Climate (Ahmed, 2019). Thunberg took the opportunity to address the city's climate strike participants and urged them to take the warnings of climate scientists seriously, stressing that Canada and its developed allies must lead the way in reducing

greenhouse gas emissions so that developing nations may build their quality of life to the standards of developed nations.

However, the protests were not unidirectional in their motives. Among the protesters were a group of counter-protesters from the United We Roll convoy, a group of pro-oil and gas activists who drove from the city of Red Deer, Alberta to stage a demonstration against what they describe as foreign activists interfering with the country's politics and energy industry (Medicine Hat News, 2019). These protests emphasised that Thunberg's climate crisis activism is a threat to Alberta's oil and gas industry (Zabjek, 2019a). However, this was not her first time in Canada; she had participated in a similar climate strike in Montreal on 27 September 2019, before briefly meeting with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. At the Montreal climate strike, her message was similar; society must take serious steps to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in order to preserve the future (Laframboise, 2019). Thunberg soon became the poster child for climate movements all around the world, inspiring millions of students and adults to take part in discourses related to climate change. The climate strikes demand that governments take immediate action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions before it is too late to prevent catastrophic events of climate change (Haynes, 2019).

Thunberg's role in the climate debate elevated the issue to new proportions of political communication, especially because her emotional and rebellious involvement revealed that environmental issues are perceived in the public sphere with a triviality that encourages people to not intervene in such matters (Skilbeck, 2020). Her involvement in politicizing the problem of climate change has resulted in the production of new perspectives through which contradicting public opinions are shaped by the media. The construction and validation of such opinions will have repercussions affecting the political and economic totality of a nation. In this context, international movements of global celebrities like Greta Thunberg instigate reactions that are outside the original motivations of their interventions. This paper, therefore, examines the context of Thunberg's visit to Canada to analyse how the discourse of climate change when mediated through constructed images influenced the oil-depended Canadian economy and political communications associated with it. Her visit to Alberta came just before the country's federal election on 21 October 2019, where Justin Trudeau's Liberal Party won a minority government. Consequently, the 2019 election campaign approached climate change as a major issue, with most federal parties running on a plan to cut greenhouse gas emissions (McIntosh, Syed, & Sharp, 2019). This article questions the way mass media facilitates the formation of public opinion around subjects like the climate activism of Greta Thunberg and its subsequent construction of public images by disseminating information in the form of activism, counter-activism, and propaganda.

Thunberg-era climate activism

Greta Thunberg has emerged as the most recognisable figure in the field of youth activism that significantly contributes to the process of international norm creation (Heidrich & Nakonieczna-Bartosiewicz, 2021). The celebrity image of Thunberg was popularised after videos of her speeches addressing world leaders about the climate crisis went viral. Her speech at the United Nations Climate Action Summit 2019 provoked listeners to consider the significance of climate change as a global phenomenon. This was further reinforced by her emotionally confronting demeanor and frequent use of scientific literature to deliver information that invokes an immediate mass reaction to her concerns (Milman & Smith, 2019). By providing a context that pointed to human activities sanctioned by powerful authoritative systems, Thunberg used her own life as an example of climate collateral damage. The semiotics of her UN speech significantly contributed to the transference of the feeling of guilt and responsibility to the audience (Karisa & Lauwren, 2020). The massive reception of her image was disseminated through news reports and social media interactions; this includes Time Magazine choosing her as 2019 Person of the Year (Alter, Haynes, & Worland, 2019). More climate rallies and environmental protests were influenced by this mercurial rise of Thunberg's stardom.

The exposure to a global audience through media platforms that focused on the 'radical teenage activist' image of Thunberg speaks about how media consolidated the complexities of climate change to a single person. The iconised figure of her activist self has become a symbolisation of the global climate movement, and in terms of constructing a self-identity of her own through her public performance, she is observed as a catalyst in mobilising public advocacy and mass action hitherto unfamiliar in the case of climate activism (Schiermeier, 2019; Wong & Raphael, 2020).

A study by Lewandowsky et al. (2019) argues that an individual's attitude towards issues like climate change is affected by the perceived social attitude towards the same issue. This becomes more problematic when 'a sizeable and highly vocal segment of the public denies those facts for political or ideological reasons' (Lewandowsky, Gignac, & Oberauer, 2013). Similarly, issues around reliability cut across all academic disciplines when examining news media. For instance, Damico, Baildon, and Panos (2018) described the society after the 2016 U.S. election as being 'post-truth' which they claim is defined as 'circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief'. The issue of climate change highlights these circumstances because many continue to deny the scientific evidence related to its existence. Therefore, people depend on 'reliability stories' which are 'stories we live by', and when provided with opposing views on climate change, they considered 'provenance, purpose, and

content' when evaluating the sources' reliability (Damico, Baildon, and Panos, 2018, p. 23).

