



Oil Drilling in Environmentally Sensitive Areas: The Role of the Media

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The question of drilling for oil in environmentally sensitive areas in the United States and offshore has become a significant issue in this year's national elections, including the presidential election. Republican presidential candidate Senator John McCain has campaigned heavily in favor of expanded drilling, arguing that it would lower the price of gasoline,¹ and assailing his opponent, Democratic nominee Senator Barack Obama, for being the "Dr. No of America's energy future."²

The polls indicate that McCain's effort has been successful. For example, 69 percent of respondents favored such expanded drilling, and 51 percent said that they believed that "federal laws that prohibit increased drilling for oil offshore or in wilderness areas" were a "major cause of the recent increase in gasoline prices."³

McCain's effort to convince the public that this drilling would lower gas prices also appears to have been successful in changing the political climate and debate around this issue. For example, Senator Elizabeth Dole (R-NC) changed her position on offshore drilling in late June, despite opposing it when McCain initially proposed lifting the ban.⁴ Democrats also appear to have been feeling the pressure to support drilling, especially those attempting to unseat Republicans in close congressional races.⁵

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¹ "Gas prices 4 dollars, 5 dollars, no end in sight. Because some in Washington are still saying no to drilling in America. No to independence from foreign oil. Who can you thank for rising prices at the pump? (crowd chants "Obama") One man knows we must now drill more in America and rescue our family budgets. Don't hope for more energy, vote for it. McCain." *Pump*. 1 August 2008. John McCain 2008. Accessed online on: 3 September 2008

<<http://www.johnmccain.com/Informing/Multimedia/Player.aspx?GUID=0BA8412F-E891-46AF-827C-CDDCD4B331D1>>

² *CNN American Morning*. 29 July 2008. Cable News Network.

³ CNN/Opinion Research Corporation Poll. 30 July 2008 <<http://www.pollingreport.com/energy.htm>>

⁴ "Dole Alters Her Offshore Drilling View." *Charlotte Observer* 27 June 2008. Accessed online on: 3 September 2008. <<http://legacy.charlotteobserver.com/630/story/688118.html>>.

⁵ "Gas Prices Fuel New Views By Democrats on Offshore Drilling." *Wall Street Journal* 21 August 2008. Accessed online on: 3 September 2008 <<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB121928346659759011.html>>

However, there is no empirical basis for believing that drilling in environmentally sensitive offshore zones would significantly affect gas prices. The U.S. Department of Energy's Energy Information Agency (EIA) projects that such drilling would add some 200,000 barrels of oil per day at peak production in about 20 years. This is about 0.2 percent of world production, and the EIA describes this as too small to have any significant effect on oil prices.⁶

How did 51 percent of Americans come to believe the opposite, that this drilling would significantly lower gasoline prices? This paper looks at the major media coverage of the issues, and finds that this coverage played a substantial role in shaping public opinion. By repeatedly reporting the false claims of drilling proponents, while giving little or no attention to the available facts, the most important news media helped to convince the public of something that is not true, and thereby influenced the entire political climate around this issue.

To Drill or Not to Drill: How It Was Reported

It is important to note that the U.S. Department of Energy's Energy Information Agency (EIA) is the country's most authoritative source for statistics on energy. For example, their statistics are regularly cited in the media and elsewhere for such quantities as oil and natural gas production of producing countries, imports and exports, prices and production of electricity, gasoline, and coal; as well as stocks of oil and gasoline, petroleum reserves, and forecasts of future supply and demand. All of these data are measured with some error and uncertainty; in some cases – e.g. forecasting supply or demand, or estimates of world reserves – much more than others. But their data are generally accepted and used in the same way as other official government data as calculated with standard methodology and not influenced by partisan or political considerations. Just as economic reporting regularly uses data (unemployment, inflation, GDP, trade) from the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, or Bureau of Labor Statistics, reporting on energy relies on data from the EIA.

In the case of a very prominent and widely reported public debate over drilling in environmentally sensitive areas, which received widespread attention, it is thus reasonable to expect that the media would provide its audience with information from the country's most authoritative source on energy statistics. We therefore looked at the largest broadcast news shows to see how many of them mentioned the EIA data on expected oil production from the proposed drilling in environmentally sensitive areas.

⁶ See, United States Department of Energy, Energy Information Agency. Annual Energy Outlook with Projections to 2030. Washington: GPO, 2007. Accessed online on: 3 September 2008 <<http://www.eia.doe.gov/oiaf/archive/aeo07/issues.html>>. See also Baker, Dean and Nichole Szembrot, "Offshore Drilling and Energy Conservation: The Relative Impact on Gas Prices." Washington: Center for Economic and Policy Research, 2008 <<http://www.cepr.net/index.php/publications/reports/offshore-drilling-and-energy-conservation-the-relative-impact-on-gas-prices/>>

Table 1
Major U.S. News Programs

Broadcast	<i>Average Daily Audience (millions) in 2007</i>
ABC World News Tonight	8.38
NBC Nightly News	8.29
CBS Evening News	6.43
The Today Show (NBC)	5.38
Good Morning America (ABC)	4.77
Meet The Press (NBC)	3.5
Cable	<i>Average Daily Audience (millions) in 2007 (Q3)</i>
CNN	0.73
Fox News	0.61

Source: The State of the News Media 2008, Project for Excellence in Journalism.

