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# Discourses of 'necessary' energy use in the UK media, and their implications for governance

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## Our research examined the discourses of ‘necessary’ energy use that circulated in the UK news media

### Why the media?

Its discourse to some degree *reflects* wider society, what it perceives to be the views of the views of its readership and political actors

- Also includes quotes from political actors, technocrats, interests groups - so can gain direct insight into these views

Also *shapes* and *transforms* the discourses circulating in society

- Influences public views, and so policy

# Sampling strategy

**Sources:** representing a range of political perspectives. Both tabloids and broadsheets:

- Telegraph, Mail, The Sun, Daily Mirror, Guardian

**Timeframe:** 1<sup>st</sup> January 2013 – 31<sup>st</sup> December 2013

- To understand the current ‘state of play’
- Longer timescale not feasible with our resources

**Search method:** keyword search using ‘LexisNexis’ database

- ‘Energy or electricity’, connected with normative descriptors:  
e.g. ‘need, necessary, essential’ and variations

# Method of analysis

**756 articles** resulted from the search, after removing duplicates and those not relevant

Initial analysis of broad narrative themes of articles, the role of demand-side strategies and governance. Articles grouped into themes reflecting these narratives.

# Method of analysis

175 articles selected for in-depth qualitative analysis

Informed by 'framing analysis' approach (Dryzek, 2005; Entman, 1993)

Structured around seven questions:

1. What energy demand or energy services are considered to be 'necessary'?
2. How much of this demand/services is considered necessary?
3. When are they considered necessary?
4. For whom are they necessary?
5. Why are they necessary?
6. Which actors are responsible for meeting this need?
7. Who is making the claim of need?

# Discourse 1: Need as demand

- *An understanding of need prevalent in articles discussing issues of energy security or CO2 emissions, but also found in some articles relating to prices*
- *Alongside Discourse 2, the most common discourse in the articles examined*

**What's needed?** Energy, electricity or gas as generic 'resources'

**How much?** *Demanded* energy consumption = *needed* energy consumption

**When needed?** Needed *whenever* demanded, for whatever purpose

**Why needed?** Economic growth, 'progress', freedom

**Whose needs?** The country or economy

*A spokesman for the Department of Energy and Climate Change said: "As the National Grid have said, we have enough energy to meet our **needs** this winter. Our infrastructure can deliver more than we **need** and has coped well during recent very cold winter spells."  
(Daily Mail, 7/10/2013)*

# What types of governance strategies are legitimised by this discourse?

**Draws attention to supply-side measures** - all energy demand 'needed', therefore *must* ensure all demand is met.

- **State** responsible for ensuring adequate supply by encouraging private investment, providing policy clarity

*The far larger issue facing us now is not so much our gas grid but **supplying** the nation's **electricity needs**.* (The Sun)

*...it would be hard to find a greater indictment of our long-term infrastructure thinking than the failure to **provide properly** for the future **energy needs** of the nation.* (Daily Mail, 24/2/2013)

# ...And *de*-legitimised?

**Demand-side measures almost entirely ignored.** State responsibility is not seen as being to limit, control or reduce demand.

- Implicitly reproduces idea that demand is unquestionable

**Where demand-side governance is addressed, very limited:**

- some recognition of scope for flexibility in timing of demand, and for increasing energy efficiency, but seen as ‘last-ditch’ solutions

**Demand-side management also directly problematised:** economic growth, ideas of ‘progress’, and individual liberty

‘BIG BROTHER TO  
SWITCH OFF YOUR  
FRIDGE’



# Discourse 2: Need as ordinary consumption

- *Prevalent in articles focussing on energy prices, particularly in relation to households*
- *Alongside Discourse 1, the most common discourse in the articles examined*

**What's needed?** Energy, heating (at an affordable price)

**How much?** The amount consumed by ordinary households, other than building inefficiencies. Far above average critiqued as 'wasteful'

**When needed?** Often not clear, but some recognition of extra importance during winter

**Why needed?** Health, 'progress', freedom

**Whose needs?** The 'ordinary consumer'

# What types of governance strategies are legitimised by this discourse?

Government responsible for ensuring the 'ordinary' level of energy consumption affordable through a diversity of means:

- Regulating energy companies, ensuring competition
- Reducing green levies (Mail, Telegraph, Sun)
- Nationalising the energy supply sector (The Guardian, Mirror)
- Increasing supply
- **Demand reduction:** Increasing domestic building energy efficiency

# ...And *de*-legitimised?

Current standards, practices and energy consumption of 'ordinary' households beyond scope of justifiable governance:

- **Health and well-being:** Non-efficiency reductions would mean people using less than they 'need', or turning down heating
- **Individual liberty:** Household consumption is a largely 'private' issue

'No 10 says people should consider wearing jumpers to keep fuel bills down'

'Use less gas to cope with cost, customers told'

**However**, a few articles present consumption that is far above 'ordinary' (i.e. 'needed') levels is **excessive** and **wasteful**. Possible support here for measures that attempt to reduce this consumption?

# Discourse 3: Need as essential services

- *Found in articles concerned about energy prices, but with more explicit and particular concern for vulnerable groups and the fuel poor. Also articles focussed on the impact of 'blackouts'*
- *Less prevalent than discourse 1 or 2, but still widely circulated*

**What's needed?** Heating most often mentioned

**How much?** 'Enough' to maintain decent levels of personal health and well-being

**When needed?** Winter months, cold periods

**Why needed?** Health, well-being, participation in society

**Whose needs?** Everybody, but the elderly and 'vulnerable' have the *greatest* need

# What types of governance strategies are legitimised by this discourse?

## **State and energy company responsible for ensuring vulnerable groups can afford adequate warmth:**

- Making targeted financial support available e.g. improvements to energy efficiency (ECO), winter fuel payment, Warm Homes Discount
- General measures to ensure energy is affordable
- Occasionally 'radical' measures, such as restructuring the energy market, renationalising energy supply

A few articles suggest scope for policies that encourage demand reduction beyond only efficiency, for those using 'more than they need' for a healthy life.

*[A] spokesman from the price comparison website uSwitch said people did need to change their behaviour "[...] We've enjoyed plentiful and fairly cheap energy in this country for many years and as a result people have sometimes got into a mindset of having their homes warmer than need be and wasting energy ... But there needs to be a balance between people wearing a vest top in winter and those who are so cold that they are becoming ill."*  
(Daily Mail, 1/10/2013)

*"When did we all start thinking it was all right to walk around our houses in the middle of winter with our shorts and T-shirts on? When did that become a sensible activity?" [Ian McCaig of First Utility said] [...]*  
*He stressed that he was not suggesting people should go back to being "huddled together" for warmth, and recognised that there were consumers in fuel poverty who could not just turn down their heating.*  
(Telegraph, 19/5/2013)

# To summarise

- Three main discourses of need in the newspaper coverage we studied
- Each have different implications for demand-side governance, the policy measures that are considered legitimate
- But not necessarily mutually exclusive – to some degree apply at different scales
  
- Surprisingly little difference between the newspapers in terms of how these discourses circulate, how demand is framed – a shared ‘common-sense’ (although need to confirm this)



# Comparing the discourses

	<b>Need as demand</b>	<b>Need as ordinary consumption</b>	<b>Need as essential services</b>
<b>What's needed</b>	Energy, electricity, gas	Energy; heating and lighting	Heating, lighting, cooking
<b>How much</b>	Whatever's demanded	Consumption of ordinary households (except inefficiencies)	'Enough' for a healthy life
<b>When needed</b>	Whenever demanded	All year, but especially during cold spells or during certain events	All year, but especially during cold spells
<b>Why needed</b>	Economic growth, 'progress', freedom	Health, 'progress', freedom	Health, well-being, participation in society
<b>Whose needs</b>	The country	'Ordinary families'. Vulnerable groups conflated with everyone	Everyone, but particular concern for the vulnerable and elderly
<b>Legitimate energy governance</b>	Largely limited to ensuring adequate supply	Increase energy efficiency, regulate energy companies and promote competition	Targeted measures of financial and efficiency support to the vulnerable. Potentially scope to reduce consumption through changing everyday standards

# Thanks for listening

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