

Donors Do Not Trust

Actor-Networks and Intermedia Agenda-Setting in Online Climate News

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Abstract

Focusing on a story exposing Donors Trust (DT) as a funding source for climate denial campaigns, we introduce actor-network theory (ANT) as a methodological tool for studying online intermedia agenda-setting. The DT story, unveiled by prominent British media in early 2013, had the potential to become a global media sensation. However, this did not occur in two distinct communication actor-networks, Russia and Canada, raising questions regarding climate change journalism and agenda-setting in contemporary networked news environments. This article takes a fresh approach to studying agenda-setting processes by using ANT to trace connections between national climate agendas, networks of power and sites of mediated information. By mapping ties between attributes of DT story actor-networks, it illuminates moments that preclude or facilitate intermedia agenda-setting in online media networks. This demonstrates ANT's potential to help better understand processes of information dissemination in an era characterised by the exceptional interconnectedness of media landscapes.

Keywords: actor-network theory, climate change, climate denial, digital networks, online media

Introduction

“Billionaires secretly fund attacks on climate science” and “Secret funding helped build vast network of climate denial think tanks” read the headlines to online news stories published by *The Independent* (January 24) and *The Guardian* (February 14) in early 2013. Each story draws on the results of an investigation that exposed massive sponsoring for so-called “climate denialism” (Dunlap & McCright 2010, Jacques 2012). According to the stories, *Donors Trust*, a U.S. based donation fund, had been transferring large sums of money into the coffers of an ongoing campaign to discredit the scientific consensus on global warming and spread an alternative view.

In the digital news media landscape, news coverage can spread across the globe within minutes. This is especially true in cases of unpredictable, catastrophic mega events. There are practically no obstacles to attaining widespread international media attention

during natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina in the U.S. (August, 2005) or the more recent Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines (November, 2013). Likewise, knowledge of international hacking scandals, like Climategate, can penetrate the largest national and local media channels and agendas (see Painter 2011, Holliman 2011). The *Donors Trust* (DT) story unveiled by the British media, however, only had the potential for widespread diffusion. Yet, in the context of global efforts to cope with climate change, one might expect such a story to become a sensation.

Despite its publicity in two respected British news outlets, the DT story attracted limited attention across mainstream media networks internationally and remained mostly absent from core domestic media agendas in several national contexts. This article conceptualises the DT story as an actor-network in order to provide a framework for studying intermedia agenda-setting. Instead of looking at large-scale media events and audience reception, which is more typical for agenda-setting studies, we ask how media agendas are shaped by networks of organisations and actor-network attributes.

In Russia and Canada, countries with comparable geographic and economic conditions, contrasting political systems and distinct climate news agendas, the DT story failed to penetrate the mainstream news agendas. This occurred even though climate journalism, in both nations, has featured a considerable degree of climate scepticism and denialism (Painter 2011, Gunster 2011, Poberezhskaya 2016). To demonstrate the usefulness of ANT for studying intermedia agenda-setting, we take these countries as two distinct entry points that allow us to retrace the steps in the DT story's diffusion within Canadian and Russian news media agendas. ANT is then used to probe what attributes of the DT story contributed to its low penetration in both national contexts.¹ Ultimately, the research questions we set out to answer are how and to what extent ANT and intermedia agenda-setting can help account, both empirically and theoretically, for the DT story's limited penetration?

Actor-network theory meets agenda-setting

This article adapts actor-network theory (Callon 1999, Latour 2005, 2011, Latour et al. 2012) to work in conjunction with agenda-setting studies (McCombs & Shaw 1972, McCombs 2005, Golan 2006, Sweetser et al. 2008). The theoretical tools of network analysis allow research to shift focus “from object to flow” (Markham & Lindgren 2014) and observe phenomena *on the move*. This corresponds to actor-network theory (ANT), which states that the network revolution – conceptual (in theory) and digital (in empirical reality) – dissolves the sociological dilemma of agency (individual) and structure (society) (Latour 2005, 2011). A confusing premise of ANT is that “the whole is always smaller than its parts” (Latour et al. 2012). The statement suggests a flexible approach to studies of social phenomena where all entry points provide insights on the overall networked assemblage. Bennett et al. (2011) use this perspective in a study that traces the flow of Fair Trade narratives across interconnected “actants” to establish a wider picture of this organised movement.

