

Publication

Black coal, thin ice: the discursive legitimisation of Australian coal in the age of climate change

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Despite mounting urgency to mitigate climate change, new coal mines have recently been approved in various countries, including in Southeast Asia and Australia. Adani's Carmichael coal mine project in the Galilee Basin, Queensland (Australia), was approved in June 2019 after 9 years of political contestation. Counteracting global efforts to decarbonise energy systems, this mine will substantially increase Australia's per capita CO₂ emissions, which are already among the highest in the world. Australia's deepening carbon lock-in can be attributed to the essential economic role played by the coal industry, which gives it structural power to dominate political dynamics. Furthermore, tenacious networks among the traditional mass media, mining companies, and their shareholders have reinforced the politicoeconomic influence of the industry, allowing the mass media to provide a venue for the industry's outside lobbying strategies as well as ample backing for its discursive legitimisation with pro-coal narratives. To investigate the enduring symbiosis between the coal industry, business interests, the Australian state, and mainstream media, we draw on natural language processing techniques and systematically study discourses about the coal mine in traditional and social media between 2017 and 2020. Our results indicate that while the mine's approval was aided by the pro-coal narratives of Queensland's main daily newspaper, the Courier-Mail, collective public sentiment on Twitter has diverged significantly from the newspaper's stance. The rationale for the mine's approval, notwithstanding increasing public contestation, lies in the enduring symbiosis between the traditional economic actors and the state; and yet, our results highlight a potential corner of the discursive battlefield favourable for hosting more diverse arguments.

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