Table 1 shows the largest audience broadcast TV news programs, with estimated 2007 audience. We chose to focus on the largest audience TV news shows because about 56 percent of Americans get the majority of their news from television.⁷ Table 1 also shows the major cable news programs, which were included in this survey.

Table 2
Use of Energy Information Agency Data on Major Television News Programs

News Source	Number of broadcasts that mentioned the proposed drilling	Number of times that EIA data was cited
<i>Broadcast</i>		
ABC World News Tonight	10	0
NBC Nightly News	7	0
CBS Evening News	7	0
The Today Show (NBC)	10	0
Good Morning America (ABC)	4	0
Meet The Press	4	0
<i>Cable</i>		
CNN	139	1
Fox News	86	0
Totals	267	1

Source: Authors' review of program transcripts, June 16 – August 9, 2008.

Table 2 shows the results by media outlet for television news programs and the large-audience Sunday morning talk shows.

As can be seen from the table, out of 267 news programs between June 16th and August 9th, in major media outlets on this subject, there was only one, or less than one half of one percent, that cited the EIA's estimate that the increased oil production would not significantly affect gasoline prices.

There were 24 other news programs that provided some similar information from other sources, usually partisan – e.g. Barack Obama. However, this is not the same thing as citing official statistics. For example, if one presidential candidate initiated a campaign to convince

⁷ BBC/Reuters/Media Center. Poll: Trust in the Media. 3 May 2006. Accessed online on: 3 September 2008. <http://www.globescan.com/news_archives/bbcreut.html>

the voters that the economy during the Bush Administration had created more jobs than during the Clinton Administration, the official data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics would be cited to show that this is wrong.⁸ In the case of the energy debate, offering another opinion on whether the proposed drilling will lower gasoline prices is not the same thing as reporting the official data. And, despite that fact that this dissenting “opinion” is actually true, it was rarely offered: in 91 percent of the news programs in this sample, the opposing “opinion” was not even presented.

It must be emphasized that the official data from the EIA were not called into question or challenged by experts who offered conflicting estimates. They were simply ignored by the major media. A typical news report presented the issue as follows:

“McCain says he now supports increased offshore drilling, as do 73 percent of Americans because, he says, more oil supplies will bring prices down. He says it's time for Obama to get on board.”⁹

Finally, it is worth noting that the role of the biggest media outlets in shaping public opinion on this issue is underestimated by the results in this sample. Talk radio, which is overwhelmingly right wing, reaches a weekly audience in the tens of millions,¹⁰ and reinforced the message that the proposed drilling would lower gasoline prices. Rush Limbaugh’s radio show, for example, reaches an estimated audience of 14.25 million people per week.¹¹ Limbaugh, like other conservative talk show hosts, repeatedly reinforced the view that the proposed drilling was necessary to lower gasoline prices.¹²

Conclusion

Major media outlets provided daily repetition of the false claim that expanded drilling in environmentally sensitive zones would significantly lower gasoline prices. At the same time, these outlets failed to report the official data from the Department of Energy’s Energy Information Agency, which showed that these claims were false. There can be little doubt that this reporting had a significant impact on public opinion, and contributed to the widespread misunderstanding reflected in polling data. In so doing, the major media exerted a very significant influence on an important matter of national policy. The media have most likely changed the debate and political climate in a way that would not have been possible if they had simply reported the most important official data, thereby showing that the central claim in this debate was false.

⁸ About 22.7 million jobs were created during the Clinton Administration, as compared to 5.1 million during the Bush Administration. See, Bureau of Labor Statistics, <<http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/surveymost?ce>>

⁹ *CBS Evening News*. 28 July 2008. CBS Broadcasting Inc. Accessed online on: 3 September 2008 <http://video.cbsnews.com/CBS_Production_News/CBS_Production_News/2008/07/28/Podcast_CBS_Evening_News_with_Katie_Couric/evening_broadcast0728_536348.mp4>.

¹⁰ See, Center for American Progress and Free Press. 2007. “The Structural Imbalance of Political Talk Radio.” Washington, DC: Center for American Progress. Accessed online on: 3 September 2008 <http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2007/06/pdf/talk_radio.pdf>

¹¹ The Top Talk Radio Audiences. Spring 2008. *Talkers Magazine*. Accessed online on: 29 August 2008. <http://www.talkers.com/main/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=17&Itemid=34>

¹² “Barry Mocks ‘Drill Here. Drill Now.’” 5 August 2008. The Rush Limbaugh Show. Accessed online on: 3 September 2008. <http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/home/daily/site_080508/content/01125114.guest.html> Transcript.