Methodologically, ANT can be viewed as relational materialism since it maps relations that are simultaneously material (between things) and semiotic (signs and concepts). Callon (1999) makes a seminal contribution to ANT (the sociology of translation, as he names it) in his study of an attempt by three scientists to domesticate scallops

in St. Brieuc Bay, France. Retracing the steps in the process of knowledge production undertaken by these actors, Callon illuminates their role in producing "...a network of relationships in which social and natural entities mutually control who they are and what they want" (1999: 68). He then describes the process these researchers employ to bring scallops, fisherman and the scientific community into a relationship with one another (1999: 81). Key to understanding this process is the concept of *translation*: how certain types of knowledge move from one network to another (in this case from Japan to France) and to what extent they influence action in a local context.

In the case of *Donors Trust*, the *translation* of a foreign news story (British) into one valued by agenda-setters in Canadian and Russian news networks did not occur. The mapping and analysis that follows, attempts to explain this lack of interest. However, we must first explore how the actor-network method of mapping and making sense of translation relates to the process of setting the news agenda in contemporary media landscapes. By taking this approach to analysing the DT story, we demonstrate that the agenda-setting information flow can potentially reveal interesting connections between media, political networks and other *attributes* of actor-networks.

Traditionally, agenda-setting research based on McCombs and Shaw's seminal study (1972), emphasises the moment of "setting" the news into the audience's mind. With respect to agenda-setting between media actors, a more specific research sub-field has developed that stresses *intermedia* agenda-setting (Golan 2006) or intermedia agenda *building* (Denham 2010). Several studies have shown that not only do traditional news media influence each other's agendas, but they are also interrelated with local agendas set by political advertising (Boyle 2001), policy networks (Kunelius & Reunanen 2012) and online forums (Lee et al. 2005, Woodly 2008). Moreover, citizen media can sometimes form networks limiting the influence of elite traditional media (Meraz 2011). Take, for example, the more complex network of relations found in a recent comparative analysis of traditional media, political campaigning and new media (Sweetser et al. 2008).

Despite the borderless nature of cyberspace, national sub-spaces can often be largely disconnected from each other and differ from the abstract global agenda (Halavais 2000, Chang et al. 2009). A study of CNN (Groshek 2008) found that while the company delivers the same news to domestic and international audiences, it produces two different *translations* of how to think about the news nationally and globally. This resembles what arguably happened in the case of *Donors Trust*: poor representation of the DT story, in the examined online news networks, occurred because it did not resonate with domestic news agendas in Canada and Russia.

In contemporary, networked news environments, another dimension of a developing story that requires consideration is audience participation in agenda-setting, which could include a study of social media. This is an important extension of the actor-network approach, though it falls beyond the scope of this preliminary investigation. Instead, our primary goal here is to clarify and showcase ANT's potential as a methodological tool for studying intermedia agenda-setting in digital communication networks. The question of audience reception is hence irrelevant. We only focus on intermedia agenda-setting capacity, which refers to "the influence of the news media on each other" (McCombs 2005: 549). Hence, this article contributes to theoretical and methodological work within the domain of intermedia agenda-setting, taking a fresh approach to the increasingly

visible networked structure of digital media practices (Latour 2011) that materialise previously intangible networks, making the invisible visible, measurable and accountable.

Method: exploring agenda-setting attributes of the donors trust actor-network

Using manual web searches, we build two national samples of websites where the diffusion of the DT story occurred. Visual mapping of the samples (see Figures 1 and 2 below) helps reveal possible network structures. Each country sample was reduced to 10 stories by limiting web searches to specific geographic locations (Canada and Russia) and a time period spanning from 24 January 2013, when the first *Donors Trust* news item was published in *The Independent* until its last, subjectively determined, meaningful mention on 25 March 2013 (for story selection lists, see Appendix).

