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SOURCES OF EVALUATION OF NUCLEAR AND RENEWABLE ENERGY CONTAINED IN THE LOCAL PRESS

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Abstract

This study investigated the sources of evaluative coverage concerning nuclear power and renewable alternatives contained in local daily press coverage. Ten categories of source were defined for their relevance to the nuclear debate and energy issues generally. Out of these, only 'pronuclear industries' and 'national government' produced more positive than negative appraisals of nuclear power. However, detractors of nuclear power were more varied, the most prolific category being the general public. Moreover, these trends were more marked for coverage in areas confronted with a possible new nuclear development. By contrast, alternative technology received far more positive appraisals and this was spread across a number of sources. Overall, whereas nuclear power was largely negatively evaluated and its support was mostly 'home-based' the reverse was true for coverage of alternatives.

Introduction

During the sixties and early seventies the continued expansion of nuclear power seemed assured. However, more recently, many factors have contributed to the turning tide of public opinion against this technology (cf. Kasperson *et al.*, 1980; Nealy *et al.*, 1983; van der Pligt, 1982; Thomas and Baillie, 1982 for reviews of public opinions trends). Despite this fact, the U.K. government and electricity supply industry seem as committed as ever to extending the nuclear option. It was against this background that, in an earlier paper, we compared local newspaper coverage of nuclear power and renewable alternatives (Spears *et al.*, 1986). We found that nuclear power was overwhelmingly negatively evaluated on a number of different dimensions known to characterize energy issues (cf. Thomas *et al.*, 1980), tending to reinforce popularly held fears about this technology. Given the widening gulf between policy makers on the one hand, and the public and the local press on the other, it seems important to distinguish between different 'sources' of evaluative coverage of nuclear power. (By 'sources' we mean those people, agents or institutions who are responsible for making or producing evaluative assertions about nuclear power, as reported in the local press.) The present study therefore seeks to extend the original content analysis by Spears *et al.* and differentiate evaluative press coverage according to its source. (In fact these two studies were conducted in conjunction with each other and on the same sample of local newspaper articles.) As in our earlier paper, the present content analysis retains information concerning the dimensions of evaluation variously used by different sources, and coverage of nuclear power is

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also compared to that for renewable alternatives. Finally we compare the distribution of sources of evaluation between areas which are confronted with the prospect of a new nuclear development, and those that are not. Spears *et al.* (1986) found that coverage of nuclear power was more evaluatively negative in the 'threatened' areas.¹ It is therefore important to determine whether the distribution of sources responsible for this pattern varies also. In summary, the present study discriminates the sources of evaluative coverage concerning nuclear power and its renewable alternatives contained in local press coverage.

Design: Method and Procedure

Sampling frame

The sampling frame was made up of all the local daily newspapers in the U.K. ($n = 103$). Any article referring to nuclear power and/or alternatives appearing in the first half of 1981, of more than one inch column space, was selected for coding. The overall sample was divided into two: the 'affected' and 'unaffected' subsamples. The affected sample corresponds to coverage in areas confronted with the prospect of a new nuclear development and comprised cuttings from four newspapers: *East Anglian Daily Times*, *Western Morning News*, *Evening Star* (Ipswich) and *Dorset Evening Echo*. The Suffolk papers qualify for this category because of the Central Electricity Generating Board plans to build a pressurised water reactor (PWR) at Sizewell. (At the time of sampling, the Public Inquiry had not yet started.) The other two are included because of the CEGB proposal, announced in 1980, to build a new nuclear power station in South West England, of which three sites in Cornwall and two sites in Dorset were put forward. Although this is a small number of papers compared with the unaffected sample, these four are among the five that are most prolific in terms of articles detected and comprise just over 30% of the sample as a whole ($n = 289$ for the affected sample; $n = 650$ for the unaffected sample).

