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Proximity and Journalistic Practice in Environmental Discourse: Experiencing “Job Blackmail” in the News

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Abstract

The shift from coal to natural gas to fuel electricity generation has positive (environmental) and negative (economic) consequences for people in the affected areas of the US. Representations of the situation in the media shape how citizens understand and respond to it. We explore the role of proximity in media discourse about the closing of a coal-fired power plant near Waynesburg, a small city in a Pennsylvania coal-mining region. Comparing reporting in smaller-circulation newspapers closer to the site with reporting in larger-circulation regional newspapers, we find that Waynesburg-area papers simply describe the events leading to the closure while regional papers analyze the events in larger contexts, and that politicians, not the plant owners, are represented as blaming environmentalists for job loss. Our findings point to the importance of proximity in environmental discourse and to the need to examine not only what kinds of discourse circulate but how and to whom.

Key words

environmental discourse, proximity, newspapers, news reporting, job blackmail, circulation, coal mining, FirstEnergy, Pennsylvania, energy generation, discourse and place, environmental regulation.

Biographies:

Barbara Johnstone, Professor of Rhetoric and Linguistics at Carnegie Mellon University, is the author of *Repetition in Arabic Discourse* (Benjamins, 1990), *Stories, Community, and Place* (Indiana UP, 1990), *The Linguistic Individual* (Oxford, 1996), *Speaking Pittsburghese* (Oxford, 2013), and textbooks about discourse analysis and sociolinguistic method, in addition to many edited volumes, articles, and book chapters. She is interested in how people evoke and shape places in talk and with what can be learned by taking the perspective of the individual on language and discourse.

Justin Mando is a PhD candidate in rhetoric at Carnegie Mellon University. In his work he intersects discourse and place, public sphere theory and environmental discourse. He is completing his dissertation, in which he examines recent public hearings on natural gas exploration with focus on the discursive creation and use of place for civic ends.

The seeds of this article were sown when we were approached by an environmental activist who was working with an organization called “Coalfield Justice” in Waynesburg, Pennsylvania (USA). Jane, as we will call her, wanted to know if we could help her figure out how to make people in the Waynesburg area think more productively about the recently-announced closure of two coal-fired power-generation plants there. The economy of the counties where the plants were located (Greene County and Washington County) had depended on coal mining for several generations, and the closure of the plants would reduce demand for local coal and put the plants’ employees out of work, so feeling was high. Jane claimed that the dominant way of accounting for the closures in the local community was to blame them on federal environmental regulations that tied the hands of the power plants’ owner, FirstEnergy Corporation, forcing FirstEnergy to shut the plants and eliminate jobs. She bemoaned “thin” newspaper reporting that relied on “recycled language” and failed to suggest that the plant closures could be a step on the way to a cleaner environment and a more diversified economy for the area. She wondered why people seemed to think it was “more interesting” to talk about people losing their jobs than to talk about economic diversification and suggested that FirstEnergy’s story was the one that got told because the company had the money, and because the environmentalists’ argument in favor of change was more complex and technical.

Jane used the term “job blackmail” to characterize the rhetorical strategy that she thought accounted for the tenor of discourse about the Hatfield’s Ferry closure. “Recently,” she wrote, “I have been reading about a decades-old concept called ‘jobs blackmail,’ which to me means that companies use language to perpetuate a belief that environmental regulation and activism are to blame for any large-scale industrial job loss, even when those losses would have occurred based on independent economic forces. This same tactic has been used recently in reporting on the closure of two major coal-fired power plants in Washington and Greene Counties.” The concept of job

blackmail was introduced by Kazis & Grossman (1991[1982]). According to these environmentalists, job blackmail is discourse that emanates from companies whose operations pose environmental risks and that blames “faceless government bureaucrats and ‘elitist’ environmentalists” for their closings of factories, mines, and mills and lay-offs of workers (7). This way of accounting for companies’ decisions implies that environmental concerns and economic ones are incommensurable, that “if the public wants careful resource use and a clean, protected environment, that must come at the expense of working people” (7). Employers use job blackmail talk to recruit their employees to their anti-environmentalist stance and to divert attention from the possibility that other things (such as mismanagement) might have led to the companies’ problems and other solutions (besides shutdowns and consequent unemployment) might be available.

We agreed to work with Jane. Before we could design ways to ameliorate the situation, however, we needed to know who was actually saying what, and where the accounts of the plant closures that were circulating in the affected area were coming from. We wanted to know whether job blackmail was really the dominant account of the closures and, if so, who was promulgating this account. This article reports on that research and its findings. We focused on one of the two power plants whose closure had been announced, the Hatfield’s Ferry plant, and our analysis is based on newspaper articles in the U.S. press about the Hatfield’s Ferry closing, from the day the closing was announced until the day the plant actually closed approximately three months later. Using close analysis of linguistic details of the texts and intertextual links among them, we found that (1) there were some striking differences between Waynesburg-area press and the regional and national press in how the closure and its implications were reported on, and (2) if newspapers did tell the “job blackmail” story attributing the situation to environmentalism, the story came not from FirstEnergy but from local politicians. People who read about the Hatfield’s Ferry closing in the Waynesburg-

area press would have heard a much more localized version of the story, in which the closing was not linked to larger trends in the economics of electricity generation or talked about in terms of possible positive outcomes, and in which politicians' anti-government, anti-environmentalist voices were given frequent and extended space.

