

'Narratives as social innovations: how new ways of thinking can contribute to a just and sustainable energy transition'

A blog by Naomi Schrandt

It is becoming an increasingly pressing issue: where does our energy come from, what about our energy (in)security this winter, and how can we minimize climate change? It is now more important than ever to move from a fossil fuel-based energy system to a low-carbon energy system. But how do we approach this, and why is this transition so difficult? In her master's thesis, Naomi Schrandt combines transition theory and political discourse theory to understand how narratives can help break through the fossil fuel ways that complicate the transition. She shares her key findings in this summary.



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Our ways of thinking construct the world around us

Scholars have attributed the challenge to phase out fossil fuels to the dominant discourse around the role of fossil fuels in society, which highlights them as a cheap, secure supply of energy that is important for economic growth. A discourse represents a particular way of talking about and understanding of the social world: they construct the social world in meaning. The discourse that is institutionalized at any given time is considered the dominant discourse, meaning that the discourse is manifested in material reality (such as technologies and infrastructure), institutional configuration (e.g., regulations, standards, values), and social practices (e.g., patterns of production and consumption). In other words, a dominant discourse underlies a socio-technical system, and thus the discourse around fossil fuels shapes, reinforces and maintains the current energy system.

Entangled in carbon-thinking

Because of this, the dominant discourse around fossil fuels reinforces a vested interest in bringing fossil fuels to the market, making it politically and economically difficult to stop production. This phenomenon has been described in various ways in the scientific literature, most commonly as ‘carbon entanglement’ or ‘carbon lock-in’. Subsequently, many governments struggle to reconcile fossil fuel production with climate ambitions, and existing institutional and financial support systems allow the fossil fuel industry to continue production. This is also true for the Netherlands, where interdependencies between the Dutch government and the fossil fuel industry ensure a deep dependence on fossil revenues. Thus, the dominance of the fossil fuel discourse and the subsequent lock-in could explain the lack of an adequate phase-out policy in the Netherlands. However, the dominance of a discourse is not permanent: they can be challenged by alternative ways of thinking, or in other words, through narratives.

What are social innovations?

The thesis attempts to offer a discursive perspective on sustainability transitions and advance this understanding by connecting insights from political discourse theory and transition theory.

Narratives as social innovations are a key concept, but what actually is ‘social innovation’?

Wittmayer et al. (2022, p.2) describe social innovation as follows:

“(combinations of) ideas, objects and/ or activities that change social relations, involving new ways of doing, thinking and/or organising energy”

In other words, the manifestations of social innovations can diverge in many ways, from local energy cooperatives to energy gamification (see the SONNET project if you want to know more about social innovations in energy, for example [this explainer](#)). In this study, one particular social innovation is explored: narratives that offer new ways of thinking about energy. So, what is socially innovative about narratives?

Talking about the alternatives

Narratives are the vehicle of discourses, as they are the linguistic instruments through which people make sense of and act in and on the world. By provoking struggles over meanings, narratives can reveal alternative ways of thinking about in this case, the energy transition and role of fossil fuels therein. This is done by revealing the failings of the current system, and by suggesting alternative guidelines and principles that can help shape desired alternative futures. In doing so, narratives as social innovations can have performative effects on the dynamics and governance of the energy transition and accelerate this process. The aim of the study is to increase the understanding of this so-called ‘transformative potential’ of narratives as social innovations to alter, change and/or replace dominant ways of thinking.

Research question and data collection

To empirically underpin the research, the thesis focuses on the role of Shell as an exemplary case for the carbon discourse, and how this role is negotiated in meaning by narratives as social innovations. The narratives as social innovations are those of Friends of the Earth Netherlands (Milieudefensie), Follow This and Code Rood. The main research question that guided this study is: *“How do narratives as social innovations contribute to social change regarding the role of Shell in the Dutch energy transition?”*. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews and an extensive set of

documentary material, varying from press releases, newspaper articles, policy-, scientific- and industry reports to websites.

