

An energy superpower or a super sales pitch? Building the case through an examination of Canadian newspapers coverage of oil sands

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Abstract

In 2006, Stephen Harper boldly pronounced Canada as an “emerging energy superpower” to a variety of international audiences, including at the G8 meeting in London. While this label is likely more representative of a marketing campaign than reality (Hester, 2007), it is important to understand the degree to which the Canadian media has embraced it. This paper determines the extent to which Canada’s national newspapers, the Globe and Mail and the National Post, and its largest paper, the Toronto Star, adopted the “energy superpower” frame in their reporting about Alberta’s oil sands over a 25-month period. The oil sands were selected as a case study because proponents of Canada as an “energy superpower” cite the development of Alberta’s oil sands as a key component of the country’s new-found status. To discover how this new label was intertwined into the broader discourse on oil sands development, I used content and discourse analysis to examine newspaper stories over 300 words in length that contain “oil sands” or “tar sands” in the lead paragraph and/or headline. While my study found few instances of news stories containing the term, it did find that these newspapers more closely adopted Harper’s underlying ideas about what an energy superpower is than the more activist government traditionally associated with the term.¹

Introduction

The Alberta oil sands are awe-inspiring in their size. To their proponents, the oil sands are a technological marvel, a source of great wealth, and at least a partial solution to our future energy needs. To their opponents, the oil sands represent the “bottom of the barrel” and a sure sign that the world’s addiction to oil trumps other concerns, particularly environmental ones. Within this polarized context, Prime Minister Harper (2006b) boldly proclaimed in his first international speech that Canada was becoming an “energy superpower.” Harper uses the term

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primarily as a marketing slogan to promote the oil sands as a great place to invest. This is a very different usage than its root “superpower” would suggest. As coined by William Fox, a “superpower” was a “super-state that could match its contemporaries with equal force on a global scale” (Hester, 2007: 2). As Hester (2007) details, energy superpowers are countries that have significant control over their vast energy resources (including oil) and are able and willing to assert this power to control prices or achieve other political objectives. Using these criteria, Hester argues that Canada is not on the path to becoming an energy superpower. Behind both Harper’s and Hester’s definitions are a set of ideas about the role of private enterprise in developing oil production capacity, the appropriate role of government in controlling a strategic energy resource, and the appropriate place for foreign interests (e.g., the U.S. and China) in oil sands development. Harper’s “energy superpower” is a country that has largely divested responsibility for the development of its energy resources to the private sector whereas Hester’s definition calls for a more activist government.

Since the media can never “mirror” reality, it is important to understand how the media “frame” an issue as they determine “what is included, what is excluded, what is seen as salient and what is regarded as unimportant” (Trimble et al., 2008: 2). I used content and discourse analysis to track how the *Globe and Mail*, the *National Post*, and the *Toronto Star* covered oil sands development over a 25-month period. These papers were selected because of their agenda-setting role at the national level (Nesbitt-Larking, 2007; Taras, 2001). The *Star* is also thought to be more “left” leaning than both the *Globe* and the *Post*. I began by determining whether these influential newspapers actually used the phrase “energy superpower” when exploring issues related to oil sands development. Because I found that the term was used only a few times by the press, I explored in greater detail whether the media embraced the set of ideas underpinning Harper’s energy superpower definition or Hester’s by exploring the following questions. Did the media present the oil sands as a good place to invest? How did they frame the private sector role vis-à-vis government? How did the media frame Canada’s relationship with the United States? With China? My findings show that despite the fact that they rarely used the term, “energy superpower,” the Canadian national newspapers and the *Toronto Star* reproduced many of Harper’s key storylines. In particular, they sold the idea that the oil sands were “open for business.” As such, they conversely rejected Hester’s notion of energy superpower, which calls for a more aggressive form of state-control over energy development. Hester’s definition of an energy superpower perceives the reliance on a single market as problematic. Again, the media leaned more closely to Harper’s view that the U.S. represents the natural market for Canadian crude. Evidence for this was found both in the coverage of the U.S. but also in their coverage of the perceived Chinese “invasion.”

The Alberta oil sands

Canada has significant energy resources from conventional oil and gas, hydroelectric, coal, and uranium. However, it is Alberta’s oil sands, with its estimated 174 billion barrels of recoverable oil, which has been fuelling Canada’s economy. Located in north-eastern Alberta, the oil sands’ deposits cover more than 140,000 km² area or an area larger than the state of Florida (Government of Alberta, 2009). As a non-conventional source of oil, the oil sands require extensive upgrading to be converted into a useable form.² As such, the oil sands have always been a high cost producer. Currently, the oil sands companies are producing 1.3 million barrels

per day (mbd) which is scheduled to rise between 2.3 mbd to 6.3 mbd by 2035 (IHS CERA, 2009: ES-8 to ES-9). Between 2000 and 2008, over 150 billion Canadian dollars were spent on oil sands development, with 80% of this expenditure occurring domestically (IHS CERA, 2009: I-5). Prior to the recent global recession which saw oil prices collapse from \$147 per barrel to the \$40 to \$60 range (IHS CERA, 2009: ES-6), potential brakes to this explosive growth were shortages of skilled labour and materials which resulted in rapid inflation. The ability to attract a skilled workforce was compounded by the severe housing shortage and other infrastructure challenges facing the host community, Fort McMurray. Longer-term challenges are the amount of water consumed (2 to 4 barrels of water per barrel of bitumen), the level of greenhouse gas emissions³, and the amount of natural gas used by the industry.

The Harper government's "emerging energy superpower" thesis

In Prime Minister Harper's first "energy superpower"⁴ speech to the Canada-UK Chamber of Commerce, Harper likened the development of the Alberta oil sands to building the Great Wall of China or the pyramids. The focus of Harper's talk was to promote the Canadian energy sector as a desirable place for British investment:

Canada is the only non-OPEC country with growing oil deliverability. And let's be clear. We are a stable, reliable producer in a volatile unpredictable world. We believe in the free exchange of energy products based on competitive market principles, not self-serving monopolistic political strategies. That's why policymakers in Washington – not to mention investors in Houston and New York – now talk about Canada and continental energy security in the same breath. That's why Canada surpassed the Saudis four years ago as the largest supplier of petroleum products to the United States. And that's why industry analysts are recommending Canada as 'possessing the most attractive combination of circumstances for energy investment of any place in the world.'...And I think we'll see even more British investment as word of Canada's stature as the West's most important energy storehouse gets out (Harper, 2006b: 7-8).

