

The online reflection of energy policies: framing the debate on hydraulic fracturing in Romania

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Abstract: Hydraulic fracturing represents a subject of actuality in debates all around economic, environmental and social topics. We analysed articles on hydraulic fracturing published on the webpages of newspapers and TV stations between September 2011 and April 2014 and obtained a sample of 400 recordings from international and Romanian media. Using cluster analysis, we found that media groups adopt extreme frames in presenting the information (either positive or negative) and an unbalanced distribution of actors. Authorities were the best represented group, while scientists had the most balanced opinion on the subject. The public opinion was detrimental to hydraulic fracturing and used environmental, economic and social arguments to support their position. Articles with a negative frame had a higher number of comments in comparison to those which expressed neutral or positive attitudes. We found mass-media to be a suitable platform for debates on the conflicts generated by hydraulic fracturing.

Key words: *media framing, fracking, main actors, public opinion, environmental impact*

1. Introduction

The energy sector represents a central pillar in the attempt of reducing the environmental impact of human activities. Natural gas is considered cleaner than other conventional fuels (such as coal and oil) (Guidotti, 2011), and it is being increasingly used in combustion processes as the associated air pollution is reduced (Popkin, Duke, Borchers, & Ilvento, 2013) and emissions reductions targets can be easily achieved by both states and companies.

Technological improvements such as horizontal drilling and hydraulic fracturing have increased in the past decades gas exploration in numerous unconventional fields (Vengosh, Warner, Jackson, & Darrah, 2013) and reduced the production costs of resources, making among others shale gas a feasible economic alternative (Gunningham, 2014; Hagström & Adams, 2012).

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