Coding frame

Apart from recording the date and origin of articles, coding involved two distinct stages corresponding to questions addressed by this study and our earlier paper (Spears *et al.*, 1986). Specifically, whereas the previous paper was concerned solely with the evaluation of the technologies in press coverage, the present objective is to determine the 'sources' of these evaluations. 'Source' was operationalized as any 'identifiable person, agent or institution who, as far as could be determined from the text, was responsible for the particular evaluation in question'. In order to appreciate

¹ This concurs with attitude research which shows that support for the construction of a nuclear power station in one's locality tends to be much lower than support for the expansion of the industry in general (the so called not-in-my-back-yard effect; cf. Baillie and Thomas, 1982; Eiser *et al.*, 1986). Moreover, this is true here even of communities which already have a local nuclear power station—a factor which has typically been associated with more favourable attitudes to this technology. Thus, although we found some evidence that people living in the vicinity of an existing nuclear power station in the South West were slightly less anti-nuclear than others (van der Pligt, *et al.*, 1986a) they were still generally opposed to a new nuclear development in their neighbourhood (van der Pligt, *et al.*, 1986a,b). Attitudes are also opposed in the Sizewell area (Warren, 1981) which again has an established reactor. (Indeed press coverage in parts of the South West and Sizewell correspond to the 'threatened' sample of our present study).

more fully the precise method of ascribing sources, it is necessary briefly to describe the first ('evaluation') stage in more detail as the two stages are interlinked.

Stage 1: Evaluation. The unit of analysis was the sentence. Each article was scored for the number of positive and negative statements it made about nuclear power and alternative technology (neutral or purely descriptive statements were ignored). In addition, these evaluative statements were classified according to a number of categories or 'dimensions' known to characterize energy issues. Specifically, Thomas *et al.* (1980) performed a factor analysis of belief items concerned with energy technology and found five underlying dimensions: economic, environmental, technological, future political ('indirect risk') and physical/psychological ('direct life risk'). Spears *et al.* (1986) further subdivided the economic dimension into 'short' and 'long term' economic costs/benefits, and also added an 'unqualified' category to account for general evaluations which did not fit into the scheme. To summarize then, this resulted in a coding scheme of 2 (nuclear/alternatives) $\times$ 2 (positive/negative) $\times$ 7 (dimensions of evaluation) cells, making 28 in all (e.g. technology, positive, nuclear; technology, negative, nuclear; technology, positive, alternatives, etc.) Sentences were simply scanned for evaluative content and an entry made in the appropriate cell. If more than one dimension was relevant within a sentence, each was coded (see Spears *et al.* (1986) for more detailed operationalization rules for the coding, and for the intercoder reliabilities of the seven evaluative dimensions).

Stage 2: Attribution of source. For each entry of an evaluation, a further decision was made to determine its 'source' (see above); only sources of evaluations were coded. Ten categories of source were devised to classify those people, agents or institutions involved in the nuclear debate and/or energy policy in general. These are as follows:

- (1) Pro-nuclear industry and organizations (e.g. CEGB, BNFL).
- (2) UK central government.
- (3) Advisory institutions and commissions.
- (4) UK local government
- (5) Independent institutions (e.g. Universities, non-governmental research institutes, 'experts', etc.).
- (6) Media: active press and TV.
- (7) Independent inquiries.
- (8) Public (e.g. personal/public opinion, letters to the Editor, etc.).
- (9) Anti-nuclear pressure groups and organizations.
- (10) Pro-alternative pressure groups and organizations.

Greater elaboration of these categories can be found in Appendix 1.

A coding scheme similar to that for the evaluation stage was devised such that it was possible to code up to two sources for any one of the 28 cells. If there were more than two different sources for a particular evaluative cell then the two most dominant sources in that article were recorded (although in fact such multiple sources per dimension were very rare). If the same source recurred in the same cell within an article, it was not scored twice. Cases where the source was unstated, ambiguous or difficult to determine were simply not coded. For some examples of how sources were coded, see Appendix 2.

Reliability of Categories

Intercoder reliability based on a subsample of 110 articles achieved an acceptable level of reliability on appropriate indices. The combination of technology (nuclear/alternative), evaluation (positive, negative) and dimension, resulted in 28 categories in all. Of these 15 yielded significant Cohen's k values (11 at $P < 0.001$). The absence of significant k values in the remaining categories (notably the future/political risk dimensions) was due to violation of assumptions associated with computing Cohen's k (cf. Fleiss *et al.*, 1969). Here, because the number of cells in the intercoder matrix is not small (11×11), it is legitimate to use a more simple measure of reliability such as percentage of agreement (Fleiss *et al.*, 1969). On this index, all remaining categories achieved a very respectable level of reliability (78.3–100% agreement).