In short, Harper argued that Canada is a safe, reliable place to invest and to gain access to the large insatiable U.S. market. During the 25-month study period, he then promoted the idea of Canada as an emerging energy superpower to a variety of international audiences – New York in September 2006 and again in September 2007, Berlin in June 2007, Santiago in July 2007, Sydney in September 2007, and lastly one more time in London in May 2008. Beginning with the Sydney speech, Harper added the word "clean" to his invocation of Canada as an energy superpower:

Because we're a politically stable country with a transparent regulatory system and a commitment to open markets, we are recognized as a major contributor to global energy security. Canada is an emerging energy superpower. But our real challenge and our real responsibility is to become a clean energy superpower (Harper, 2007a: 5)

Afterwards, he listed the variety of programs and initiatives that the Conservative government was pursuing to make this claim a reality. The addition of the word “clean” and inclusion of details about his government plans was likely an attempt to buffer international disapproval of Canada’s failure to meet its Kyoto targets, and his government’s admission that it would not even try to do so.

On a few occasions, Harper did promote the idea of Canada as an emerging energy superpower to a domestic audience most notably in a Canada Day speech in 2007. However for the most part, it was the Minister of Natural Resources, Gary Lunn, who was left to sell the idea to Canadians. Before numerous audiences in a variety of locations, Minister Lunn repeatedly labelled Canada as an emerging energy superpower (Lunn 2008, 2007^a, 2007^b, 2007^c, and 2006). Becoming a “clean energy superpower” was often presented as the next challenge that the government was actively working towards. The last instance of Minister Lunn using the term was at the Newfoundland and Labrador Oil and Gas Industries Association conference in June 2008. On one occasion, Environment Canada asserted that Canada is an energy superpower. In *Climate change plan for the purposes of the Kyoto Protocol Implementation Act – 2007*, the ministry states:

Canada is an energy superpower and one of only a few industrialized countries that is a net exporter of coal, oil, and natural gas and has large reserves of each. This gives Canada a major role in the long term energy security of North American and world energy supplies . . . Canada is seen as one of the few secure places in the world to invest in energy development, and one of a very few energy exporting nations that has reserves sufficiently large to provide a secure long term supply of fossil-fuels (1).

As recently as August 2010, Prime Minister Harper reiterated the claim that Canada was “becoming” a clean energy superpower (Harper, 2010).

In addition to marketing the Canadian energy sector as a good place to invest, one can also discern an additional objective to promote Canadian energy resources as integral to North American and even sometimes global energy security. Under this perspective, Canada should be a major player, particularly in designing a post-Kyoto world.

Is Canada really an energy superpower as the Harper government has been telling the world? Critics reject the idea that simply having an abundant quantity of energy resources is sufficient to make a nation into an energy superpower. As such, they argue that Canada is not on a path to becoming one. A more apt description would be that Canada is really an American energy satellite (Clarke, 2009), an energy superstore (McCarthy quoted in Clark 2009 and Hester, 2007) or an energy pussycat (McQuaig quoted in Clark 2009 and Hester, 2007). The section below explores the history of the term “energy superpower” and determines whether it should be applied to Canada.

Energy superpowers

As an energy superpower, a country must have some special capabilities which it shares with other energy superpowers and which non-members of this exclusive club do not have. Being an energy exporter, even a large one, is not enough. As Hester notes this label has not been applied by media or academics in the public realm to Saudi Arabia despite its status as the world's largest oil producer (2007: 3). To be an energy superpower, a country must not only have enough control over its abundant natural resources to be a price setter but also be willing and able to use this power to extend its influence beyond a regional market to a global one (Hester, 2007: 4). At times, OPEC has met this test (e.g., the 1970s oil crisis). However, for the most part, even OPEC has had difficulty in setting prices by matching production quotas to consuming countries' economic cycles (ibid). High energy prices bring the development of unconventional oil online, encourage the development of alternative fuels, and reduce overall demand – thus even an energy superpower's ability to raise prices is limited. In addition, "bullying" tactics, like pipeline shutoffs, can also lead consuming countries to seek alternative, more stable, sources (Monaghan, 2007: 286). Energy producing countries are also likely dependent on the revenue. The "most credible" and perhaps the "only" energy superpower is Russia who could combine its control over vast energy resources with its military power status (Rutland, 2008). However, at best, Russia's influence is regional as opposed to global and it has had difficulty in translating its energy resources into either hard or soft influence (Rutland, 2008; Monaghan, 2007; Milvov 2007; Hester 2007). For example, Rutland notes that despite subsidized energy prices, Belarus is increasingly "hostile" towards Russia. In addition, Russia's hard tactics towards Ukraine, shutting down a pipeline for a few days and increasing prices, produced condemnation both within the Ukraine and from western countries. Instead of restoring Russia's position on the world stage, energy superpower terminology is now seen as being "counterproductive" and Putin has abandoned the use of the term (Monaghan, 2007: 286).

Hester (2007) provides the most comprehensive treatment in testing the term against the Canadian case. Hester argues that Canada falls short of "energy superpower" status in three important ways (9). First, Canada lacks a national energy plan. A significant but not an insurmountable barrier to developing a national energy plan is the fact that provinces have ownership of and management authority over the natural resources found within their territories. While the federal government currently does not have a national energy plan, it has and continues to play a key role in the fostering the development of the oil sands.⁵ For example, the Trudeau government was instrumental in the creation of Syncrude, originally holding a 15% share. The federal government further supported the oil sands by favourable taxation rules (e.g., \$583 million tax expenditure⁶ for the period of 1996 to 2002) (Pigeon, 2003: 1). The federal government is often seen as supporting the growth of the oil sands by failing to use all of its powers (House of Commons, 2007). Even stricter environmental regulations (for example, the Liberal government's Kyoto plan or Harper's "Made in Canada" plan) would have little impact on the pace of overall development.⁷ As such, the most discernible federal policy objective, throughout both Liberal and Conservative governments, has been an overt pro-development policy.