In our search for websites with information concerning the DT story, especially those relating to Russian and Canadian media contexts, we ignored results that simply link to the original British stories or refer to them on comments pages. Doing otherwise would have diverted us from our macro-level aims into micro-level scrutiny, distracting us from the main purpose of exploring the larger structures of agenda-setting in online actor-networks. Sites that merely reproduce the original content in online forums and news aggregation feeds are ignored for the same reason.

In line with actor-network theory, we contend that understanding and better explaining the intermedia agenda-setting of an online news story entails exploring its network. This method involves mapping connections not only among media sources and content visualised as networks, but from the broader contexts that form assemblages of attributes pertinent to a particular phenomenon. In the analysis that follows, we outline relevant background information that helps to define some of the key actor-network attributes of the *Donors Trust* story. A detailed and contextualised reflection on these attributes aims to reveal hidden agenda-setting variables, such as origin of the news story, climate impact and vulnerability of Russia and Canada, as well as power networks that influence decision-making. Qualitative analysis of the hyperlinked content offers a more substantial discussion of these attributes, the extent of their reach and impact on news media landscapes in Russia and Canada.

In the Canadian case, it is difficult to treat numerous English-language sources as meaningful since online content from U.S. networks dominates North American media space. Russian sources, in turn, are much easier to distinguish from other Russian-speaking contexts, namely from an array of post-Soviet states. The sample of websites is limited in that it does not include instances of possible reposts, sharing and social media “likes” that link to the original stories. The data collected indicates two surges of media interest connected respectively to the original publications.

The main point of textual analysis is to go beyond the idea that a news network only consists of sites with content that is somehow related. Examining the content itself reveals more about the actor-network structure by shedding light on certain third-party actors and underlying themes. Our analysis explores relations between media organisations, actors mentioned and some central actor-network attributes of the news coverage.

Background: visual maps of the research objects

For our analysis, we collected all of the unique stories published on Russian and Canadian websites in the wake of the original British publications. The coverage was limited in both countries. Our research method uses visualisations to map ties between various actors and their attributes in the form of networks. Thus ANT-based analysis, with its emphasis on the process of information “translation” from one part of a network to another, benefits our exploratory approach. There are many technical means to conduct such an analysis. This study relies on Gephi software (Bastian et al. 2009) since its functionality allows for the uploading of raw data, collected manually or with a web crawler, to run with algorithms defining various aspects of influence in a networked structure. Our simplified use of the tool mostly benefits from Gephi’s visualisation capacity. The method’s usefulness increases with larger data sets by potentially providing more insights on hidden or less obvious relationships.

Figure 1 visualises the DT story as a network of connected media sites and actors in Russian media space. Larger nodes represent the stories in *The Independent*, *The Guardian* and in a sample of Russian media sites. Smaller nodes depict organisations and any other meaningful subjects (actors) mentioned in the texts. Thick arrows display hyperlinks and represent the direction of linking between nodes. Thinner lines connect media nodes and actors. Following the British media, the network is largely formed by two nodes, *Inopressa.ru* and the Russian *Greenpeace* website. The former closely relies on the original British sources. The latter plays a more independent role as the local chapter of an international NGO. With the exception of *Vesti*, none of the nodes represents an established Russian media source nor is there any mention made of domestic institutions.

