

The role of national newspapers in fostering understanding of transition technology: The case of Carbon Capture and Storage.

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Introduction

Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS) is a relatively new technology that is considered a serious option for transition towards a clean energy system. Coverage of the debate on CCS in the national newspapers is steadily increasing (Van Alphen, 2007) and recently peaked after public opposition to an onshore demonstration project in Barendrecht and the government's decision to cancel all plans for onshore CCS in the Netherlands.

Research among the Dutch public (Paukovic, Brunsting, & De Best-Waldhober, 2011) shows increasing awareness of CCS. However, knowledge of CCS has not significantly increased. The same goes for concepts related to CCS that are arguably necessary to understand the technology, e.g. characteristics of CO₂ and the relation between CCS and consumer's personal lives via consumption of electricity from coal- or gas-fired power plants. This leads to the question to what extent public knowledge about CCS is stimulated by coverage of this issue in national newspapers, which are still a major information source and opinion shaper despite being 'traditional' media.

Method

This abstract describes results of a thematic content analysis of 430 articles referring to carbon capture, transport, or storage from May 1, 2009, until May 31, 2010. Coding categories were based on expert sources on CCS and related concepts as well as on lay people's perceptions of these topics, which we elicited through in-depth interviews with 17 lay people. In parallel, we developed a 'knowledge test' to measure the prevalence of knowledge and misconceptions of CCS and related concepts as well as media use among 401 members of the general Dutch audience. This test was

conducted in May 2010 and its results were used to interpret and compare findings from the newspaper analysis.

Results

Results indicate that national newspapers do not reinforce or create misconceptions as found in the knowledge test. However, they also do little to correct misconceptions or fill the 'blanks' in people's knowledge. Amongst others, we found that only a small percentage of the articles contains knowledge about CCS, CO₂, energy production, or climate change. Very few articles discuss utility and necessity of CCS, and almost none of them link concepts into a causal chain from fossil fuel use through electricity production to climate change.

Discussion

Basic knowledge levels about CCS in the general Dutch public are low and 'blanks' in people's knowledge about related concepts are large. Most newspaper coverage of CCS does not seem to match the public's abilities to comprehend and interpret news about this technology. Given the complexity and low personal relevance of the topic, information processing theories would predict that in its current form, most news about CCS will be ignored by most people. A discussion topic is by whom and by what means additional context should be provided about CCS, or about other new energy technologies to which our findings likely apply.

References

- Paukovic, M., Brunsting, S., & De Best-Waldhober, M. (2011). *The Dutch General Public's Opinion on CCS and Energy Transition*. CATO-2 report.
- Van Alphen, K., Van Voorst tot Voorst, Q., Hekkert, M.P., & Smits, R.E.H.M. (2007). Societal acceptance of carbon capture and storage technologies. *Energy Policy*, 35, pp. 4368-4380.