Results

Description of the sample

Out of the 103 local daily newspapers in the U.K., 89 produced articles which contained evaluative coverage of nuclear power and/or alternative technology. In the six-month monitoring period a total of 939 articles were detected (cf. Spears *et al.*, 1986).

Distribution of sources

Data reporting the distribution of different sources of evaluation for nuclear power and alternatives are presented in Tables 1 to 4. These tables depict the sources of positive statements concerning nuclear power (Table 1), sources of negative evaluations of nuclear power (Table 2) and likewise for alternatives (Tables 3 and 4). Each table provides a breakdown of the distribution of sources on each dimension of evaluation (short-term economic, long-term economic, environmental, etc.) for both subsamples (affected, unaffected). Data in these tables denote the percentage of articles in each subsample which contain sources on any given dimension of evaluation. (N.B. While the percentage values appear to be generally small, these are expressed as a function of the *overall* subsample and not just as a proportion of purely 'nuclear' or 'alternative' articles.)

From Table 1 we find that the 'pro-nuclear industry and organizations' category is consistently the most prolific source of positive appraisals of nuclear power. In fact on all seven dimensions of evaluation, the recurrence of this source is greater in percentage terms than all the other sources put together. This is true of both the affected and unaffected subsamples although the 'pro-nuclear' category is *most* prevalent as a source of positive evaluations in the affected sample (where there are more articles concerned with nuclear power *per se*; cf. Spears *et al.*, 1986).

Comparing this distribution of sources with the pattern for *negative* evaluation of nuclear power provides a sharp contrast (Table 2). First of all it is apparent that sources of negative appraisals concerning nuclear power are much more widely distributed than for positive evaluations. That is, all categories of source are responsible for *some* negative statements about nuclear power, and compared with Table 1, most are relatively prolific. In particular, the 'public' category is a very substantial detractor, especially in the affected sample. For example, the public

TABLE 1
Sources of positive statements concerning nuclear power (percentage of articles per sample in which sources appear)

Source	Sample	Short-term economic	Long-term economic	Environmental	Future/ political	Technological	Direct life risk	Unqualified
1. Pro-nuclear industry/organizations	Affected ^a	4.5	8.3	9.0	2.1	4.8	12.5	20.4
2. U.K. government	Unaffected ^b	3.1	5.8	5.2	0.8	4.6	8.2	12.8
	Affected		0.3	1.4			0.7	3.1
3. Advisory institutions/commissions	Unaffected	0.2	0.8	0.6		0.2	1.1	1.2
	Affected		0.3	0.3	0.3		1.0	
4. U.K. local government	Unaffected		0.3	0.3		0.3	2.0	0.8
	Affected		0.3		0.2			1.0
5. Independent institutions	Affected		0.7	1.0				0.8
	Unaffected		1.8	0.9	0.3	1.5	1.0	2.8
6. Media	Affected	0.7	1.4	1.0		1.0	1.1	1.7
	Unaffected		0.3	0.5		0.5	0.6	2.4
7. Independent inquiries	Affected							0.6
	Unaffected							
8. Public	Affected		0.7	0.7	0.7	0.7	1.7	4.2
	Unaffected	0.2	0.5	0.6		0.2	0.6	0.8
9. Anti-nuclear groups/organizations	Affected			0.7			0.7	
	Unaffected							
10. Pro-alternative groups/organizations	Affected							
	Unaffected							0.2

^a n = 289.

^b n = 650.