The narratives: problems, futures, actors, actions

An important step in researching the transformative potential of narratives in the energy transition, is to extensively analyze the four narratives under study. The four narratives can be shortly summarized as follows:

- Shell: *'A Just Transition: From Fossil Fuels to Hydrogen in Step with Society'*

The narrative of Shell is characterized by its' business perspective, as their focus is mostly on the future of the company and the activities for achieving that future. Central in their narrative are energy security, and the role of society and consumers. Shell argues that fossil fuels continue to be important in the transition as they provide energy security, and they can maintain a sufficient cashflow to Shell while transitioning to alternatives. At the same time, Shell expresses that the transition requires 'unprecedented collaboration' and the need to move in line with society to ensure their market share, making the company dependent on societal actors such as consumers and policymakers.

- Friends of the Earth: *'A Duty of Care to Protect Human Rights Against Climate Change'*

Friends of the Earth's narrative has a focus on human rights, as they argue that Shell is violating human rights by significantly contributing to climate change through their greenhouse gas emissions. This argument is based on the idea that the process of climate change is disturbing vital ecosystems that humanity is depending on. Shell has direct control to reduce their emissions, giving the company the power to influence the pace and shape of the energy transition, whereas citizens do not have that power. However, Shell refuses to mitigate their emissions, despite knowing about the risks of their activities for a long time. Rather, Shell uses delay methods to secure their continuation in the oil and gas business, and therefore legal action is necessary to enforce Shell to comply with their duty of care.

- Follow This: *'Shareholder Activism: The Trojan Horse within Shell'*

Follow This argues that oil and gas companies like Shell are in a unique position in the energy transition as they can 'make or break' the Paris Agreement depending on how quickly and drastically they reduce their greenhouse gas emissions. Their narrative is focused on the organizational culture and business level changes within Shell. However, the main barrier in the transition is the lack of imagination at the management level of oil and gas companies, which is why engagement with shareholders about financial opportunities is key to Follow This. Financial arguments are thus at the core of Follow This' narrative: a strong emphasis on sustainability increases the long-term value of the company, and investments in oil and gas are risky because of their negative effects on climate change.

- Code Rood: *'A Capitalist Logic: Putting Profit Before People and Planet'*

The narrative of Code Rood places emphasis on the capitalist system as the fundamental problem, as it is based on the disruption, depletion, and destruction of nature, and it causes inequality and exploitation of peoples and ecosystems. Seeing that the capitalist logic is deeply rooted in Shell, the company is not capable of becoming sustainable. Therefore, a just, fair and environmentally sustainable energy system isn't an achievable possibility, when abiding by the business logic of a company such as Shell. Social justice is a guiding principle in Code Rood's narrative, and they argue

that fundamental change towards a decentralized and socialized energy system throughout the whole chain of supply is necessary. A transition to a just and environmentally sustainable energy system requires the dismantling of capitalist-driven companies like Shell, and the way to succeed in this is to show alternative ways of thinking about energy and the role of Shell by growing and strengthening the climate movement.

Building bridges or tearing them down?

The similarities and differences between the four narratives provides insights into their transformative potential. This is important, as the transformative potential of narratives to destabilize dominant ways of thinking depends on whether a coalition of a variety of actors around the narrative succeeds in building strength. This idea stems from Laclau & Mouffe's political discourse theory, who argue that social change always involves a plurality of actors that need to be mobilized, and to do so, a narrative should be able to align different groups of people in a so-called 'discourse coalition'. This can be done in several ways, for example through 'equivalence', meaning that actors strategically align their different demands to form a broader coalition, or through othering, where a shared opposition is named that blocks their voiced demands. As is clear, the shared opposition in the energy transition of the counter-narratives (i.e., the narratives as social innovation) is Shell. Besides, there are also quite a few aligned understandings between the counter-narratives, which are elaborated on below. Because of this, but also because there exists some demarcating demands (e.g., the perceptions around profit, or the role of carbon capture and storage) between the counter-narratives, they can be considered a 'weak discourse coalition'. Surprisingly, another weak discourse coalition was found, namely between Follow This and Shell, as Follow This is the only counter-narrative that leaves room for a continued usage of fossil fuel on the condition that emissions are reduced.