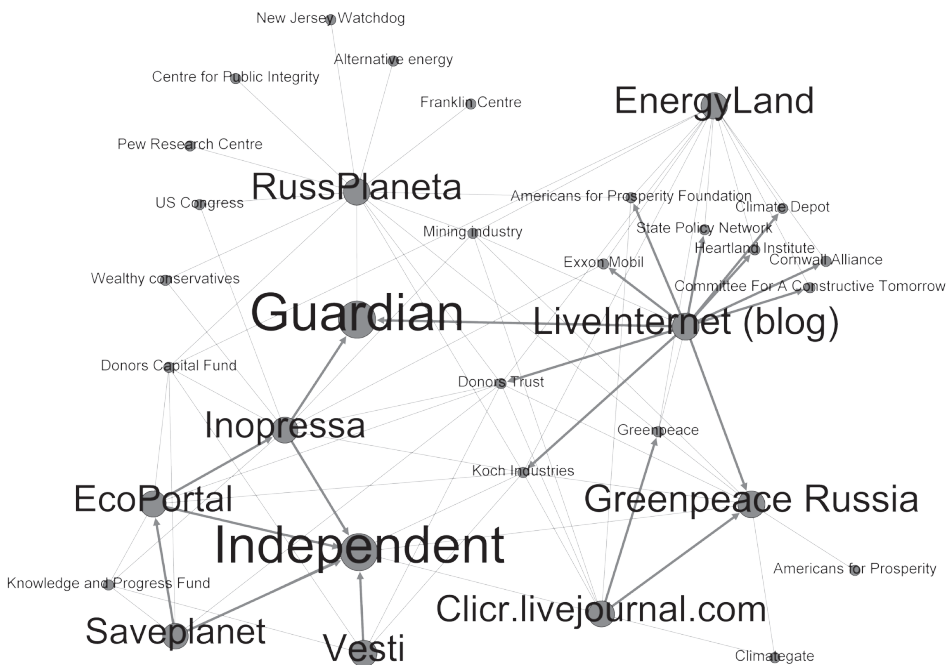


Figure 1. Map of DT story penetration in Russia

Figure 2 shows that the DT story was not a significant news item in Canadian digital media space either. No mainstream media outlets picked up the story and coverage was limited to blogs, the websites of environmental organisations, and local online news platforms, such as *Salt Spring News* and *Straight.com* in British Columbia. A post for *Salt Spring News* by Jim Scott provided the most extensive summary of *Donors Trust* coverage by other news media. The post links to several stories from February 2013, published in the U.S. and Britain, and offers commentary. Sites like *Salt Spring News* function as important nodes that connect readers to more extensive coverage by mainstream and alternative news organisations outside Canada.