When critics, like Pratt (2001), lament Canada's lack of national energy plan, it is most often from the perspective that Canada has largely divested itself of the right to control the amount and type of exports to the United States, potentially putting Canada's needs second to that of the U.S. This was Hester's second point. Canada's relationship with its largest customer, the United States, is one of institutionalized deregulation (Clarke 2009; Pratt, 2001). NAFTA's proportionality clause (Article 315) limits the Canadian government's ability to restrict exports. A second clause (Article 605) binds energy exporting companies to maintain the normal ratio among specific energy goods. For example, a company could not substitute "a heavier grade of crude oil for a lighter grade" (Clarke, 2009: 138).

Third, Canadian governments have divested themselves of the last vestiges of direct ownership, as a result the Canadian oil and gas sector is now owned by the private sector and foreign state-owned companies (Hester, 2007).⁸ This was part of the larger neoliberal trend— to get government out of the way of business— influencing Canadian governments. However, not noted by Hester, was the federal government's apparent desire to manage the sale of Canadian assets to foreign state-owned firms when it strengthened the review criteria in 2007.⁹ Their concern appeared to be directed at the Chinese as opposed to other state-owned firms like Norway's Statoil.¹⁰ When seeking investment opportunities in 2007, Chinese officials even publicly accused the Conservative government of giving them a "chilly reception" (Harding, 2007: FP1; Scott, 2007: A1; Ebner, 2006c: B1). However, the situation appears to have changed with the "political rapprochement between Ottawa and Beijing." The Chinese have now made some significant investments. In 2009, PetroChina acquired a 60% stake, roughly equal to three billion barrels, in two oil sands projects of Athabasca Oil Sands Corporation.¹¹ In 2010, Sinopec brought a 9% share in Syncrude. Up until this point, the Chinese had only made token investments (small leases and some limited partnerships) in the oil sands.¹²

For all of these reasons, the federal government not only lacks the means to control "the resources enough to be able to effectively leverage them for political purpose" but also, as Hester argues, "appears not to aspire to achieve such control" (2007: 10). Again, Harper promotes this unwillingness to take control as a virtue when marketing the oil sands to international investors. Hester questions the motivations behind Harper's claim that Canada was becoming an energy superpower – was it simply to attract more investment to what was an overheated Albertan economy, as she failed to find a discernible foreign policy objective.

If the media embraced the underlying set of ideas behind Hester's definition, one would expect to find support for a more activist government who would be willing to limit exports of Canadian crude if necessary to obtain other political objectives. As an intermediary step, one would expect the media to embrace efforts to diversify markets, renegotiate NAFTA's energy clauses, and keep refining capacity within Canada. However, as discussed in the section below it would be unlikely that Canada's newspapers would adopt this perspective; as private, profit-seeking enterprises, they tend to uphold the values of a free market.

Oil sands and the news

If one accepts the "energy superpower" thesis, the oil sands are perceived as changing Canada's status on the world stage. As well, the oil sands are seen as the primary driver shifting the

economic power of the country westward. Due to its level of investment, its environmental impacts, and its impact on other regions and industries, the oil sands have become a national news story.¹³

As Taras (2001) argues media are “our central public squares” where the public come to “know” about policy issues, political interests, and governing institutions. This is particularly true for issues with which the reader has no direct experience. The majority of readers of the national newspapers or the *Toronto Star* have neither direct experience with oil sands development nor acquaintance with the area. If the media simply “mirrors” reality, this would not be a problem. However, since most important issues are multi-dimensional with many different angles, the media “frames” issues by promoting a pre-existing storyline promoted by political elites, unearthing a dormant or alternative one, or “creating their own thematic interpretations” (Terkiltsen and Schnell, 1997: 882). The media limit our thinking about the issues that they choose to cover as they bestow visibility and legitimacy on some opinions and illegitimacy to others (Nesbitt-Larking, 2001; Sherman and Gismondi, 1997).

In addition to the general “newsworthy” characteristics of an event like timeliness or conflict, news is shaped by the broader underlying values of society. For the purposes of this paper, the most important are the economic values of free enterprise and a free market (Jaap van Ginneken as referenced by Lorimer et al., 2007: 242). Often, but not exclusively, this leads media to apply a “business filter” to public policy issues. A greater range of stories are being told about business’ interests as opposed to the interests of other societal groups (e.g., labour, environmentalist) and the stories about businesses are more likely to be positive (Hackett and Gruneau, 2000; Simons 1999). As such, the media are more likely to embrace Harper’s version of Canada as an energy superpower, as it invokes an image of Canada as a good place to invest, rather than Hester’s version, which calls for more direct government involvement in the energy industry.

Methodology

This paper examines news stories pertaining to the Alberta oil sands in the *Globe and Mail*, the *National Post* and the *Toronto Star*.¹⁴ Stories over 300 words in length which contained the words “oil sands/oilsands” or “tar sands/tarsands” in the lead paragraph and/or headline¹⁵ from October 1, 2005 to October 31, 2007 were selected for analysis.¹⁶ A total of 684 articles were analyzed – 331 articles in the *Globe*, 287 in the *Post*, and the 66 in the *Star*. Male reporters wrote the majority of the news articles, although the *Post* had a higher percentage written by female reporters¹⁷ (38% compared to the *Globe*’s 10% and the *Toronto Star*’s 20%). This was due to the presence of the *Post*’s Calgary Bureau Chief, Claudia Cattaneo, who wrote numerous hard news articles and columns. Oil sands stories were considerably more likely to be included in the business section than any other section (90% in the *Post*, 84% in the *Globe*, and 70% in the *Star*). All newspapers predominately presented the oil sands story as a hard news story (82% in the *Globe*, 77% in the *Star*, and 73% in the *Post*) with the second most popular format was that of a column or commentary (17% in the *Post*, 16% in the *Globe*, and 11% in the *Star*). Lastly, most stories were written out of Calgary (64% in the *Globe*, 62% in the *Post* and 42% in the *Star*).

In addition to mapping out the placement of oil sands stories in the newspaper, content analysis also determined a variety of other factors including the frame, main actors, and portrayal of oil sands development. To compliment and add richness to this quantitative methodology, I employed discourse analysis (Burnham et al., 2004). My purpose was to identify dominate frames and ideas, to understand how these sets of ideas were organized, and to discover which actors legitimized those ideas.

Findings: Energy superpower – a contested idea

The newspapers used the term “energy superpower” infrequently — only one time in the *Toronto Star*, three times in the *National Post* and eight times in the *Globe and Mail*. In “Part 1” below, I deconstruct the media’s usage of this term.