Environmental discourse in the media: Proximity and representation

Fill (2001) describes “ecolinguistics” as the study of “languages in their environments” and “language and environmental problems” (Bednarek and Caple 2010: 8-9). In contributing to the latter line of work, we join a growing number of scholars who study environmental discourse in situated contexts (Endres 2012, Hugh-Jones and Madill 2009, Lindeman 2013, Stamou & Paraskevopolous 2008, Usher 2013, Waddell 1996, Yamaguchi 2007), in particular in mediated environments (McIlvenny 2009, Killingsworth & Palmer 1992a, Sonnett et al. 2006). In a synthesis of literature on environmental discourse, Muhlhausler and Peace (2006) conclude that environmental discourses are most often anthropocentric and concerned with the local (471). Even in cases where environmental risk could be considered from an “eco-centric” perspective (Killingsworth & Palmer 1992b), such as a southern Ontario water dispute that could have wide impact on the natural environment (McElhinny 2006), environmentalists gain the most traction when they frame risk in human terms and focus on issues in close proximity to their audiences. We add to the conversation about how environmental problems are framed by considering how news reporting about an event with strong environmental and human impacts differs based on audience and proximity to the event.

Ecolinguists have also studied texts that report on environmental issues. Coupland and Coupland (1997), in their study of British newspaper reports on sun tanning, and Bednarek and

Caple (2010), in an analysis of natural disaster stories in the media, show how ecolinguistics can act as a counter to pre-existing discourses. Studies of technical risk communication by scientific experts, politicians and the media (Farrell and Goodnight 1981) and accommodations of scientific discourse for the media (Fahnestock 1998, Killingsworth and Palmer 1992b: 133-60) show, respectively, how the public can be rendered a passive observer of environmental crisis and how reporters may “betray their own objectivity” (Killingsworth & Palmer 1992b: 133) by adding certainty to scientific findings and by framing findings as appeals to “usefulness” or “wonder” (Fahnestock 1998: 333-34).

Farbotko (2005) shows how an Australian newspaper talks about sea-level rise on Tuvalu, representing Tuvaluans as passive victims rather than potential agents of change. Media representations can also be understood to take evaluative stances through their use of contextual frames that blur the lines between news and commentary (Morasso 2012: 201). We find evaluative stances in reporting on the Hatfield’s Ferry controversy, but this evaluation importantly varies relative to geographic proximity to the event.

Proximity is not an entirely novel analytical lens in discourse scholarship. Van Dijk (1988: 124) and Bednarek and Caple (2014) describe proximity as a “news value” that contributes to newsworthiness. The concept was first introduced by Galtung and Ruse (1965: 75-77) who show that news about distant nations (*cultural* distance rather than geographic) is focused on the actions of elite individuals. Our work differs in that we look at proximity not as a variable that influences *which* news stories are reported but as a variable that influences *how* news stories are told. Our approach is similar in this respect to that of Blommaert et al. (2003), who analyze interviews with people living in varying degrees of proximity to a refugee center in Beersel, Belgium. The authors determine that “...local neighborhood discourses become part of the larger economy of discourses and images, through mechanisms in which locality and translocality interact. Proximity...is the key to

understanding these interactions and the assessment patterns they generate” (325). Other notable work on proximity has been done by Piotr Cap (2008, 2010, 2013), who has developed *proximization theory*. This theory considers spatial, axiological and temporal proximization in political discourses that communicate threat. Cap focuses on the War on Terror and analyzes the legitimization discourse of U.S. political leaders from 2001-2010. While Cap’s work on proximization is similar to our own in that we both consider proximity to be a rhetorical construction with broad and significant effect, we approach this type of appeal from different angles and with different results. As we will show, proximity makes an important difference in how the Hatfield’s Ferry closing was represented in the press. In all the newspaper reports we examined, reporters use proximation to strategically position the “local” with reference to their audiences, representing different groups of readers as interested parties. In addition, however, newspapers whose audiences are physically closer to the Hatfield’s Ferry site represent the events quite differently than do newspapers whose audiences are further away.

Data and Methods of Analysis

Using Google and Nexus-Lexis searches, we identified all the online newspaper articles about the closure of the Hatfield’s Ferry plant, starting from the announcement of the closure on July 9, 2013, and ending on the day the plant actually closed, October 9. There were 47 such articles. We also assembled a corpus of press releases (also published online) that were drawn on in some of the articles (Appendix 1). These press releases include one from FirstEnergy announcing the closure and five from politicians who represented the area where the plant was located. To get a first-hand

look at some of the discourse surrounding the Hatfield's Ferry closure, we attended a public hearing about it and took notes that supplement our analysis of the newspaper reports about this hearing.

FirstEnergy's initial announcement gave rise to reports in Waynesburg-area and larger-circulation regional papers, and between then and when the plant closed, two public hearings about the proposed closing generated multiple news reports each. A number of articles reported on other reactions to the announcement and analyses of the situation. (With the exception of a brief summary of FirstEnergy's initial press release in the *Wall Street Journal* (Chaudhuri 2013), the Hatfield's Ferry closure was not covered in newspapers with national coverage in the US.) In an initial close reading of a roughly representative subset of six articles we were struck by a number of differences between the articles published in newspapers whose circulation was restricted to the immediate area of the plant and those published in newspapers with wider coverage, with the wider-circulation papers more likely to analyze the situation that gave rise to the plant closure and the more local papers more likely simply to describe the current situation and reactions to it. We also noted corresponding differences in whose voices were quoted and paraphrased. These differences suggested that people in the immediate area of Hatfield's Ferry, relying on local sources of news, might be getting a different account of the plant closing than would people further away, reading about it in other newspapers.