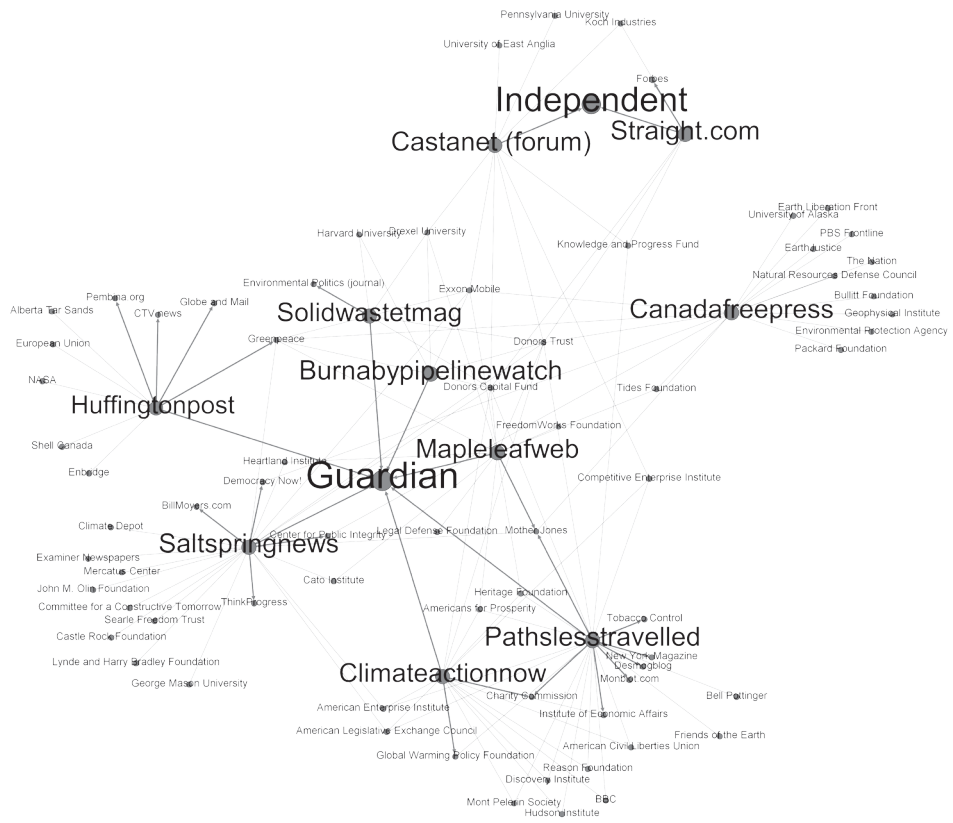


Figure 2. Map of DT story penetration in Canada

Together these maps of the networks of media sites representing the DT story identify some central nodes (agenda-setters and patterns of URL linking) and potential brokering sites that establish continuity in agenda-setting. Brokering, however, was not observed in these cases with agenda-setters remaining confined within narrow circles of neighbouring sources. On each map, websites that link to or mention the same actors appear in clusters. Moreover, informational websites operating within the same fields of interest or with shared political views naturally appear closer together. For example, eco-activist groups place similar emphasis on environmental protection and civic actions, whereas corporate websites and think tanks publish news content and mention actors relevant to their field. Therefore, websites and web publications that mention particular actors are

viewed as research objects that present an opportunity to examine and compare how intermedia agenda-setting transpires in different online contexts. This is an underdeveloped area of research despite the growing influence of online news content.

Analysing Canadian and Russian actor-network attributes

Origins of the Donors Trust news story

Setting the agenda of the *Donors Trust* (DT) news story is an action that pertains to numerous material objects and immaterial ideas combined. An actor-network approach helps explain how action is redistributed in its various attributes (Latour 2005: 192). From this perspective, a study of the DT story can proceed with a step-by-step reconstruction (or reassembling in Latour's terms) of the relevant constituents of a story to determine how they relate to one another. A list of the DT story's useful attributes begins with the websites where the story was originally published – <http://theguardian.co.uk> and <http://independent.co.uk> – and the homepage of the funding organisation itself, <http://donorstrust.org>. What can we learn from these sources? In addition to what has been mentioned, the two newspapers build their critical arguments by connecting *Donors Trust* to:

- a closely related *Donors Capital Fund*, that also sponsors research and reports produced by think tanks aiming to undermine the scientific consensus on global warming;
- a *Knowledge and Progress Fund* that serves as an intermediary for anonymous money flows from the American fossil fuel industry and more specifically from *Koch Industries*; a large conglomerate that recently surpassed *ExxonMobil* in its financial support for efforts to undermine climate science by financing campaigns like this one (see Mayer 2016);
- the ideology of conservative billionaires, the wealthy American right and Republican party policies;
- the absolute lawfulness of this financing scheme, guaranteed anonymity for donors who, in return, receive tax relief and all this as a measure of avoiding public scrutiny.

The Guardian story emphasises the role of *Greenpeace* in discovering factual evidence of this secret sponsorship of climate denialism. The reporting is based on *Greenpeace's* ongoing investigation into the tax records of anti-climate groups like *Koch Industries*. One such report, published in January 2012 (and updated in 2013), is the first to name *Donors Trust* as a key contributor to the climate denial campaign. Both DT stories reinforce these *Greenpeace* findings by citing similar claims made by Robert Brulle, a sociologist at Drexel University whose research has examined the rise of this influential network of climate change deniers (see, for example, Brulle 2013).

What kind of visible attributes did *Donors Trust* generate in the online public space? A banner on the organisation's homepage suggests their primary objective is "Building a legacy of liberty". The trust is located at 109 North Henry Street, in Alexandria, Virginia. Launched in 1999, *Donors Trust* describes itself as a cooperative charity with donors "actively engaged in supporting and promoting our free society as understood

in America's founding documents". The *Donors Trust* website takes credit for donating more than \$300 million to over 1000 "liberty-minded" organisations and specifies some in a list of 57 "recent grant recipients". The list is a valuable data source for research on the network of organisations sponsored by *Donors Trust*.