Despite this fact, the study did capture many of the issues raised when either supporting or rejecting the emerging energy superpower thesis. Most notably, elements within the economic and energy security frames directly address this debate. Does Canada have or need a national energy strategy? Did the media promote the idea of oil sands as a good, reliable place to invest as Harper marketed Canada when using the energy superpower idea with international audiences? How did the media present Canada’s relationship with the United States? With China? These questions are explored in “Part 2.”

Part 1: Use of the term “energy superpower”

The media both embraced and rejected the “energy superpower” claim. In this selected sample, the media used the term “energy superpower” in one of three ways

1. A “matter of fact” inclusion (2 articles)
2. a) Supportive of the term being applied to Canada by actively claiming that Canada was or is becoming an energy superpower (2 articles)

b) Supportive of the concept but critical that government had not done enough to achieve it (2 articles)
3. Critical of government applying the term to Canada (6 articles)

1. A “matter of fact” inclusion (2 articles)

Instances in this category include news stories that mentioned but did not directly address the term, for example, “Federal Natural Resources Minister Gary Lunn also addressed the conference, where he sought to spotlight Canada’s role as an energy superpower” (McCarthy, 2006: B1). This category is important because it shows that the term was accepted as fact or was straightforward to the reader, therefore needing no explanation, support or criticism.

2. Supportive of the term being applied to Canada (4 articles)

Instances in this category are supportive of the term. Direct evidence was used to bolster this claim in two of the articles. For example, “such growth (4 mbd by 2020) would make Canada one of the world’s most significant oil producers and underscores Prime Minister Harper’s declaration that Canada is an emerging “energy superpower” (Ebner, 2006: B1). The other type of story is supportive of the term but critical that the government had not followed through in making it a reality. In a regular column, the *Patch*, Cattaneo (2007a) lauded the government’s plan to become an “energy superpower” yet worried that it was being abandoned in search of eastern votes (FP2). In a later column (2007b), she called on the government to stop using the term because she felt it had abandoned its objectives all together:

The notion (energy superpower) may have seemed catchy a couple of years ago, when enthusiasm for energy security and national wealth assured by the oil sands still exceeded Alberta envy or the green campaign to crush their development (FP2).

3. *Critical of the term being applied to Canada (6 articles)*

The root of this criticism varied depending on the article. A news story in the *Globe* drew attention to the fact that government estimates about future oil sands production varied based on whether they were projecting pollution targets or encouraging investment. Calling out Harper’s use of the term as a marketing device, the story concluded that, “(Lunn’s) lowball estimate doesn’t square with the Prime Minister Harper’s efforts to tout the country’s potential as an energy superpower” (McCarthy, 2007: B3). A *Globe* columnist rejected the idea that oil sands could play a large role in solving future oil crisis:

Prime Minister Harper touts Canada as an “emerging energy superpower” as if it were the next OPEC. It’s a misleading, extravagant, and potentially dangerous claim. Canada will not save the world from oil shortages and the numbers tell the story (Reguly, 2007: B7).

Other commentators questioned whether being an “energy superpower” was fundamentally a good thing. For example writing in the *Post*, Corcoran (2006) doubted whether pursuing this goal was good for the overall health of economy by calling it “the NEP in reverse, an encroachment on the rights of all Canadians” (FP15).¹⁸ In the *Globe*, Nikiforuk (2007) questioned whether Canada could “defy the axiom of our age” believing that “oil corrupts and corrupts absolutely” (A15). Calling it a “sad commentary,” Crane (2006) lamented in a *Star* story that Harper’s “most important story to tell” was promoting the oil sands rather than “our capacity for innovation” or our “high quality workforce” (A21).

Part 2: Testing the ideas

Behind the use of the term, “energy superpower” is a set of ideas about the role of private enterprise in developing oil production capacity, the appropriate role of government in controlling a strategic energy resource, and the appropriate place for foreign interests (e.g., the U.S. and China) in oil sands development. This next section tests four hypotheses to discover whether the media embraced these underlying concepts.

Economic frame:

H1: The newspapers will present the oil sands as a good place to invest; and

H2: The newspapers will embrace the role of the private sector in the development of the oil sands.

Energy security frame:

H3: To enhance their energy security, the US needs to reduce its reliance on oil from unstable suppliers. Canadian oil is well positioned to help reduce this dependency. As such, the newspapers will present the U.S. as the natural market for oil sands production; and

H4: Canada could reduce its reliance on the US market by expanding exports to China. However, the involvement of Chinese state-owned firms may remove oil from a competitive marketplace. As such, China will represent a conundrum for the media.

Each section begins with an overview of the basic findings under each frame.

The economic frame

Not surprising given its predominance in the business section, all three newspapers overwhelmingly framed the oil sands story as an economic story (see Table 1). Although the *National Post* was more likely to run an economic story than the *Globe and Mail* and the *Toronto Star*, the rank order of the various frames did not differ between newspapers – environmental (2nd), energy security (3rd), and social frame (4th).

Table 1: Main frame of the story by newspaper

	<i>Globe and Mail</i>	<i>National Post</i>	<i>Toronto Star</i>	Total
Economic	231 (70%)	236 (82%)	40 (61%)	507 (74%)
Environmental	50 (15%)	21 (7%)	21 (32%)	92 (14%)
Energy security	22 (7%)	17 (6%)	2 (3%)	41 (6%)
Social	10 (3%)	6 (2%)	2 (3%)	18 (3%)
Other	18 (5%)	7 (2%)	1 (2%)	26 (4%)
Total	331	287	66	684

Expansion plans of oil sands companies/pipeline companies, whether through expansion of their own facilities or through buying out or forming partnerships with other companies, dominated the economic news frame (see Table 2).

Due to rising oil prices/profits and the maturing of the industry, many, including the Alberta and federal governments, examined whether the preferential treatments (e.g., low royalty rates, the accelerated capital cost allowance) were still necessary. This debate was captured in the third most prevalent category – government take. Tied for third place in both the *Post* and the *Star*, was the rising costs associated with the inflationary pressures of the boom.

Given the predominance of the economic frame, which essentially casts a “business filter”, it is not surprising, that these newspapers have embraced the role of the market led by private oil companies.