To explore this possibility and to locate the exact source of the job blackmail discourse, if it was present, we decided to compare the coverage of the Waynesburg-area papers with that of the regional papers. We selected three events that gave rise to articles in papers in both categories: the initial announcement of the closing on July 9, a public hearing about the closing held in Waynesboro on September 13, and a public hearing in Jefferson, PA on September 16. These articles are listed in Appendix 2.

The Hatfield's Ferry plant is on the Monongahela River, which is the boundary between Greene and Fayette Counties. There are three newspapers that serve the local area, all of which covered the plant closing. The *Greene County Messenger* is published in Waynesburg and serves the county of which Waynesburg is the county seat; the *Observer-Reporter* is published in Washington, the seat of Washington County, and has an office in Waynesburg; and the *Herald Standard* is published in Uniontown, the seat of Fayette County. Papers with wider, regional coverage that covered the plant closing were the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, the *Pittsburgh Tribune*, and the *Pittsburgh Business Times*, all of which serve roughly the southwestern quarter of Pennsylvania, as well as papers from elsewhere in Pennsylvania and from neighboring West Virginia and Ohio. Table 1 represents the data for this part of the analysis. All the articles that we discuss in this paper are listed in Appendix 1.

Event	Number of articles about this event in Waynesburg-area newspapers	Number of articles about this event in regional newspapers
Press release from FirstEnergy announcing plant closures, July 9	2	7
Public hearing in Waynesburg, Sept. 13	1	4
Public hearing in Jefferson, Sept. 16	2	1

Table 1: Data for comparison of Waynesburg-area and regional reporting of events

Our approach to this material combined rhetorical analysis, asking what sorts of claims were made and how they were argued for, and linguistic discourse analysis in the Hallidayan tradition (Halliday and Matthiessen 204), asking how choices about naming and wording, transitivity, and the representation of other voices shaped and were shaped by the ideological force of the article (Fairclough 1972). The questions we asked were motivated by our hypothesis that proximity to the

Hatfield's Ferry plant would affect how the scope of the issue was represented and how events were evaluated. We asked the following questions about each of the articles:

- (1) How is the plant closure represented? In particular
 - (a) How does the article characterize the reasons for the plant closure?
 - (b) How does the article characterize anticipated or possible positive outcomes of the plant closure?
 - (c) How does the article characterize anticipated or possible negative outcomes of the plant closure?
- (2) How does the article represent the fact that the closure would result in the loss of 380 jobs? (Possibilities included, for example, "job loss," "380 people who will be without jobs," and "unfortunate casualties in the President's 'war on coal'")
- (3) Does the article refer to the Waynesburg-area community, where the plant and its workers live, and if so how?
- (4) What places are mentioned by name?
- (5) Are other sources of energy besides coal mentioned (natural gas, wind, solar, nuclear), and if so how?
- (6) How are government regulations and regulators referred to? ("the Environmental Protection Agency," "the EPA's Mercury and Air Toxics Standards," "Obama's 'War on Coal'", etc.)
- (7) How is FirstEnergy, the company that owns the Hatfield's Ferry plant, referred to, and what semantic role does it play in the clause when it is? Our list of possible semantic roles was drawn

from Halliday's (2004, pp. 168-205) discussion of clauses as representations. The roles that turned out to be relevant in our analysis were actor, senser, sayers, goal, and scope.

(8). Who is directly quoted, and in what order? ¹

In addition, we identified several articles that were based on or resulted from press releases from politicians. To see how politicians' voices were represented in Waynesburg-area reporting and in regional reporting, we looked at these to see how and to what extent elements of the press release were incorporated into articles based on it. The data for this part of the analysis is summarized in Table 2.

Press release	Number of articles in Waynesburg-area newspapers based on press release	Number of articles in regional newspapers based on press release
US Congressman Tim Murphy, July 9		1
US Congressman Bill Shuster, July 9		1
PA State Rep. Pam Snyder, July 9	1	
PA State Rep. Pam Snyder, July 22	1	
PA State Rep. Pam Snyder, July 26	1	1

Table 2: Data for comparative analysis of treatment of politicians' press releases

Our analysis of this material consisted of noting how much of the press release was reproduced or represented in the article and how these discursive moves were framed. For example, some articles cited a press release as being among their sources and paraphrased parts of the press release, while others simply reproduced the press release in toto, with no attribution.

¹ In addition, we noted the tense of every verb in each article, but this did not turn out to reveal any differences between the local and the regional articles.

Findings

In our analysis of this corpus of Waynesburg-area and regional newspaper articles, we found definitional differences related to locality as well as a marked difference in the amount of analysis and evaluation in regional papers in contrast to reporting in the Waynesburg-area articles, which deviate less from actual events in chronology and presentation. Further, we found that job-blackmail discourse is represented almost exclusively in the voices of politicians rather than in the voice of the polluting company.

Regional articles expand the scope of the “local”; local articles contain the scope of the “local.”

Along with scholars such as Schegloff (1972) and Myers (2006), we found that formulations of place have rhetorical consequences. The differing proximity of regional and Waynesburg-area newspapers to the Hatfield’s Ferry closure impacts how these papers define what is “local”. Differing definitions of “local” can draw attention to ways of “understanding of the world and the attitudes and behaviors we adopt toward various parts of that world” (Schiappa 2003: 32). We found differences both in the linguistic representation of locality and in embedded attitudes towards audiences, stakes, and stakeholders. The scope of “local” is expanded in regional articles while Waynesburg-area articles restrict localness to a smaller geographic area. Regional articles achieve this widened scope by (1) using the word “local” to cover broad geographic areas, (2) recentering the *origo* of locality, (3) using generic place references, and (4) implying that geographic proximity suggests similar response.