TABLE 2
Sources of negative statements concerning nuclear power (percentage of articles per sample in which sources appear)

Source	Sample	Short-term economic	Long-term economic	Environmental	Future/political	Technological	Direct life risk	Unqualified
1. Pro-nuclear industry/organizations	Affected	4.2	0.3	3.5	1.0	2.1	3.1	3.1
2. U.K. government	Unaffected	8.5	0.8	4.6	0.6	4.0	5.8	4.3
	Affected		0.3	0.3			0.3	0.3
3. Advisory institutions/commissions	Unaffected	0.3	0.2	0.6	0.2	0.2	0.5	0.8
4. U.K. local government	Affected	2.4	1.7	1.4		0.7	1.7	3.1
	Unaffected	1.7	0.9	2.5	0.5	2.0	3.2	4.5
5. Independent institutions	Affected	0.7		3.5	1.0	0.3	2.1	5.9
	Unaffected	0.6	0.3	1.5	0.6	0.6	1.5	1.7
6. Media	Affected	1.7	1.7	4.8	0.3	1.0	4.5	6.2
	Unaffected	1.4	0.6	2.2	2.0	1.5	3.4	3.4
7. Independent inquiries	Affected	3.8	0.7	4.2	0.7	1.7	4.5	4.8
	Unaffected	0.3	0.3	2.0	0.8	0.6	2.5	1.2
8. Public	Affected	0.3					0.3	0.3
	Unaffected	8.0	4.2	13.8	9.3	4.8	13.1	30.8
9. Anti-nuclear groups/organizations	Affected	2.0	1.1	4.9	4.8	0.6	5.8	5.5
10. Pro-alternative groups/organizations	Affected	3.5	3.8	7.3	4.2	1.7	6.6	14.2
	Unaffected	1.8	1.5	4.0	2.9	0.6	3.5	5.2
	Affected	1.0	0.3	1.0		0.7	1.0	2.1
	Unaffected	0.3	0.2	0.3			0.2	0.6

made general or unqualified criticisms of nuclear power in over 30% of all articles in this sample. They also questioned its safety both in terms of human life *and* the environment in over 13% of cases. In general, sources tend to cluster on these three dimensions, where evaluative statements proliferate (cf. Spears *et al.*, 1986). Compared with Table 1, the 'pro-nuclear' and 'U.K. government' categories tend on the whole to be *less* frequent sources of negative appraisals than positive ones, whereas the reverse is true for all other categories of source.

Table 3, which presents the distribution of sources of positive statements concerning alternatives, also provides a strong contrast to Table 1. Unlike the positive appraisals of nuclear power, the sources responsible here seem to be broadly spread and not just located in the most intuitively partisan group (in this case the 'pro-alternatives groups and organizations'). Indeed, in the unaffected sample, the 'independent institutions' category seems to be the most prolific source. For example, over 17% of articles in this sample received acclaim from this quarter on the technological dimension, with 10.9% and 9.5% of such articles containing similar support on the long-term economic and unqualified dimensions of evaluation respectively. In the affected sample however, the pro-alternatives category is consistently the most common source of positive appraisals. Again, the long-term economic, technological and unqualified dimensions seem to be the main areas of acclaim.

Sources of negative statements concerning alternatives (Table 4) are relatively few and far between, reflecting the general paucity of negative evaluations overall (cf. Spears *et al.*, 1986). As for sources of positive appraisals, the main categories responsible here are the 'independent institutions' and 'pro-alternatives' sources.

Summary and Discussion

The distribution of sources produces a fairly high degree of consistency across the seven categories of evaluation. As might be expected 'pro-nuclear industries and organizations' are by far the most prolific source of positive evaluations concerning nuclear power, irrespective of dimension. Conversely the general public exceed even the anti-nuclear movement as the most frequent detractors of nuclear power. That the 'public' contribution to the negative sources is greatest in the affected sample is consistent with the fact that public opinion is relatively more anti-nuclear in areas confronted with a possible new nuclear development, though not necessarily in those with an existing nuclear facility (cf. van der Pligt *et al.*, 1986a; Thomas and Baillie, 1982; Warren, 1981).

It is interesting, although perhaps not surprising, that the government's evaluations of nuclear power are more congruent with those of the pro-nuclear category (mostly positive) than the advisory institutions and commissions which it authorizes (mostly negative). Out of the ten categories 'U.K. government' is the only other consistent advocate of nuclear power besides the industry itself. On the other hand, opposition is much more broadly spread across a number of different groupings. By comparison, the distribution of sources for alternatives is very different to that for nuclear power. Support for alternatives is much more widespread, proliferating in the 'independent institutions' and 'pro-alternatives' categories in particular. Sources of negative evaluations are relatively few and far between.