The emergence of Greta Thunberg is therefore part of media construction as much as it is part of her agency as a young individual capable of overcoming many hurdles to get her point across the world. García (2020) argues that the self-construction of Thunberg's activism is rendered through audiovisual and written life-writing texts. Hence, it is central to understand the 'reported' and perceived story of the Thunberg-era climate debates and its intergenerational and transnational impact on local spaces of specific political, cultural, and economic structures. The relationship between the psychological effects of media and the perceived social consensus of opinions reveals the nature of personal convictions and the ways they relate to media literacy around the subject of climate change.

Since the 2019 election campaign was influenced by the issue of climate change, public opinion toward Canada's energy industry became particularly significant. This paper attempts to answer the following questions: 1. Did the media depiction of Greta Thunberg and the use of her constructed image invoke reactions from the Canadian public? 2. Did the use of her platform affect the outcome of the 2019 federal election? Examining the official election results, theoretical framework surrounding media messaging, and scientific observations about climate change, this article analyses the role of news media in shaping public opinion. How does print news media succeed or fail in facilitating a change in public opinion on the issue of climate change? What kind of information have major newspapers highlighted in their coverage of Greta Thunberg's message in Alberta's public sphere?

Climate debate and the public sphere

During her visit to Canada, Greta Thunberg reiterated how political inactivity to climate change is ruining the lives of young children: 'we aren't doing it because it's fun... we are doing this because our future it at stake', she said in her speech (Dyer, 2019). This purported immediacy of the climate crisis comes from the notion of an existential threat that leads to new problems related to 'climate refugees' and their legal status in an international level (Sciaccaluga, 2020). Ideological approaches that unite an anti-capitalist movement with more focus on indigenous populations are faced with parallel theories of its practical application, especially related to geo-engineering, which 'has enormous consequences for the adaptation of the political' (Mann & Wainwright, 2018, p. 149). Since many have rationalised the 'crisis' as a problem for future generations to deal with, the construction of conspiracy theories and other counter-protests are contributing significantly to the common knowledge of the public sphere.

German sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas (1991) theorised the public sphere as a domain separate from the state and the economy, where members of the public can engage in discourses. The public sphere is 'made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state' (p. 176). For Habermas, the public sphere's success depended on critical and rational discourse, where everyone could participate equally. The barriers based on race, religion, and gender were lowered in an ideal public sphere, however, new barriers such as payment for access, and the growth of private interest began to emerge. For instance, Habermas blames the intertwining of editorial sections with advertising, making the press 'an institution of certain participants in the public sphere in their capacity as private individuals; that is, it became a gate through which privileged private interests invaded the public sphere' (Habermas, 1991, p. 185).

The media depiction of the climate debate demonstrates the habit of journalism in depicting a dualistic view of climate change. This dichotomy, as Kangas (2019) has approached it, is part of visualising two aspects of discourse between two opposing viewpoints. The notion of perceived social consensus (Lewandowsky, Cook, Fay, & Gignac, 2019) points further into Habermas's theory of the public sphere. To Habermas, the public sphere can be *refeudalized* by the influence of public relations, saying publicity 'imitates the kind of aura proper to the personal prestige and supernatural authority once bestowed by the kind of publicity involved in representation' (p. 195). Jamie Warner (2013) suggests that 'the wholesale adoption of marketing techniques by the state and political actors connects the two in a way only glimpsed by Habermas in the early 1960s' (p. 286). According to Warner, the refeudalizing of the public sphere envisioned by Habermas preserves a farce of the public discourse necessary for democracy, arguing this function 'has been completely captured by professionals in political consulting' (p. 288). On top of this, the integration of private interests, advertising and entertainment into the media has allowed technology to target individuals as constituents or customers with what companies think they want to hear (p. 290).

While Habermas's concept of public opinion must meet the criteria of forming rationally, and through public discussion, Warner argues that the tactics of private technology and telecommunications companies, such as Facebook and Google, prevent such discussions from happening (p. 290). In what is known as the refeudalized public sphere, the images constructed by the media may be taken uncritically by members of the public.

Picturising climate change in media

Jarkko Kangas (2019) argues that the images invoked in the media coverage of climate change have undesirable effects. His analysis uses the presence of two

common themes in the imagery of climate change reporting: *the smokestack* and *renewable energy*. Kangas examines the imagery shared on the 'climate change' section of the international version of *The Guardian Online* in November-December 2015, the period of the UN Paris climate summit (2019), and finds that *The Guardian* published 1,046 pictures mostly depicting activists, protesters, and politicians. His set of 140 images contains the themes he focuses on, depicting 87 *causes* and 53 *responses* to the climate problem (Kangas, 2019).