Table 2: Economic frame – specific emphasis by newspaper

	<i>Globe and Mail</i>	<i>National Post</i>	<i>Toronto Star</i>	Total
Expansion of oil sands sites and related facilities	41 (18%)	51 (22%)	17 (43%)	109 (22%)
Mergers, acquisitions, joint partnerships	55 (24%)	42 (18%)	7(18%)	104 (21%)
“Government take”	32 (14%)	29 (12%)	3 (8%)	64 (13%)
Business costs associated with development	23 (10%)	27(11%)	3 (8%)	53 (10%)
Workers (e.g., issues associated with their recruitment & retention)	15 (7%)	27 (11%)	1 (3%)	43 (9%)
Distribution to market (pipelines, shipping etc.)	27 (12%)	5 (2%)	1 (3%)	33 (7%)
Investment climate	7 (3%)	20 (8%)	1 (3%)	28 (6%)
Impact on other industries or regions	4 (2%)	5(2%)	2 (5%)	11 (2%)
Profits to oil sands companies	3 (1%)	0 (0%)	5 (13%)	8 (2%)
Other economic issues	24 (10%)	30 (13%)	0 (0%)	54 (11%)
Total	231	236	40	507

H1: The newspapers will present the oil sands as a good place to invest

In his “energy superpower” speeches, Harper actively promoted the oil sands, as a good place to invest. One expects that all three newspapers would embrace this claim. Content analysis demonstrated that when the *Globe and Mail* or the *National Post* wavered from a neutral or balanced stance, they were far more likely to portray investment decisions (expansions of facilities, mergers or acquisitions, or general investment climate) positively than negatively as Table 3 demonstrates. Although a smaller data set at 25 articles, it is important to note that the majority of *Toronto Star* articles in this subset were positive, further evidence that the major newspapers embraced this idea.

Table 3: Newspapers portrayal of investment decisions in the oil sands

	<i>Globe and Mail</i>	<i>National Post</i>	<i>Toronto Star</i>	Total
Positive	38 (37%)	42 (37%)	14 (56%)	94 (39%)
Negative	7 (7%)	7 (6%)	1 (4%)	15 (6%)
Neutral	58 (56%)	64 (56%)	10 (40%)	132 (55%)
Total	103	113	25	241

A good example of the news media embracing the argument that Canada remains the last “safe” place to invest was the inclusion of quotes like the following by Jeff Rubin of CIBC World markets:

The Canadian oil sands, as the single most important energy asset in the world open to private capital, its ownership will reflect the global oil industry. And the process in which the global oil industry is going to assert ownership over that sector is by buying out the people who own it now (Parkinson, 2007: B10).¹⁹

Or this one from the manager of Salida, a hedge fund, “with Shell's bid for Shell Canada, I think everyone on the planet now has an idea of what the oil sands is worth to the majors - its really about big reserves in a secure part of the world” (Harding, Jon, 2006: FP5).

Neutral stories were unlikely to deny the basic premise that Canada currently represents the best place for energy companies to invest. However, these stories tempered this enthusiasm by referring to the current challenges (e.g., high cost overruns, a shortage of skilled labour) which could affect the industry’s ability to deliver the expected production increases on time and on budget. It is important to note that sometimes a negative tone was in the best interest of the oil sands companies as Taylor (2007) cheekily pointed out in the lead paragraph of his column:

Pity Alberta’s oil sands producers. It must be hard for them to know which hat they’re wearing, the snazzy Stetson they don when they tell investors how rich they are or the beggar’s cap they hold out when they argue against paying higher economic rents (B11).

H2: The newspapers will embrace the role of the private sector in the development of the oil sands.

Hester argues that one of the main problems with Canada achieving “energy superpower” status is that the government has divested substantial control to the private sector. Since the news media tends to embrace the private market, one expects that the newspapers would reject Hester’s assumption that a lack of government control is a problem by embracing either a pro-business stance or conversely an anti-government intervention stance.

The three newspapers’ positive orientation towards the private market is not surprising given that the majority of first and second sources represented business interests, as Table 4

demonstrates.²⁰ Classic “opponents” to business fell far below as the media rarely used environmental and labour groups as their primary sources. Perhaps more surprising is how infrequently government sources (both elected and departmental) were quoted despite two broad-based provincial reviews and changes to the federal fiscal and environmental policies. Business concerns and perspectives about the state of the industry clearly dominated Canada’s major English newspapers.

Table 4: Selected first and second sources by newspaper (all frames)*

	<i>Globe and Mail</i>		<i>National Post</i>		<i>Toronto Star</i>	
	1 st source	2 nd source	1 st source	2 nd source	1 st source	2 nd source
Business	181 (57%)	133 (53%)	179 (64%)	142 (68%)	38 (62%)	18 (50%)
Provincial government	17 (5%)	17 (7%)	9 (3%)	7 (3%)	1 (2%)	1 (3%)
Federal government	16 (5%)	12 (5%)	9 (3%)	8 (4%)	5 (8%)	5 (14%)
Environmental groups	9 (3%)	12 (5%)	2 (1%)	3 (1%)	3 (5%)	3 (8%)
Labour/workers	7 (2%)	4 (2%)	8 (3%)	7 (3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

* of stories with sources

During the study period, both the federal and provincial governments were seen to be exerting, at least rhetorically, a more interventionist stance particularly in terms of increasing overall government take – provincially in regards to royalties and federally in regards to elimination of corporate tax exemption for income trusts and the elimination of the accelerated capital cost allowance. When the newspapers wavered from their neutral stance, they were far more likely to portray these decisions as negative towards oil sands development – as such embracing a business perspective (see Table 5). The business perspective was that government should not change the “rules of the game” after investment decisions were made and that businesses not government should decide the “pace” of development. Whereas, positive portrayals included views that these new measures would help government “get their fair share,” would reduce the downsides of runaway growth, or were no longer necessary given the industry’s strength.

Table 5: Overall story perspective where government take is the focus

	Government take – provincial			Government take – federal		
	<i>Globe</i>	<i>Post</i>	<i>Star</i>	<i>Globe</i>	<i>Post</i>	<i>Star</i>
Positive	1 (4%)	1 (4%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Negative	7 (29%)	7 (29%)	1 (100%)	3 (38%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Neutral	16 (67%)	16 (67%)	0	5 (63%)	4 (100%)	2 (100%)
Total	24	24	1	8	4	2

However, there were differences between the national newspapers when examining their editorial stance, with the *Post* adopting a stronger pro-business stance than the *Globe*²¹. Whereas, the *Post* (2007: A16) warned that Alberta could risk the country's financial health by this proposed "cash grab," the *Globe* (2007) "congratulated (Stelmach) on his quest to get a bigger deal" and blamed the previous government's "unlimited development" stance for numerous problems facing the industry today (A18). In addition, while all three papers reported how energy stocks fell immediately after the release, only the *Post* ran a front-page story, which had this inflammatory headline:

Royalties hike would kill 'golden goose'; Report on oil sands; Klein warns against change made on whim (Cattaneo and Harding, 2007: A1).