Regarding the dimensions of evaluation, sources tend to express their criticisms

TABLE 4
Sources of negative statements concerning alternatives (percentage of articles per sample in which sources appear)

Source	Sample	Short-term economic	Long-term economic	Environmental	Future political	Technological	Direct life risk	Unqualified
1. Pro-nuclear industry/organizations	Affected	0.7	1.0			1.4		1.7
2. U.K. government	Unaffected	0.5	0.5	0.2				0.3
	Affected							
3. Advisory institutions/commissions	Unaffected	0.9	0.3					0.3
	Affected	0.3					0.3	
4. U.K. local government	Unaffected	1.4	0.5	0.6		0.2		0.2
	Affected			0.3				
5. Independent institutions	Unaffected	2.0	0.3	0.6	0.2	0.3	0.2	0.9
	Affected	1.7	0.7			0.7		1.4
6. Media	Unaffected	2.8	2.3	0.2		2.9	0.2	3.4
	Affected	1.0	0.3			0.3		0.7
7. Independent inquiries	Unaffected	1.8	0.5	0.6		0.5		0.9
	Affected							
8. Public	Unaffected							
	Affected	1.7		0.3		0.3		1.0
9. Anti-nuclear groups/organizations	Unaffected	1.2	0.2	0.2		0.6		0.9
	Affected	0.3						
10. Pro-alternative groups/organizations	Unaffected							
	Affected	2.4	0.3	0.3		0.3		0.7
	Unaffected	3.7	0.3			0.6	0.2	0.9

of nuclear power in terms of danger to human life and the environment. The relatively positive representation of alternatives is focussed on the technological issues and long-term economic benefits. A substantial proportion of evaluation is also unspecified for both technologies (see Spears *et al.* (1986) for greater detail concerning the dimensions of evaluation).

Overall, the present study provides further descriptive evidence for the polarised nature of the nuclear debate. Whereas the government and electricity industry may have had a positive attitude to nuclear power at the time the sample was taken, our data suggest this view was not widely shared. The public and (not surprisingly) various anti-nuclear groups seem particularly vocal in their criticism of nuclear power, largely outweighing the pro-lobby. This finding contrasts with an American study which showed that policy makers and corporate interests were more able to control the media presentation of a controversial technology at the expense of conservationists and locally affected inhabitants (Molotch and Lester, 1975). These researchers suggest that the power and influence of such groups gave them 'differential access' to 'event making' in the national press. Clearly, it is difficult to draw comparisons between very different contexts and technologies (Molotch and Lester's study examined coverage of an oil spill). However, the fact that our study examined the *local* rather than the national press could help to explain the greater voice of public protest and anti-nuclear pressure groups. Because of their local activity, such groups and 'opinion leaders' may themselves have differential access to the local press and be more representative of the target audience addressed by local newspapers than is the largely centralized pro-nuclear lobby. Such a interpretation gains some support from our comparison of affected and unaffected samples. However, a more detailed analysis, extending beyond mere content analysis of media output, would be necessary to fully explicate the complex relation between the different interest groups on the one hand, and the national and local media on the other.