The analysis of images depicting the *causes* of climate change found that 52 percent of the images held a visual theme of fossil fuels and energy technology, while only 11 percent focused on traffic, and a combined 12 percent focused on air pollution and agriculture. Kangas describes these depictions as a 'rather radical limitation to the multiple relevant ways of approaching the phenomenon' as other complex factors like population growth and deforestation 'are all but neglected'. He asserts that these depictions leave little room for the consideration of tackling climate change through individual responsibility, and decisions surrounding cultural or lifestyle changes (p. 67).

When analyzing the image set of *responses* to climate change, a similar majority was held by images depicting renewable energy. Wind and solar energy technology held a combined 60 percent of the samples, with only 9 percent depicting forests or plantations. Building and lightning images made up only 8 percent, and 4 percent each was shown depicting bicycling and other sources of energy. While arguing that the two types of images represent opposing alternatives to each other that emphasize a technological aspect of the climate problem, Kangas says the visual dichotomy is 'inherent in the conventional media climate imagery' (p. 68). The two visual themes of smokestacks and renewable energy represent alternatives to each other, embody more abstract conceptual categories of 'cause' and 'response', and suggest a technology-oriented view on climate change (Kangas, 2019). This contrast exists between what Kangas calls 'two modernities', i.e., an unsustainable current path and an ideal alternative, where the two narratives construct images of their respective ideologies.

Media reaction to the 'Thunberg effect'

Over the period leading up to and following Greta Thunberg's visit, Alberta-based print media has produced news and opinion pieces on the subject: twenty-two articles, columns, editorials, and opinion letters focused on Thunberg's visit, the politics of climate change activism, and the events surrounding her visit. These events include the climate strike rally, the United We Roll convoy's counter-protest, the Premier of Alberta's actions away from the rally, the painting of a mural depicting Thunberg's likeness, and the vandalism of that same mural. Some opinion pieces focused on the ethics of action or inaction on climate change, the veracity of climate

science and climate scepticism, and the ways Alberta can benefit from action on climate change.

The news articles had used neutral language in their descriptions of Thunberg's visit, the defacing of the mural depicting her, the launch of a gas pipeline Premier Jason Kenney attended, the climate strike rally, and the United We Roll convoy. Of note is an article discussing a resident's experience attending the rally with her young daughter (Cranker, 2019). One *National Post* article about the defacing of Greta Thunberg's mural refers to the vandals behind it as 'Big Boys', suggesting a demeaning tone (Warnica, 2019). An article from *Medicine Hat News* hears the voices of Energy Minister Sonya Savage, Premier Jason Kenney, and Rachel Notley, and interviews from the United We Roll convoy. The focus of the article is on the convoy's counter-protest and positions the issue as a debate between economic prosperity and action on climate change.

Three columnists who voiced their opinion on Thunberg's visit were unsupportive in their analysis of the visit. *The Calgary Sun*'s column turned the issue of climate change as a real-world versus dream-world dichotomy; depicting Thunberg as an idealist with unrealistic propositions and a cult following (Bell, 2019). *The National Post*'s column makes an explicit mention of the 2019 federal election and 'the future of Alberta'. The author casts doubt on the veracity of mainstream climate science, depicts the urge to act on the climate crisis as a struggle between Alberta's future and virtue-signaling derides progressive politics of the Liberal, NDP and Green party platforms, and calls a collaboration between them 'anti-oil' (Murphy, 2019). A second column from *The National Post* continues the trend of treating mainstream climate change narratives with skepticism and positions the message of Thunberg as an affront to the prosperity of Alberta. It criticises Edmonton and Calgary mayors Don Iveson and Naheed Nenshi for offering to meet with Thunberg during her visit and positions Premier Jason Kenney's stance as common sense. Referring to those who seek action against climate change as 'alarmists', the author is dismissive in his narrative of the movement behind Greta Thunberg and notes that she could be influencing the election (Corcoran, 2019).