Although one can discern a favourable bias towards the interest of business, this is not to suggest that opposing voices were absent altogether, only that the news media minimized them. For example, Brian Mason, the leader of the Alberta NDP, responding to yet another approval of a oil sands project, was quoted as saying, "the tar sands development strategy being followed by the Alberta government is not in the interests of Albertans, it is in the interests of the oil industry" (Ebner, 2007: B5).

Energy security frame

The global reserves/production category captured news stories, which addressed oil sands contribution (or lack of it) to current and future global reserves. It is not surprising that Chinese energy security figured predominately in the national newspapers (36% in the *Globe* and 29% in the *Post*) as the media addressed questions of whether Chinese interest was real and welcome by Canada. Meeting American energy needs received only minor attention. However, this frame does not capture the extent of the U.S./Canada relationship over energy. For example, decisions by individual companies to build refining capacity in the U.S. as opposed to Canada were captured in the economic frame. The three articles examining Canadian energy security challenged Canada's ability to meet its own energy needs given its trade relationship with the U.S. The other category captured countries, like South Korea or India, and their interest in the oil sands or the competition between American and Chinese interests.

Table 6: Energy security frame – specific emphasis by newspaper

	<i>Globe and Mail</i>	<i>National Post</i>	<i>Toronto Star</i>	Total
Global reserves/ production	6 (27%)	7 (41%)	0 (0%)	13 (32%)
Chinese energy security	6 (27%)	5 (29%)	0 (0%)	11 (27%)
American energy security	1 (5%)	3 (18%)	0 (0%)	4 (10%)
Canadian energy security	1 (5%)	0 (0%)	1 (50%)	2 (5%)
Energy security, other	8 (36%)	2 (12%)	1 (50%)	11 (27%)
Total	22	17	2	41

H3: To enhance their energy security, the US needs to reduce its reliance on oil from unstable suppliers. Canadian oil is well positioned to help reduce this dependency. As such, the national newspapers will present the U.S. as the natural market for oil sands production.

Harper views Canada's status as the biggest supplier of crude to the U.S as evidence of our new and increasing sphere of influence. However, Hester and other critics view the Canada/U.S. energy trade relationship as problematic because NAFTA's proportionality clause limits Canada's range of policy tools and therefore, its ability to transfer this new-found status to political power is limited. Two commentaries, one in the *Globe* and another in the *Star* essentially reproduced this argument. Gordon Laxer (2006) lamented Canada's failure to develop its own energy policy and rhetorically asks, "If there are energy shortages, in which of the three NAFTA countries are citizens most likely to freeze in the dark?" (A15). In the 1980s energy crisis, Alberta residents, angry at Trudeau's National Energy program, had bumper stickers "Let the Eastern bastards freeze in the dark." The joke, according to Laxer, is now on all of Canada, including Alberta, who will freeze in the dark, because NAFTA's proportionality clause binds Canada to export the majority of its oil to the U.S. Laxer's solution is for Canada to create a new energy strategy but in order to do this Canada must first either re-negotiate this specific clause or leave NAFTA altogether. The *Star* piece, also written by Laxer in conjunction with Tony Clarke and Bruce Campbell, identified Canada as an "energy satellite of the U.S." not as an "energy superpower." These opinion pieces are representative of a marginalized perspective and as such, do not seriously challenge the perspective that the U.S. is the natural market for Canada's energy resources.

In the four articles directly focusing on oil sands as part of the solution to American energy needs, the oil sands were perceived as reducing America's dependence on foreign (e.g., non-North American) energy supplies. The following blunt quote from Irving Mintzer, a "leading American energy consultant" highlights this perspective perfectly:

They (Congressmen) see the oil sands as quid pro quo: You give us unfettered access to the oil sands; we give you a guaranteed market. We'll also throw in a freebie: continental security, care of the Pentagon (Reguly, 2006: 19).

Another story highlights the U.S. Energy Secretary's meeting with oil sands producers to reduce barriers for growth (Harding, 2006b: FP5). Underlying these stories was the assumption that oil sands sector's interest in a large insatiable close market was aligned with American interest (i.e., a secure and close supply). There was no indication in these stories that playing this role may jeopardize other Canadian interests.

However, the Canada/U.S. relationship is more complicated than a review of just energy security stories would suggest. To get a better understanding of how the Canadian newspapers perceive this relationship, one needs to also briefly examine four other news events. (1) In October 2005, Natural Resource Minister, John McCallum, promoted the growth of oil sands exports (400,000 barrels a day)²² to China as a means of diversifying Canada's energy sales. This was perceived in the *Globe* as a "warning" to the Americans over the softwood lumber dispute in a front page news article (York, 2005: A1) and the editorial board came out in support of this new aggressive strategy.²³ This "linking" of issues was later rebuked in two subsequent news stories in the *Globe*. Here is an instance where the Canadian government was attempting to act as an energy

superpower by using its energy resources to gain an advantage on another foreign policy objective. It was short lived and ultimately provided additional opportunity to assert the dominant view that Ottawa should not control where Alberta/oil companies send their oil. (2) During this time period, multiple competing pipeline proposals were being developed. When talks stalled between Enbridge and Chinese refiners to develop a pipeline to the west coast and Enbridge reached a deal with Exxon to send the equivalent amount to Texas, the outcome was applauded by an industry observer: “this continent needs more oil than it produces – it should not be shipping crude overseas” (Ebner, 2007b: B1). Whether Chinese investment was welcomed is the focus of the next section. In September 2006, BP announced it would upgrade refineries in the U.S. to handle oil sands crude. Critics saw this as an export of value-added jobs. However, both the *Globe’s* and *Post’s* stories on this event marginalized and minimized this criticism by limiting their coverage. The *Globe’s* Ebner (2006b) wrote, “the prospect of EnCana refining its oil sands output in the U.S. has raised some questions in Alberta about shipping away the province’s raw materials” but then subsequently quoted the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers as saying this was not a large problem. Likewise, the *Post* repeated the exact same format – a brief statement about criticism followed by the rebuttal from CAPP (Cattaneo and Harding, 2006: FP6). (4) The amount of greenhouse gases produced by the oil sands is a source of friction in the relationship as news stories on California’s low emission law demonstrate. The stories did not present the law as an immediate threat to the oil sands, given the fact that California receives little oil from Canada, but concluded that if “snowballing” of the law to other states occurs, this could be quite costly (Mittelstaedt, 2007; McKenna, 2007). What is important is that both stories, including one written by an environmental reporter, framed the issue as a possible barrier to exporting oil sands to the U.S. rather than examining the merits of the law.