- (1) Four out of the eight regional-press articles emanating from Pittsburgh, which is 65 miles away from the Hatsfield plant, refer to the plant closings as a “local” event, increasing the newsworthiness of the event by representing it as close to their primary readership, thus raising its stakes (Bednarek and Caple 2014). An example of this comes from Timothy Puko (2013b) of the *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review*, who writes, “State officials and labor leaders urged FirstEnergy Corp. to sell two local power plants it wants to close, but their plea got a cold response from the Ohio company during a hearing on Friday”. Puko not only explicitly categorizes the plants as “local”, but also juxtaposes the generic place reference “local” with the specific place reference to Ohio. Puko implies a relationship between the interests of local people and the more distant “Ohio” company that gives nothing but a “cold response.” This expanded sense of locality allows authors to define events as “local” not only to raise the stakes of an event for their readers, but also to evaluate the relationship between distant entities (e.g. “the Ohio company”) and their audience, whom they represent as closer.
- (2) In a related move, regional articles also reposition the *origo* of locality 18% of the time, defining what is local in relationship to a central point no longer fixed on the event. Locality is relocated to the city where the newspaper is based. In the following excerpt, “Pittsburgh area” is used to establish the relationship between the event and the newspaper’s primary readership: “FirstEnergy Corp. announced its third round of coal-fired plant closings in 18 months on Tuesday, a move that will cost most of the 380 employees at the two affected locations in the Pittsburgh area their jobs...” (Puko 2013a). To complement this relocation of the central point with reference to which localness is defined, specific place references are used for distant places, to create a comparison between what is local and what is not. In the same article, Puko refers to the “Akron-based company” twice in the span of two

paragraphs, furthering this local/non-local distinction. Other authors use relational language to situate the plants simply “south of Pittsburgh” (Weese 2013). Repositioning localness in this way keeps the focus on a familiar site (Pittsburgh), representing the event with reference to that site. This means that audiences need not be familiar with the location of the reported event to feel connected to it. Readers may mentally position the event in closer proximity to their own location due to this relational representation of proximity.

- (3) Generic place references create ambiguity that retains focus on the local. An example of this comes from the *Pittsburgh Business Times*, which consistently refers to “the county” and “the region”, although the county being referred to is Greene County, while Pittsburgh is in a different, non-contiguous county. Reporter Malia Spencer (2013) writes, for example: “[Blair Zimmerman] acknowledged the county is benefiting from expanding natural gas drilling activity...”. By using the definite article with “county” rather than writing *his* county or *Greene* County, the specific place reference is rendered ambiguous to a Pittsburgh audience. A similar effect is created with the reference to “the region”, which creates a spatial relationship between Pittsburgh and Hatfield’s Ferry. Spencer writes: “...but [Blair Zimmerman] could say it would have a snowball effect on the region and its coal mining.” The metaphorical use of “snowball effect” also places these localities in a proximate relationship, as the impact of plant closures gathers momentum and affects one geospatially connected area after another. Ambiguous representations of place, whether intentional or not, may impact how audiences perceive the proximity of an event in relationship to themselves. Readers may interpret these ambiguous representations as suggesting that the power plants are closer to them than they actually are.

(4) Regional articles also use the geographic proximity of places to suggest similarities among them. In two of the eleven regional articles, this comparison serves to implicitly define localness. For instance, Robert Powelson, chairman of the Pennsylvania Public Utilities Commission is quoted in the *Pittsburgh Post Gazette* as saying, “I scratch my head because just north of us, in Indiana County, GE Capital made an announcement that they will invest \$750 million to keep [a coal plant] active.” (Litvak 2013b). Powelson implies that the proximity between the Hatfield’s Ferry plant and the one in Indiana County suggests that similar action could have been taken to save Hatfield’s Ferry, even though the Indiana County plant is owned by a different company.

In contrast to the discursive expansion of “local” in regional articles, we find that Waynesburg-area articles contain the scope of what is “local”. These articles published in closest proximity to the Hatfield’s Ferry coal plant primarily limit the “local” in two ways. (1) They use specific place references for areas in close proximity. This forces readers to rely on local knowledge and presupposes that readers have that knowledge. (2) They refer to phenomena with wide impact as a local concern by using generic place references rather than specific place names in talking about similar events in distant places. This helps keep the focus on the local.

(1) Specific place references for areas in close proximity are used at a higher rate than in regional articles. In the eleven regional articles, there were 27 of these specific place references, averaging 2.5 per article. In the six local articles, we found 18 of the same type of reference, averaging 3.0 per article. Waynesburg-area articles also use relational language to situate events in their specific geospatial contexts, relying on the situated knowledge of their

readership. In an announcement of the plant closures, a journalist from the *Herald Standard*, writes, “Hatfield, which was built in 1969 and has 174 employees, and the Mitchell Power Station near New Eagle...” (Ferris 2013). In referring to Hatfield’s Ferry in an elided form as “Hatfield”, the author presupposes familiarity with the location of the plant and its importance due to its proximity. The author also relationally situates the Mitchell plant “near New Eagle”, presupposing familiarity with this borough of fewer than 2,500 residents. These formulations of specific place references serve to create “co-presence” between the author and his or her audience (Schegloff 1972: 84). This assumed familiarity with specific places not only situates both writer and reader as “local”; it can also serve as a barrier to understanding for non-local audiences.