From this initial set of attributes, the DT story began its diffusion from an abstract international actor-network into its local segments: national networked sites of climate debate, two of which we shall now discuss. Starting with this set of attributes is significant to our wider analysis since it underlines ties between secretive actions sponsored by fossil fuel industries and strongly embedded national relations of power in Canada and Russia. Another important aspect is the acknowledged legality of the described sponsorship, which offers no grounds for scandalous investigations, legal charges or justice claims that frequently attract wider media attention.

Climate impact and vulnerability issues in Canada and Russia

Attributes pertaining to the objective natural conditions in which climate discussions may evolve also inform our analysis. Climate issues are clearly more sensitive for nations with a future threatened by projected changes to the natural environment. Canada and Russia are two of the world's largest countries. They each have a major impact on the environment and are characterised by similar climatic conditions. Both countries are leading producers of carbon dioxide (CO₂), the root cause of global warming. In 2012, Russia produced 5 per cent of the world's emissions, and was only surpassed by China (29 per cent), the United States (15 per cent), the European Union (11 per cent) and India (6 per cent) (EDGAR 2013). Canada was ranked eighth, contributing approximately 1.6 per cent of total global carbon emissions.

Economically, both countries are highly dependent on the export of natural resources. Canada is the largest supplier of oil to the United States (Swart & Weaver 2012). *TransCanada Corporation's* plan to build a pipeline connecting oil mines in the province of Alberta with the U.S. Gulf Coast (Casey-Lefkowitz & Shope 2011) is a major financial incentive for the country and hardly a climate-friendly initiative. This situation closely resembles what is currently happening in Russia. As Jack Sharples (2013) argues, Russia's economic development is based on the export of energy resources and hence its national security is highly dependent upon Europe's attempts to reduce greenhouse emissions in an effort to tackle climate change. Governments in Russia and Canada have thus far demonstrated little interest in reducing global oil and gas consumption.

Both countries face a relatively low level of estimated risk in relation to ongoing and future climate challenges. The Climate Vulnerability Monitor Report ranks countries on a scale from 1 to 5, according to the strength of cumulative climate risks ranging from "low" (level 1) to "acute" (level 5) (DARA 2011: 26-28). Canada is currently grouped among the level 2 countries: those facing "moderate" levels of climate risks (DARA 2011: 38). By 2030, the only sub-categories of risk that are anticipated to reach level 3 are economic stress and habitat loss. Other risk factors, such as health impacts and weather disasters, are expected to remain the same. Although Russia faces a higher level of risk (level 3), they are mainly associated with "extremely acute" levels of economic stress. By contrast, the sub-categories of "health impact" and "habitat loss" register at

level 1 and risk of “weather disasters” at level 2. The monitor forecasts that in 2030 these risks will remain low in Russia (DARA 2011: 46). The high climate impact and low levels of vulnerability these countries share may have visible consequences on the media agenda in general and the work of journalists in particular. Hence, this combination of attributes provides interesting entry points for examining the online communication actor-networks that formed around the DT story in both national contexts.

Climate change is not a central issue on the Russian media agenda (Poberezhskaya 2016). In Canada, the topic generated some attention between 2007 and 2009 (Tegelberg 2010) but has not been prioritised on the domestic news agenda either. However, the issue of climate change is clearly more salient when compared to Russia. Two comparative studies of media coverage of global climate summits show that Russia was last in terms of the quantitative output of climate news (Eide & Kunelius 2010: 20, Kumpu & Kunelius 2012: 316). Canadian news media demonstrated much higher levels of engagement, occupying top positions in both studies. When discussing climate change, Canadian journalists underline it as a “global moral dilemma” and make “demands for global solidarity and action” (Tegelberg 2010: 108). The scarce Russian coverage was more concerned with domestic “economic efficiency” and “global energy security” (Yagodin 2010: 288, Sharples 2013), with a marked tendency toward careful climate scepticism.