The media routinely confirmed, directly and indirectly, the idea that the United States is the natural market for oil sands production and that government (either Canada or the U.S.) should not take actions, which would disrupt this trade flow. Contrary voices were not absent but were marginalized.

H4: Canada could reduce its reliance on the US market by expanding exports to China. However, involvement of Chinese state-owned firms may remove oil from a competitive marketplace. As such, China will represent a conundrum for the media.

Under a completely free market, all investment interest would be welcome. As well, Hester argues that dependence on a single market binds the producer as much as the buyer. She argues that Russia is not a “global energy superpower” because it is reliant on one market – Europe. Therefore, for Canada to achieve “energy superpower” status a diversification of markets would be ideal. One would expect that the media would positively view a diversification of markets for oil sands production. However, investment by state-owned firms, particularly by China, is problematic. The concern is that these firms do not operate under “normal” market conditions and could potentially take the oil off the market. It also challenges the perceived interests of the oil sands largest market and closest neighbour – the U.S. As such, I would expect to find both positive and negative references to China’s interest (or potential) in the oil sands.²⁴

Under the energy security frame, 11 stories examined Chinese interest in the oil sands and another three focused on perceived “competition” between Chinese and American interests. These articles are grouped into four clusters:

1. Chinese investment was never really on the table (4 articles).
2. Chinese takeovers should be prevented (3 articles).
3. Alberta/Canada is “open for business” from China (4 articles).
4. Chinese investment threatens U.S. interests (3 articles).

1. *Chinese investment was never really on the table (4 articles).*

In an in-depth article, entitled “Chinese invasion just passing through”, Harding and Cattaneo (2006b) concluded that Chinese investment failed to materialize because neither party was truly interested. First, oil sands companies’ preferred market was and continues to be the American market and once the Americans “responded”, there was no need to enter into agreements with the Chinese (FP1). Second, the Chinese did not want to risk the problems associated “with them coming to America’s backyard” (Ibid). What is key about this article is that it placed the strategic decision of expanding beyond the American market squarely outside the realm of the Canadian government. By placing politicians outside the frame, clearly, this article did not conceive Canada as acting as “energy superpower.” Canadian governments were only mentioned in the following paragraph:

While some are not ruling out future Chinese investment, and politicians from Alberta and Ottawa are now in China talking up the oil sands, it looks like the Chinese won’t have access to Canadian oil for a long time, likely not before the next spurt of oil sands production growth, perhaps in 2015 and beyond (Ibid).

In other articles, a Chinese state company complained that it received a chilly reception from oil sands producers and the Conservative government (Harding, 2007; Scott, 2007; Ebner, 2006c). As such, a widespread investment by the Chinese was never really on the table but was just hype.

2. *Chinese takeovers should be prevented (3 articles)*

Under this grouping, articles highlighted reasons why Chinese takeovers are fundamentally different from other foreign takeovers with the subtext being that Chinese takeovers should not be allowed to occur (for example, some worry that Chinese oil sands production would not be available for sale on the world market but would enter a closed system). Calling their involvement to date, “passive,” Reguly (2006b) warned that the Canadian government should set the rules now to minimize political damage (B2). Foster (2006) reiterated this message when he argued that government asserting control through state-owned companies was causing instability and used Russia as an example (FP22). As such, the Canadian government should not

permit takeovers by Chinese companies but he found that the government was sending mixed messages on this issue (Ibid).

3. *Alberta/Canada is “open for business” from China (4 articles)*

Chinese investment, while small, was growing. Several articles detailed this growth but did not present it as a problem. For example, in the two articles reporting the acquisition of relatively small oil sands leases directly by a Chinese state oil company, the underlying message was that “the Alberta government is open for business.” Chinese companies will follow “the rules” like any other company (Scott, 2007b; Jaremko, 2007). While other articles examined Canadian government efforts to promote the oil sands in China or proclaimed that Canada was open to all investment (Chase, 2007; York, 2007).

4. *Chinese investment threatens U.S. interests (3 articles)*

China’s involvement in the oil sands was most often perceived in the media as a challenge not to Canada but to the United States where it was seen as a “provocation” to and a “competition” with American interests” (Ebner, 2007b and 2006d; Reguly, 2006b).

This review demonstrates that media embraced several conflicting perspectives due to their uncertainty over how to frame the Chinese involvement. Under the rubric that the oil sands are a great place for the world to invest, the media embraced potential Chinese investment. When large-scale investment appeared to be forthcoming either through a westerly pipeline or a takeover of a dominate player, the media questioned whether the Chinese investment was in fact something which should be prevented as these actions were seen to interfere with the accepted norm that the private sector should lead the development.²⁵ Chinese investment was largely seen as threatening American energy security and as such would affect us only indirectly from the fallout from the Americans. Lastly, the national newspapers, which had previously worried about or welcomed Chinese investment, changed their story to conclude that the pending Chinese “invasion” was more hype than reality.