- (2) Phenomena with a wide impact are presented primarily as a local concern. In a Waynesburg-area newspaper report on the Waynesburg hearing, generic place references for non-local places are used to retain focus on the local impact of the event. PJM Interconnect is a corporation that monitors energy grid reliability and is reported to serve “Pennsylvania and all or parts of 12 other states”. This is followed by mention of “...the dramatic shift in power generation from coal to natural gas, noting natural gas now represented about 19 percent of generation in PJM’s area.” The reporter acknowledges the larger trend in a multi-state area by way of the generic references to “12 other states” and “PJM’s area” rather than listing the names of the states in question or designating the relevant area as “the Northeast”. This serves to keep the focus on the local. These references are followed by a quote that resituates the event in terms of local impact: “Members of the panel expressed concern about what the closings of the plants might mean in terms of the costs of electricity to local homeowners...” (Niedbala 2013). In some cases, focus on local impact is retained

with a combination of generic and specific place references for non-local places. For instance, one reporter cites specific non-local places in describing the closures of “nine coal-fired plants in Ohio, Pennsylvania and Maryland”. This is followed by the claim, “...the closings would leave the area with inadequate power supply” (Ferris 2013). Here acknowledges the wider trend of coal plant closures, but represents the risk of these closures as a primarily local (“the area”) concern about power reliability.

The effect of the Waynesburg-area reporting not only contains the designation of locality, but it also contributes to the representation of the issue as exclusively local. The two plant closures in southwestern Pennsylvania are part of a larger trend caused by low energy prices and an abundance of newly secured natural gas. While regional articles acknowledge the larger trend across multiple states, Waynesburg-area articles rarely do. When they do, as in the last example, the event is situated in the context of local impact.

Local articles describe; regional articles analyze

Waynesburg-area and regional articles related to the Hatfield’s Ferry plant closure differ significantly in the amount of analysis reporters present to their readers. Regional articles provide more analysis. This can be seen in their placement of blame and their use of quotes. On the whole, regional papers create a more complex view of the issue, presenting a complex narrative account that evaluates the information it is based on. In contrast, the Waynesburg-area papers present stories chronologically and provide less analysis and evaluation.

As we will see below, reporters in the regional press cite reasons for plant closures that go beyond those provided by FirstEnergy themselves. In addition to this, regional articles tend to place blame within accounts which imply a David and Goliath narrative. For instance, the *Pittsburgh Post-*

Gazette opens its article about the Waynesburg hearing with the line “Bob Whalen came to Waynesburg with a plan to save FirstEnergy’s money-losing coal plants...” (Litvak 2013b). Compare this to the opening of an article on the same hearing in the local paper the *Observer Reporter*: “FirstEnergy Generation President James Lash testified Friday...that the company would hold to its plan to close the two coal-fired plants ... eliminating the jobs of 380 employees” (Niedbala 2013). While the *Observer Reporter* begins with a broad statement about the result of the hearing, the *Post-Gazette*’s article opens with a narrative about union representative Bob Whalen, characterized as a tragic hero, journeying to the hearing with an idea about how to preserve the jobs of the workers he represents and thwarted by the obstinacy of FirstEnergy Corp’s representative. In Pittsburgh’s other daily newspaper, the *Tribune-Review*, the report of the same event also begins with an account of this clash (Puko 2013b). Both regional papers foreground Whelan’s proposal that FirstEnergy sell the plants instead of closing them, and both construct their articles around that theme, while the Waynesburg-area paper begins with an overview of the hearing and then gives a purely chronological account of the proceedings, describing what people said in the order in which they said it and suggesting no broader narrative plot.

The characterization of coal plant closures as a struggle between the little victim and the huge corporation is also apparent in a regional-press article announcing the closures. Waynesburg-area citizens are portrayed as helpless in the face of FirstEnergy. Representing plant workers as devastated by the news of the closures, the reporter quotes Whalen, who says, “You’re talking about a large majority of folks who are in their very late 40s to mid-50s who have dedicated themselves...to this company”. Citing the employees’ ages helps develop the claim that the workers are loyal to the company and will have difficulty finding new employment. In addition, the reporter advances the claim that they had “no inkling of the closings” because “FirstEnergy [had previously]

spent \$1 billion on environmental controls at Hatfield's Ferry, which had given workers a sense of security" (Puko 2013a). This develops a sense of pathos about the workers and suggests that FirstEnergy is acting unfairly. In both this example and the example above, the regional press leads the reader to evaluate the relationship between FirstEnergy and its employees negatively.

The difference between the regional articles and the Waynesburg-area ones in the structure of the articles and the sophistication of analysis can also be seen in the use of quotation. While Waynesburg-area articles tend to give play-by-play accounts, regional articles are often organized around a theme and provide an account that supports that theme. As mentioned above, the Waynesburg-area report of the Waynesburg hearing in the *Observer Reporter* offers a chronological account that provides limited quotations and paraphrases. The author does not quote or paraphrase anyone who did not actually speak at the hearing and elides exchanges like the one between union leader Whalen and FirstEnergy's representative that the regional papers chose to foreground. Towards the end of the article, the *Observer Reporter* reporter alludes to this exchange but represents only one of the two voices involved: "In response to a question about the company's willingness to sell the plants, Lash said no one so far has expressed interest in buying them" (Niedbala 2013). In contrast, the *Post-Gazette* journalist directly quotes Lash close to the beginning of the article, following a direct quote of Whalen's question about selling the plants: "We've had no offers for the power plants', [Lash] said. 'No one has approached us to buy those two stations.'" In the next paragraph, the reporter reveals the name of a potential buyer "confirmed in a phone call after the hearing" (Litvak 2013b). This is one instance among many where regional papers look for alternative explanations and reach to outside sources for additional context. Regional papers also provide longer quotes and sometimes structure their reports in such a way as to put characters into conversation that in actuality were not.