Opinion letters and editorials numbered the most out of any single category, with nine pieces covering different perspectives on the matter. Common themes among those rejecting Thunberg and her activism include rationalising Canada as a country that pollutes less and produces oil and gas more ethically in comparison to China and Saudi Arabia (Banks, 2019). Other themes include skepticism behind Thunberg's global travels and advocacy with suggestions that she is funded by unseen forces (Agar, 2019; Richl, 2019). One opinion compares the rhetoric behind the climate crisis to cold war-era talk of nuclear annihilation, though explicitly calls activists 'climate alarmists' (Pendergast, 2019). Other opinions voiced through

editorials and letters include criticism of Premier Jason Kenney for not meeting with Thunberg during her visit (Neufeld, 2019), the ways Alberta can benefit from a transition to a renewable energy-based economy (Firme, 2019), and upholds Thunberg's activism as a force of good, citing how she ought to be a catalyst for steps to mitigate climate change (Pentland, 2019). One editorial discusses the defacing of Greta Thunberg's mural in Edmonton, making a case for sympathising with the worries of those affected by a decline in the oil and gas industry, but urges constructive dialogue. The authors liken polarising and divisive discourse to childish name-calling and ask Albertans to behave like adults to find solutions to the 'climate crisis' (Thomson, Easton, & Doran, 2019).

The media coverage of Thunberg's visit shows a pattern of established opinion columnists taking an uncharitable stance against Thunberg and her advocacy. A total of seven published opinions took an explicit stance against Thunberg and climate change activism, while ten news articles presented a neutral stance on the events. The remaining four opinions addressed the events surrounding Thunberg's visit and climate change activism in general. By the numbers, 45.45 percent presented a neutral coverage with little spin, while 36.36 percent presented opinions rejecting Thunberg's visit, and 18.18 percent endorsed her actions. The numbers suggest a stronger presence of negative published opinions than positive ones, with neutral positions holding a plurality, but not a majority. When compared with Edmonton's 2019 election results, a very stark contrast is noticeable among party victories. The Conservative Party of Canada took the lion's share of the vote in Alberta, with 33 out of the province's 34 electoral districts.

Of those 34, eight are in the city of Edmonton, with the only non-Conservative Party win going to Heather McPherson of the New Democratic Party in Edmonton – Strathcona. The 43rd federal election swept out two prominent Liberal MPs in two Edmonton ridings (Elections Canada, 2019). The Conservative Party of Canada took a sweep of non-CPC-held ridings across the prairie provinces and easily won the most in Alberta on election night. The Conservative Party of Canada has also been criticised this past election for having a lackluster plan to address climate change, which has been depicted in the media as being costly and ineffective (Wherry, 2019). The findings analyzed in this essay paint a picture of the civil democracy the public sphere depends on, and point to the undeniable power of media in shaping narratives that influence democratic processes like elections.

Political communication and propaganda: Impact on public opinion

In 2018, Alberta contributed $71.5 billion to Canada's GDP from its oil and gas production. The oil and gas industry provided more than 62,000 jobs in 2018, and the country's primary energy production was produced majority by crude oil and

natural gas, leading the way with 56 percent. Canada has the third-largest proven oil reserves in the world, a share of 10 percent, with 96 percent of those reserves located in Albert's oil sands (Natural Resources Canada, 2019). According to a study by Stanford University, the country's oil and gas sector ranks among the highest in the world for carbon-intensive oil production, with high emissions (Garthwaite, 2018).

Therefore, political communications that surround climate activism in Canada must focus on the country's status as an economy depending on oil production and distribution. The emphasis on Alberta's role as the oil capital of North America is a significant factor in discussions of environmental activism, which, in the context of Thunberg's visit to Alberta, provides a basis for public opinion formation. When Thunberg's climate strike march at the Alberta legislative building was interrupted by pro-energy activists with noisy bull horns and placards that said: 'we need oil and gas' and 'we love Canada energy' (Zabjek, 2019b), it automatically created a form of local skepticism towards global idealistic claims about the climate emergency. The geopolitical significance of Alberta's oil sands which contain large deposits of bitumen has been associated with concerns regarding environmental pollution that threatens the cultural, geographical, and economic existence of the indigenous population of the area. The construction of pipelines that carry oil sand and bitumen to over half a dozen states in the USA and to all the provinces in Canada had met with protests from the indigenous First Nations communities, which after Thunberg's arrival got more media exposure; including Thunberg meeting the First Nation chief as part of a BBC interview (CTV News, 2019). The pictures and videos of this meeting created a form of new mediated imagery that connected the global with the local to disseminate the notion of solidarity.

Since the shaping of public opinion depends on the 'process of political communication in the public sphere' (Kriesi, 2004, p. 188), the mediated images of climate activism or counter activism can decide the outcomes of public opinion. The opinions that separate the climate activists from the pro-energy activists were decided by the type of 'political reality' with which the consumers interact in a complex vortex of information controlled by the globalized market economy. The objective, subjective and constructed forms of political reality (Kaid et.al, 1991), when consumed by an international population with ideological leanings, the veracity of the mediated realities get lost in the very process of the transfer of these messages. In this way, parties from both sides can accuse the other of propaganda to rationalise their respective positions. Corner (2007) observes 'propaganda as a communicative practice' which is exercised through processes like 'strategic selection' and 'exaggeration' of materials, emphasising events that 'appeal to desire or fear', and using 'a rhetoric of visual display' to imitate or symbolize opinions.