Conclusion

In only a small number of instances did the national newspapers, the *Globe and Mail* and the *National Post*, or Canada’s largest paper, the *Toronto Star*, use the “energy superpower” term in news stories, commentaries, or editorials that focused on the Alberta oil sands. This small subset of articles was roughly evenly split between those, which dismissed the idea as misleading or inherently negative, and those, which were supportive of Harper’s goal of becoming an energy superpower. However, it would be a mistake to conclude that the media failed to embrace Harper’s oil sands frame. When examining Harper’s speeches, his primary goal was to market the oil sands as place for safe, reliable investment. In doing so, he implicitly contrasted Canada to other oil producing countries, like Russia and Venezuela, which had recently taken aggressive steps to reassert more state control. All three newspapers embraced the Prime Minister’s contention that private oil companies, and not a more activist state, should/would lead oil sands development. Evidence of this is their overwhelming adoption of an economic frame and their placement of business actors as their primary sources. One saw

little evidence that the newspapers perceived Canada's divestment of control to the private sector as problematic. All three papers did perceive the oil sands as a good place to invest and often applied a "business filter" when examining the proposed changes by both levels of government to the fiscal regime governing oil sands development. In addition, the media often reinforced the idea that the U.S. was the natural market for Canada's oil sands crude. During the study period, Chinese investment received a "lukewarm" response as the media largely rejected the idea that Canada needed to diversify its markets. Other perspectives were present in national newspapers but their voices were largely silenced by sheer dominance of an economic frame told by business actors. With very few exceptions, it is possible to conclude that the media would largely reject the steps that the Canadian government would need to take in order to make Canada an "energy superpower."

Endnotes

- ¹ The author would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their comments, as well as Dr. Ian Urquhart and Dr. Linda Trimble for their earlier feedback.
- ² There are two primary methods for extracting bitumen (10-12%) from its surrounding material (quartz sand (70%), water (3-5%) while the remainder consists of other inorganic material) (Urquhart, 2004: 3). For those deposits located close to the surface, open pit mining is used. For deeper deposits, producers use an in-situ process, which separates the oil from the sand underground by injecting steam. For a full description of both processes, see the pamphlet, *Canada's Oil Sands* (July 2006) produced by Canadian Centre for Energy Information. Some oil sands companies are even investigating ways to separate bitumen from limestone deposits.
- ³ The greenhouse gas emissions are two to three times higher than conventional oil production however others argued that when applying a full life cycle accounting, oil sands are only 5 to 15 percent higher (IHS CERA, 2009: ES-4).
- ⁴ Harper was not the first Canadian government official to link the concept of "superpower" to our natural resources. For example, Raymond Chrétien, Canada's former ambassador to France, connected the two ideas in a speech he gave in 2001- "our natural resources, Canada is indeed a superpower in this regard" following which he made referenced not only to the oil sands but also to other non-energy resources like water and forests.
- ⁵ Initially, the federal government retained authority and management over the oil sands when they formed the province of Alberta in 1906. It was not until 1930 when the federal government transferred authority over natural resources to the province but even then, they retained control over 5,000 square kilometres, which included the Athabasca oil sands deposit (Chastko, 2004: 21). The federal government did not transferred to the province of Alberta until after WWII.
- ⁶ Pigeon (2003) defines a tax expenditure "as the deviation between the actual tax system and a benchmark...system (with the benchmark being defined as) a 'neutral' tax system that does not favour one industry over another" (1).
- ⁷ Kyoto would be a "non-event" with cost estimates at under 30 cents a barrel (Urquhart, 2004: 16).
- ⁸ In 2004, the federal government sold off its last remaining stake (19% ownership) in PetroCanada.

- ⁹ The Investment Canada Act gives the authority to the Minister of Industry to review the sale of Canadian companies to state-owned enterprises to determine whether there is a “net benefit” to Canada. The federal government must be convinced that the company will still operate on a commercial basis including factors like “where to export” and “where to process” (Industry Canada, 2009).
- ¹⁰ In June 2007, Statoil purchased North American Oil Sands Corp for \$2.2 billion. There was no opposition to this takeover.
- ¹¹ Operations will remain in Canadian hands and there is no requirement to sell the oil to the Chinese (Vanderklippe, 2009: B1).
- ¹² For example, Sinopec, through its Canadian subsidiary, initially brought a 40% stake in Northern Lights Project, approx 1 billion barrels, in 2005 and then increased its share to 50% in 2009. Total SA now owns the other 50% (Total, 2009).
- ¹³ For example, the Canadian Energy Research Institute (2006) estimated that 44% of employment generated by the oil sands would occur outside Alberta: 27% in other provinces and 17% internationally.
- ¹⁴ All coding was conducted by me. To ensure accuracy, I trained a cross-coder to randomly select and code 20 percent of the stories. To determine inter-coder reliability, I used the number of questions in agreement divided by the total number questions producing the following results: 96 percent for the *Globe and Mail*, 96 percent for the *National Post*, 97 percent for the *Toronto Star*. The coding frame is available from the author upon request.
- ¹⁵ News stories were identified using Factiva, which defines the lead paragraph as the first two paragraphs.
- ¹⁶ In October 2005, the Klein government proposed reserving the vast area of north-eastern Alberta for the exclusive use of oil sands development. Facing widespread public outcry, the Klein government created a multistakeholder committee to review all aspects of development. Subsequently, the new Alberta Premier, Ed Stelmach launched a second review to look exclusively at royalty rates. The multistakeholder committee reported in June 2007 and the royalty review in October 2007. This paper is part of a larger study examining the range of media coverage during this period.
- ¹⁷ In case of multiple reporters, the sex of the first reporter is coded.
- ¹⁸ The paper reproduced part of Harper’s London speech dealing with “emerging energy superpower” on the same page as this article.
- ¹⁹ This news story did not contain any other sources and essentially repeated Rubin’s bullish forecast for the industry made at an investor conference.
- ²⁰ Included in this category are the following sub categories: oil sands companies/energy industry, pipeline companies, business analysts or associations, and the investor category. This number is likely slightly higher as some businesses were categorized under other – for example, Finning which provides heavy equipment to oil sands companies.
- ²¹ This study’s key words did not capture any editorials in the *Toronto Star* on this subject matter.
- ²² The amount is equal to proposed capacity of Enbridge’s Gateway pipeline to BC west coast.
- ²³ No *National Post* or *Toronto Star* stories were captured in the data set on this issue.

- ²⁴ This trend continued in 2009. News coverage about PetroChina's 2009 \$1.9 billion purchase in both the *Globe* and the *Post* received both positive (renewed investor confidence after 2008 crash) and negative (US negative reaction over increased Chinese presence in their 'backyard) commentaries (McCarthy, 2009; Vanderklippe, 2009; Martin, 2009)
- ²⁵ When a larger scale investment did occur in 2009, the media noted that for the most part the international subsidiaries of Chinese oil companies operate like any global oil company, thereby largely capturing them within a private sector discourse (McCarthy, 2009:B1).

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