Regional reporters also draw on outside sources more often, quoting experts who provide perspectives on the situation other than those of the people who are immediately involved. The use of these outside sources adds an element of investigative reporting that is absent from the local articles. In reports on the announcement of impending closures, the *Tribune Review* reporter cites an expert on the economics of power generation from the University of Pittsburgh and the *Post-Gazette* reporter cites an equity fund manager who specializes in the electricity-generation industry. Both of these experts make claims that support the notion that FirstEnergy is not being forced to close the plants due to environmental regulations but that the decision was instead based on “business sense” due to low demand for energy (Puko 2013a). In both regional papers, these expert voices take prominent positions in the articles. In the *Tribune Review*, the expert quotation is located in the last two paragraphs of the article, giving the expert the final word. The *Post-Gazette* reporter puts the expert opinion in second and third lines of the article, framing FirstEnergy’s announcement.

By contrast, the Waynesburg-area *Herald Standard* reporter, also reporting on FirstEnergy’s initial announcement of the closure, quotes local labor union leader Robert Whalen talking about the plant workers’ reaction (“caught completely off guard” and “in shock”), rather than quoting uninformed experts. Furthermore, unlike the regional papers, which situate Whalen’s voice in the middle of their articles, this Waynesburg-area paper gives Whalen the prominent role of framing FirstEnergy’s announcement, in terms of local reactions to it. In Whalen’s voice, the reporter details the ages of employees and describes their loyalty and expertise (Ferris 2013). This focus on employees positions the closure exclusively in its local context. Furthermore, whereas the regional reporters explore broader economic reasons for the plant closure, the Waynesburg-area reporter lists FirstEnergy’s earlier environmental upgrades to the Hatfield’s Ferry plant, characterizing the closure as a waste of money and local talent. To summarize, Waynesburg-area reporters focus on the local

impact of the event and do not explore broader reasons for the closures, while regional reporters reach out to experts who provide an outsider's perspective on the closures that includes analysis of broader trends in the energy business.

Job blackmail talk is more visible in the Waynesburg-area papers and often comes from politicians.

FirstEnergy's July press release announcing the closure of the Hatfield's Ferry plant listed two reasons for the company's decision: "the cost of compliance with current and future environmental regulations" and "the continued low market price for electricity." (FirstEnergy 2013). The report on the same day in the Waynesburg-area *Observer-Reporter* leads by citing only one of these two reasons: "FirstEnergy Corp. announced Tuesday it plans to deactivate two coal-fired power plants in Washington and Greene counties because of the high cost of bringing them into compliance with Environmental Protection Agency standards" (Niedbala 2013). Of the press release's two justifications for the closings, this Waynesburg-area newspaper initially represents only the one associated with job blackmail, the one, that is, that blames the situation on the government's environmental policy. Later in the same article, the issue of the causes of the closure comes up again, this time in a direct quote from US Congressman Tim Murphy, who also blames the US government: "What this ... is is this administration saying it is going to ignore any efforts by power companies to invest in cleaner plants and, in fact, punishing power plants for investing huge amounts in cleaning up." The same selective representation of the company's position can be seen in the Waynesburg-area *Herald-Standard's* report on the same day, which leads with "FirstEnergy unexpectedly announced on Tuesday that it is deactivating Hatfield's Ferry Power Station in Greene County and a power plant in Washington County rather than put them through expensive retrofitting needed to comply with anti-pollution regulations" (Ferris 2013). Again, it appears in the Waynesburg-area news as if the only reason the power plants are closing, or at least the more

important one by far, is because the government has tied FirstEnergy's hands with expensive environmental red tape. The possibilities that the company may also need to downsize because of the low price of its product, or that larger economic factors may impact the company's decisions about how to respond to government policy, do not enter the picture.

Regional papers handled the reasons for the plant closings quite differently, muting or even arguing against the job blackmail account and putting the situation in a larger context. The *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review* announced the closings in its lead paragraph, commenting that the decision “underscores the changing landscape in [the] electricity industry”² (Puko 2013a). While FirstEnergy is described as “grapple[ing] with looming deadlines to upgrade the plants to meet new federal [environmental] standards,” the article also notes that Hatfield's Ferry and Mitchell plants are just two of the 12 coal-fired plants the company is in the process of closing down, explaining the connection between the two reasons cited in FirstEnergy's press release: “Electricity prices are so low that the plants won't be able to make money if FirstEnergy spends the \$275 million needed to meet new federal ... standards.” That evening, an article in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* quotes a stock-market analyst as saying that the shutdown is unrelated to government policy: “This not about the [Environmental Protection Agency]. This is primarily a reflection of where the market is” (Litvak 2013a). Two other regional papers cite both of FirstEnergy's justifications for the closings, one noting also that “in 2005, Greenpeace USA named Hatfield's Ferry Power Station as one of the worst polluters in the nation” (Wescoe 2013).