In 2009, a controversial incident of stolen scientific correspondence (Climategate) diffused widely across local news networks in Russia and Canada, showing an insatiable journalistic appetite for provocative climate stories. Even embarrassing events such as Canada dropping the Kyoto Protocol or Russia’s detention of a *Greenpeace* vessel received substantial coverage in both countries, while stories like *Donors Trust* have gained far less traction. We analyse the DT story’s limited diffusion to better understand why it did not spread in the way these others did.

Networks of decision-making

Canada is a parliamentary democracy where, until recently,² the ruling Conservative Party gradually increased its influence over climate politics. The party’s political base is firmly rooted in the province of Alberta, the heartland of Canada’s fossil fuel industry, although other regions enjoy a considerable stake in natural resource extraction. Hence, the overall tendency of Canadian climate-related policies can be described as a slow withdrawal from international obligations. However, the Canadian case is also notable in that the political opposition has managed to send its own delegation to annual UN sanctioned climate summits. At the Copenhagen summit in 2009 (COP15), for instance, representatives of several provinces accused the federal government of inaction on climate issues. The incident triggered discussion in the national media and revealed important regional differences (Tegelberg 2010: 98). This exemplifies the opposing narratives and diverse viewpoints that enter into mainstream climate news in Canada.

The Russian constitution grants full authority to the president who stands above all judicial, legislative and executive powers. Thus, the visit of President Dmitry Medvedev to COP15 in 2009 could be mistaken for a sign of increased climate alertness among national decision-makers. During COP15 and at later summits, Russia abstained from taking an active role in the climate negotiations, walking a comfortable line between the interests of developing and developed countries (Yagodin 2010). The official Russian

policy is outlined in the Climate Doctrine (2009) which recognises the negative consequences of climate change, while emphasising the advantages of such developments for a country with vast territories, substantial water resources and a small population in vulnerable areas. Previous research (Russell et al. 2012: 204, Tegelberg et al. 2014) found that in Russia the only alternative public agenda on the topic of climate change is set by international NGOs that political elites view as a threat because of their potential to mobilise oppositional protest.

Analysing news agenda content

Russia's vague climate scepticism

In Figure 1, *Inopressa.ru*, which specialises in translating foreign news sources into Russian, was the first site to pick up the two British news stories and extend the agenda across two ecological websites (*EcoPortal* and *Saveplanet*). *Inopressa.ru* therefore played the role of a network translator, in theoretical and empirical terms, by connecting the two British publications to an environmentally-oriented sub-network within the Russian-language media landscape. Because neither *Inopressa.ru* nor the climate theme are central to agenda-setting in Russia, there was no further diffusion of the DT story. If this were a story like the *Greenpeace* ship arrests by Russian police, it is plausible that a different network would have taken shape, one reflecting the interests of Russian news agenda-setters. In this respect, the DT story lacked the necessary support from strong civil society and environmental organisations. Furthermore, it cannot be adequately translated into media networks controlled by giant Russian fossil fuel companies like Gazprom.

Whereas *Inopressa.ru* mostly functioned as a link to a limited international agenda, the role of *Greenpeace* Russia was more substantial in providing original context for the story. Like *Inopressa.ru*, the Russian *Greenpeace* website published two stories, each following the original articles. The difference was that the belated *Greenpeace* reaction (a week after the first translation by *Inopressa.ru*) served as a news source for media blogs. An Oxfam-related ecological blog community *Clicr.livejournal.com* aggregated the story and explicitly linked it to *Greenpeace*'s ongoing investigation. Similarly, SergejSh, a blogger from *LiveInternet*, focused on the investigative work and publications. This blogger was highly active in hyperlinking to various actors mentioned in the story. In general, Russian bloggers have limited agenda-setting capacity when it comes to their influence on mainstream media (Yagodin 2014). However, the Russian blogosphere is known to display more diversity in the debate about climate change than any traditional media (Poberezhskaya 2014).