The climate debates can therefore be observed as part of the 'propaganda model' of media interventions, which according to Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky (1988) 'suggests a systematic and highly political dichotomization in news coverage based on serviceability to important domestic power interests' (p. 35). The news reports of Thunberg's visit in Edmonton have been functioning as a medium that projects a polarised view, satisfying arguments from both groups of the international climate debate. Jessalynn Keller (2021) observes that the global circulation of Thunberg's image as a 'mediated transnational girlhood' exposes the patriarchal underpinnings of Alberta's local oil culture. Keller cites the sexually assaulted depiction of the teen in a sticker image and the defacing of the artistic street mural as examples of local responses that have been circulated internationally by media interventions. These depictions that highlight deviancies, which often include Thunberg's own performativity in the public as a teenage girl with Asperger's syndrome, create a counterintuitive sarcastic evaluation of the mediated images that not only discredit the person but the views and opinions associated with her/him (Konyaeva & Samsonova, 2021). Public opinions are the result of the act of manufacturing and manipulation through which media systems enforce their propaganda to control the masses (Chomsky, 1991). This operation of propaganda is often realised through election results where public opinion is ratified hegemonically.

Comparisons of the results of the 43rd federal election show that the electorate shifted unpredictably and produced a minority government, but Alberta shows strong support for the Conservative Party of Canada, now the official opposition (Elections Canada, 2019). The results support the initial model of Habermas's public sphere where the media play a role in facilitating the democratic process through informing the public ahead of rational discussion (Habermas, 1991). Warner's amendments to the refeudalized public sphere, proposing a model where private interests target customers and constituents with targeted messaging (Warner, 2013), further demonstrated by three major columnists taking aim at anti-CPC rhetoric just days before the election (Corcoran, 2019; Murphy, 2019; Bell, 2019). Most explicit opinions rejecting Thunberg's activism in Alberta reflect a model where the media plays a role in forming the public opinion that interests the continued prosperity of the oil and gas industry while still maintaining a face of objective journalism. The sole non-Conservative riding won in the province, Edmonton – Strathcona, reflects a politically progressive area that wants action on climate change, despite most published opinions in local newspapers advocating against Thunberg's positions.

The climate strike rally held in the city, featuring the presence of Greta Thunberg, may have cemented the feeling of a social consensus for individuals to form an opinion on. The rejection of public opinions against Thunberg's activism

may represent a functional public sphere within a feudalised public sphere, where individuals critically examine their own personal judgements, as well as the opinions published in local news outlets to determine their relevance. The perception of social consensus may also be felt in surrounding ridings outside central Edmonton, where most voters elected a Conservative MP. This reflects the function of the refeudalized public sphere wherein the opinion can be swayed, both as customers and constituents, through messaging and perspectives they may already want to hear. Imagery invoked by the majority of published opinions, or those which rejected Thunberg and her advocacy, depicted similar themes of mistrust, skepticism of science, presentation of climate change activism as a threat to prosperity, and the presentation of a dichotomy between climate change activism and Alberta's oil and gas industry.

Conclusion and future scope

This study analysed the media intervention in the new climate discourse popularised through the constructed image of Greta Thunberg. It examined the quantitative results on the influence of the climate debate on the oil economy of Canada and the 2019 federal election, and compared it with the theoretical framework of communication within the realm of the public sphere, now believed to be refeudalized, and no longer the model where theoretical public opinion may be formed, but where non-public opinion can flourish (Warner, 2013). The barrier of news media behind paywalls presented a challenge to the analysis, and a way to include those pieces of media might also benefit the findings. The data and media analysed depict the functions of both a feudalised and non-feudalised public sphere in the city of Edmonton, Alberta. The findings suggest that the media's role as both objective journalism and opinion sources plays a sizable role in the formation of public opinion that affects democratic processes. It also suggests that a feudalised public sphere functions in the opposite of forming public opinion through the targeted messaging of private interests. Further study of this issue could examine the online space where media can be shared, such as web forums and social media, and the comment sections those hold. On top of examining other mediums, such as audiovisual and broadcast media, a sample size of voters could be collected and surveyed. Unanswered questions, such as the direct effects of examined print media on individuals, may be further studied by surveying subjects.

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