² The depletion of easily accessible coal and the development of a new technology for extracting natural gas from shale meant that coal had become more expensive than natural gas, and the electricity-generating industry was rapidly shifting to gas to fuel power plants.

In short, when the Waynesburg-area newspapers talk about the reasons for the plant closings, they do so in ways that reinforce the idea at the root of job blackmail discourse, the idea that the company is being forced to shutter power plants and lay off workers because of the federal government's environmental policy. When regional papers talk about the reasons for the plant closings, they foreground more complex, more systematic accounts. It looks, then, as if job blackmail talk has less to do with how FirstEnergy describes its motivations and more to do with how news reporters represent FirstEnergy's motivations.

In fact, overt claims that the government is to blame for the plant shutdowns and the consequent layoffs come not from FirstEnergy but from politicians.³ In the initial report in the Waynesburg-area *Observer-Reporter*, for example, US Senator Pat Toomey is quoted as saying, "Our nation's activist EPA has once again hurt our workers and our local economy. This is another skirmish with the current administration and its 'War on Coal'" (Niedbala 2013). The initial report in the regional *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* quotes State Representative Rick Saccone, who "blamed the 'radical environmentalists who are running an agency of government'", along with US Representatives Tim Murphy ("the president is making good on his promise to 'bankrupt' anyone who opens a coal plant") and Bill Shuster ("Obama's war on coal puts 380 Pennsylvanians out of work") (Litvak 2013a). A press release from the office of State Representative Pam Snyder begins with "State Rep. Pam Snyder and State Sen. Tim Solobay today blamed overreaching federal regulators for forcing the closure of two southwestern Pennsylvania power plants and the loss of up to 380 local jobs" (Snyder 2013). All of the politicians who are quoted or paraphrased in our corpus of articles take the position that the government, and in particular the EPA, president Obama, and

³ Of course, this is not to say that politicians may not be taking their cue from FirstEnergy and other energy-generating corporations.

what they call “Obama’s War on Coal” are to blame for the Hatfield’s Ferry closure. None blames FirstEnergy.

Waynesburg-area articles and regional ones quote politicians at similar rates (25% of the people quoted in the Waynesburg-area articles and 21% of the people quoted in the regional articles are politicians). However, here is a difference in how the quotes tend to be framed by the article writers, one which gives the politicians’ voices more presence in the Waynesburg-area articles than in the regional ones. The writer of the Waynesburg-area article from which the Toomey quote comes characterizes politicians’ responses to the closure announcement in psychological terms, as “swift and angry” and introduces Toomey’s words by saying , “[Toomey] was as hot as [another politician who is quoted in the article]” (Niedbala 2013). By contrast, the first report in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* does not quote or paraphrase Toomey, and the first report in the *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review* characterizes him in political terms, paraphrasing him by saying “Coal boosters, including Republican Sen. Pat Toomey, focused on the job loss to reiterate their claims of a ‘war on coal’ from Democrats” (Puko 2013a). A quote from Saccone in the *Observer-Reporter* article about “our nation’s activist EPA” is introduced this way: “State Rep. Rick Saccone, R-Elizabeth, blistered the EPA over what he considers to be its overregulation of coal, which also criticizing the administration” (Niedbala 2013). Again framing the quote in psychological rather than political terms, the sentence also gives Saccone’s position double presence, once through the framing sentence and once through the actual quote. By contrast, the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* quotes Saccone in a list of responses from politicians introduced with, “Within hours of the announcement, Pennsylvania politicians issued statements invoking the so-called War on Coal” (Litvak 2013a). This framing sentence reminds the reader that the people in question are politicians and suggests a skeptical stance toward the war on coal metaphor by labeling it “so-called.”

Additionally, politicians' voices get more presence in Waynesburg-area articles than in regional ones because of how the reporters handle press releases from politicians. There were only a handful of articles that made obvious use of such material, and only one case in which a Waynesburg-area article and a regional one were based on the same press release. This case is striking, however. An article in the regional *Pittsburgh Business Times* was clearly precipitated by a press release from State Rep. Pam Snyder on July 26. The writer paraphrases the press release, which he refers to as "a prepared statement" from Snyder. He takes one phrase and one sentence directly from the press release, putting both in quotation marks and adding "Snyder said" after the second, so that it is clear which parts of the article represent Snyder's voice and which the reporter's (Gough 2013). By contrast, an article on the same day in the Waynesburg-area *Observer-Reporter* simply reproduces the press release, with a different headline, substituting "said Friday" for "today said" (Stevens 2013). There is no indication in the article that the entire text is Snyder's press release, or even that the article draws on a press release; Snyder's press release is presented as if it had been an interview with the reporter. Another article by the same reporter takes all but two of its 19 paragraphs directly from three press releases. In both these cases, politicians' voices are completely blended with reporters' voices.

To summarize, since it is politicians, not FirstEnergy, who advance the job blackmail argument that the Hatfield's Ferry closing is simply the result of unfair environmental regulations, and since politicians' voices speak more loudly in the Waynesburg-area newspapers than in the regional ones, someone relying on Waynesburg-area papers for their news would be more likely to be exposed repeatedly to job blackmail discourse than would someone reading the regional press.