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Appendix 1

Categories of source with some examples

- (1) *Pro-nuclear industries and organization* BNF Ltd.; CEGB (and regionals); Uranium Institute; UKAEA (& Atom); British Nuclear Forum; Nuclear Power Information Group.
- (2) *U.K. Government* Prime Minister; Parliament; Secretary of State for the Environment; Department of Environment/Energy; Ministry of Agriculture; Government MPS/MEPs; Acts.
- (3) *Advisory Institutions* Ad hoc Royal Commissions; Standing Royal Commission; Parliamentary Select Committees/Reports; Private Members Bills; National Radiological Protection Board; Health and Safety Inspectorate (nuclear industries), etc.
- (4) *Local Government* County Council; Borough Council; City Council; Metropolitan Council; Planning Authorities; MPs lobbied by local government.
- (5) *Independent Institutions* Universities; Research Institutes without tied commercial/ nuclear funding; Nuclear Information Network; International Commission on Radiological Protection; 'experts'; unions; other countries; schools, etc.
- (6) *Media* Press/TV reporting in an evaluative capacity—e.g. editorials/leaders; Press Conferences; Exhibitions/Events sponsored by the press.
- (7) *Independent Inquiries* Public Local Inquiry (PLI); Ombudsman; Planning Inquiry Commission; Court of Law; The Assessor; The Inspector; WATT Committee (or on Government funded).
- (8) *Public* Section 29 parties and other interested persons; Individual objectors; Letters to the Editor; Ad hoc local pressure groups (e.g. Stop Sizewell B); Public/people's opinion (opinion in general); MPs lobbied by constituents.
- (9) *Anti-nuclear Pressure Groups* SERA; Network for Nuclear Concern; National Peace Council; NCCL; CND; Greenpeace;* Society for the Protection of Rural England;* Friends of the Earth;* etc.
- (10) *Pro-Alternatives Groups and Organizations* Any alternatives industry (e.g. ETSO, branch of UKAEA); National Centre for Alternative Technology.

* These sources may alternatively be ascribed to Category 10 depending on the context of the evaluation (i.e. anti-nuclear vs pro-alternative).

Appendix 2

Example extracts from articles(1) Taken from *Southern Evening Echo*, Southampton, 23 May 1981

	<i>Evaluation</i>	<i>Source</i>
S1 Safe energy campaigners left a petition at 10 Downing Street calling for a phasing out of nuclear power stations and a decision against building any more.	Unqualified, negative, nuclear	10. Anti-nuclear pressure groups
S2 Many people are less firm in their views, but share the concern which centres on safety both long and short term.	Environmental, negative, nuclear/ Direct life risk, negative, nuclear	8. Public 8. Public
S3 The problem of what to do with old stations is most relevant.	Unqualified, negative, nuclear	No source
S4 Experts are tending to disagree more and more as to the number of stages to be followed in the deactivation of stations.	Technology, negative, nuclear	5. Independent institutions

(2) Taken from *Burton Daily Mail*, Burton, 3 January 1981

	<i>Evaluation</i>	<i>Source</i>
S1 Norwegian scientists believe they have discovered a new technique for turning the energy of waves into electricity.	Technology, positive, alternatives	5. Independent institutions
S2 Several years of tests in a lake north of Oslo, which angered fishermen but intrigued scientists abroad, confirmed the institute's hopes that the system will work and be economically competitive, said Dr Mehlum.	Environmental, negative, alternatives Technology, positive, alternatives Long-term economic, positive, alternatives	8. Public 5. Independent institutions 5. Independent institutions

(3) Taken from *The Birmingham Post*, 19 February 1981

	<i>Evaluation</i>	<i>Source</i>
S1 The CEBG yesterday hit back at criticism of the Government's nuclear programme, saying a Commons Committee had failed to understand the basis of the strategy.	Unqualified, positive, nuclear	1. Pro-nuclear industry
S2 However, the conservation group, Friends of the Earth, said its campaign against expansion of nuclear power in Britain was vindicated by the report.	Unqualified, negative, nuclear	9. Anti-nuclear pressure groups

(4) Taken from *Shropshire Star*, Shrewsbury, 27 January 1981

	<i>Evaluation</i>	<i>Source</i>
S1 Television scientist Dr Magnus Pyke has lent his weighty opinion to a campaign to extol the virtues of solar heating.	Unqualified, positive, alternatives	5. Independent institutions
S2 Background to the campaign is a Press forecast that within 20 years half of the homes in Britain will be using solar energy.	Technology, positive, alternatives	6. Press

(5) Taken from *North Western Evening Mail*, Barrow-in-Furness, 28 May 1981

	<i>Evaluation</i>	<i>Source</i>
S1 Two legal actions in which damages are being claimed on behalf of former Windscale workers are to be heard at Carlisle Crown Court on 9 June.	Unqualified, negative, nuclear	8. Public
S2 In both cases it will be alleged that radiation to which they were exposed in the course of their work affected their health, and in one case led to a fatal cancer.	Direct life risk, negative, nuclear	8. Public