Struggles over power and responsibility

The findings show that the discursive struggle that the counter-narratives provoke revolved around the question of what constitutes a just transition, and who is responsible for it. This also corresponds with Laclau & Mouffe's political discourse theory, as they state that revealing injustices within a dominant discourse is an essential part of creating social change. All three counter-narratives show a strong connection around the issue of power inequality, as they all emphasize Shell as a powerful actor that employs delay methods to influence the pace and shape of the energy transition. At the same time, citizens do not have the same kinds of power to counteract Shell. This issue of power strongly relates to another struggle, namely that of responsibility: who bears the responsibility for the energy transition? Is it the responsibility of fossil fuel multinationals such as Shell, seeing that they have the power and ability to reduce absolute emissions and provide alternatives to fossil fuels? Or does the responsibility lie with citizens, as they are the consumers of energy, and therefore do have agency in the transition? While Shell emphasizes the responsibility of citizens to make alternative choices, the narratives as social innovations strongly connect on the idea that Shell is one of the most powerful actors in the energy transition that not only influences the transition, but also is required to be transformed to make the energy transition possible in the first place. Yet, the counter-narratives also connect on the idea that Shell is not doing enough (or nothing at all) in the energy transition, and instead shifts responsibility onto others.

But what does justice entail?

However, it is not only the narratives as social innovations that raise the issue of injustice, as Shell also provides an explanation of injustice in the energy transition in their strategy. Whereas the

counter-narratives paint Shell as the main culprit of injustice, Shell positions itself as a pragmatic actor that addresses injustices by shifting the attention to the issue of energy security: the ability to provide a constant, affordable, and acceptable supply of energy. There is thus a conflict over meaning of what a just transition entails, and what Shell's contribution is in it. The literature on energy justice recognizes the plurality of this concept, and various dimensions of energy justice have been defined. For example, Sovacool & Dworkin (2015) name eight aspects of energy justice, of which the 'intragenerational equity' or in other words, 'distributive justice' is one dimension. This understanding of justice deals with the distribution of material outcomes and is thus the understanding of the energy poverty/security argument that is visible in the narrative of Shell. The counter-narratives also have to some extent similar but also diverging understandings of justice: Code Rood focuses on 'due process', also known as 'procedural justice', which is concerned with how decisions are made and who is involved, whereas Friends of the Earth and Follow This relate more to the 'sustainability' aspect of justice, which concerns the duty to ensure a sustainable use of natural resources, and that of 'intergenerational justice', concerned with the rights of future generations to enjoy a good life. The concept of responsibility and justice also relate to each other, as the way that (in)justice is perceived can shape who people see as responsible for energy (transition) problems and this in turn can change attitudes and actions. Thus, by provoking this discursive struggle over the meaning of justice, the attention is shifted towards the responsibility and power, and thus the role of the fossil fuel sector in the energy transition (and climate change).

Conclusion

So why is it interesting to know that the counter-narratives succeeded in provoking a discursive struggle over the meaning of justice in the energy transition, and with that over power and responsibility? Well, in doing so, the narratives opened up the negotiation about the role of Shell in the energy transition. However, this could remain just a discursive struggle if the discourse coalition around the counter-narratives remains weak, which is why it is crucial to build a stronger coalition around a narrative. If the discourse coalition can build their strength, it is possible that the dominant discourse is destabilized and replaced by the new ways of thinking as provided by the counter-narratives. The first step to challenge the dominant discourse has thus succeeded. In order to turn this transformative potential into transformative power to phase out the unsustainable elements of the dominant discourse, the counter-narratives must continue to put effort into building a strong coalition that is not only able to challenge the dominant discourse, but also able to alter or replace it with a new meaning of justice and responsibility in the energy transition.

Full report here: <https://edepot.wur.nl/572989>

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[Naomi Schrandt](#) is working as a research assistant for the [Design, Impact and Transitions Platform](#) on the theme of Transformative Research. She completed her MSc. in Environmental Sciences at Wageningen University & Research and has also worked as a research intern at the [Dutch Research Institute For Transitions](#) on the [SONNET project](#). She has expertise in the social complexity of phasing out fossil fuels in the energy transition, looking at it from the perspective of power dynamics, discourse, and social innovations.