Discussion

As Blommaert et al. observe, people in close proximity to an event exhibit an “insatiable hunger for information and documentation” (320). It is likely that people in the Waynesburg area experienced the closing of the Hatfield’s Ferry plant on radio and TV, in conversation with others, and perhaps through the internet, in addition to reading about it in the newspaper. A full account of the circulation of ways of accounting for the closure would need to explore other media. This would be a much larger project, requiring ethnography as well as multi-model text analysis. We think, however, that our exploration of newspaper reporting supports several significant claims.

We started this inquiry with the sense that “flows of information and their uptake are strongly tied to spatial patterns” (Blommaert et al. 2003: 231). Through our study of local and regional newspaper reports, we find that proximity shapes how readers experience events. Close proximity to an event entails a limited view of the issue, as reporters consistently focus on very local impacts and characterize events as isolated occurrences even when they may be part of a larger trend. The Waynesburg-area press, offering less evaluative reports than the regional press, suppresses alternative interpretations of the events through its focus on negative local impact and its limited representation of outside expert voices. The focus on local impact and the presentation of information that requires situated knowledge of events seems designed for the local readership, making them feel connected to the event even if they are not directly affected. This might transform readers into advocates. As a side effect, though, this strategy reduces the community’s opportunity for productive comparison with places undergoing similar transitions.

The regional press, by expanding the scope of what is “local”, may convince their audience that they are, as well, stakeholders. However, because the *origo* of locality is centered on the site of the report rather than on the site of the event, regional audiences may respond to the stakes of the issue that affect them most, such as, in our case, the risk to grid reliability and the possibility of

higher electricity costs. It is less likely that these more distant audiences will share the concerns of those who are closer to the site.

These findings supplement our understanding of proximity as a news value (Galtung and Ruge 1965, van Dijk 1988 and Bednarek and Caple 2014). We show that proximity is not only a geographic or cultural measure of distance, but that proximity itself can be constructed in media reports to create inclusivity or exclusivity. Proximity thus has a two-fold effect. First, proximity helps to determine newsworthiness. Second, once an issue has been deemed newsworthy, that issue can then be made to seem closer to an audience through discursive means. In some instances, an issue may not be deemed relevant due to its geographical or cultural proximity, though it is still reported based on other news values. In these cases, the appearance of proximity may be created as we have described.

Our findings also point to the role of journalistic practice, and constraints on it, in how environmental issues enter public discourse. The Waynesburg-area reporters almost invariably adopt a conventional reportorial stance, relaying just the “facts” in the order in which they occurred. (Having attended the Waynesburg hearing, we were able to see, for example, that the Waynesburg-area reporting of it mentioned the people who spoke at the hearing in the order in which they spoke, while a Pittsburgh paper’s report on the hearing changed the order of the reported voices in order to put them in conversation with one another in a way they were not at the hearing.) The lack of analysis in the Waynesburg-area papers is no doubt related to their small budgets for reporting, in contrast to those of the much larger regional papers.

We have also shown that “job blackmail” is not as simple as Kazis and Grossman suggest. In this case, at least, the discourse Kazis and Grossman call job blackmail emanates not from the

polluting company but from politicians. This is not to say that FirstEnergy is not involved in the circulation of job blackmail discourse; the company may very well influence the politicians through campaign donations and in other ways. But from the perspective of a newspaper reader, it is the politicians, not the corporation, who blame environmentalists for job loss. This points to the importance of studying not just what people say about environmental issues but also how these discourses circulate.

Additional research may build on this work by way of comparative studies. Comparative studies of social change that results in job loss may provide further insight into the nature of job blackmail as well as its circulation. The effect of proximity on reporting may also benefit from a comparison between local environmental issues in different parts of the world. Further work could also compare our findings with the construction of proximity as it pertains to nation-state level environmental discourses.

Appendix 1: Press releases analyzed

FirstEnergy (2013) FirstEnergy to deactivate two coal-fired power plants in Pennsylvania, July 9. Press release, available at:

https://www.firstenergycorp.com/content/fecorp/newsroom/news_releases/firstenergy-to-deactivate-two-coal-fired-power-plants-in-pennsylv.html (accessed 16 August 2013).

Murphy T (2013) Rep. Murphy statement on shutdown of SWPA coal plants. Press release, Lanham: Federal Information & News Dispatch, Inc.

Shuster B (2013) Obama's War on Coal puts 380 Pennsylvanians out of work. Press release, Lanham: Federal Information & News Dispatch, Inc.

Snyder P (2013a) Snyder, Solobay discuss plant shutdowns with FirstEnergy. Press release, available at: <http://www.pahouse.com/snyder/index.asp?pg=PAHouseNews&doc=29946> (accessed 16 August 2013).

Snyder P (2013b) Snyder, Solobay question power plant shutdowns. Press release, available at: <http://www.pahouse.com/snyder/index.asp?pg=PAHouseNews&doc=29879> (accessed 16 August 2013).

Snyder P (2013c) Snyder questions planned closing of coal-fired plants. Press release, available at: <http://www.pahouse.com/snyder/index.asp?pg=PAHouseNews&doc=29969> (accessed 16 August 2013).

Appendix 2: Newspaper articles analyzed

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Henninger M (2013) Closing of western Pennsylvania power plants leaves workers at a loss. *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 21 July. Available at: <http://www.post-gazette.com/local/region/2013/07/21/Closing-of-Western-Pennsylvania-power-plants-leaves-workers-at-a-loss/stories/201307210272> (accessed 16 August 2013).

Kasey P (2013) FirstEnergy: Hatfield's Ferry similar to Harrison, but too expensive to run. *State Journal: Grounded*, 8 August. Available at:

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