RussPlaneta and *EnergyLand* are two peripheral media nodes that appear further from other Russian news nodes. Both produced relatively extensive lists of actors involved in the news story. Yet, in this case, the nodes are not significant sites within the Russian media space. In the Russian network, the only node with a potential for large-scale diffusion is the news portal *Vesti* due to its proximity to the mainstream. Symptomatic of Russia's general climate scepticism, the adoption of this story by an important online media outlet did not lead to further diffusion. As part of the dominant agenda-setting network, *Vesti* reporter Maksim Dinkevich played down the original criticism of climate denialism and reversed the overall meaning, stating that "the threat of global warming is a myth

blown up by journalists to unprecedented sizes”. An italicised portion of Dinkevich’s statement hyperlinks to another *Vesti* (10 January 2013) story which states that “climate warming does not threaten the earth”. Even this reverse agenda did not cause the story to spread to general news sites, confining it to a specialised eco-oriented sub-network.

There are two distinct clusters of nodes in the Russian network. The left side gravitates around the British publications and their *Inopressa.ru* translations. The right side is dominated by *Greenpeace*’s media output. Overall, there are not many actors or clearly stated themes on the climate news agenda when compared to the Canadian case. The two clusters share at least one common theme which is to consistently emphasise the involvement of *Koch Industries*, and “mining industries” in general, in the DT story.

The vagueness of Russia’s climate scepticism attests to a general lack of personified opinions and voices on the DT story. The Russian stories frequently copied each other and bore signs of aggregation, with the same or sometimes slightly altered text appearing in multiple places. Only *Vesti* and *RussPlaneta* provided the names of journalists who contributed to the coverage. The other media sites relied on anonymous authorship, decreasing the authority of the sources and aggravating the already poor conditions for translation within the actor-network.

Canada’s diversity and clarity of opinion

In a post for *Solid Waste Magazine*, David McRobert notes that the *Donors Trust* story “....confirms findings of earlier studies by sociologists and other academics” (2013). McRobert summarises this literature, placing emphasis on empirical evidence showing that conservative think tanks play a major role in funding the research of climate deniers. While *Greenpeace*’s investigation was a main source for the DT story, none of the Canadian websites linked to it directly.

The Canadian diffusion map, shown in Figure 2, is divided into three parts. The largest part is formed by a cluster of nodes referring to *The Guardian*. The earlier publication in *The Independent* had a less significant diffusion effect, with only two Canadian sites basing stories on that early stage of coverage and hence making up the second, smaller cluster. The third part of the network is formed by a single node *CanadaFreePress*, the only right-wing conservative website in the sample. A piece by Ron Arnold entitled “Greenie lying bastards” on *CanadaFreePress* comes as a clear defence of *Donors Trust* and contrasts with the critical perspectives featured on the other sites.

Since the Canadian sample mostly consists of original publications, unlike the aggregate stories that dominated the Russian case, there are fewer connections between the nodes. This is due to the higher number of news stories about *Donors Trust* in a network that shares a common language with the British news media. The more diverse discussions in Canada can also be explained by the proximity of *Donors Trust* to the North American context. On the network map this is indicated by the overall number and variety of actors mentioned. Actors, moreover, are often uniquely associated with a single news source. *Huffingtonpost.ca* mentions a different set of actors than *Salt Spring News* or the *MapleLeafWeb* discussion forum. It is not surprising then that the liberal oriented *HuffingtonPost* is the most thematically distant from the conservative website *CanadaFreePress*. Accordingly, these two sources and their ideological counterparts occupy opposite poles on the Canadian diffusion map.

Donors Trust and *Donors Capital Fund*, predictably, occupy central positions among the mentioned actors. More interesting, in this respect, is the peripheral place of *Koch Industries* despite the organisation being named in the original stories as a key sponsor of foundations like *Donors Trust*. Here, once again, a breakdown in the capacity for translation to occur between key actors hindered the potential for the DT story to diffuse more widely within the Canadian climate news network.

Discussion

Analysis of DT coverage in both cases ultimately points to a comprehensive lack of interest in covering the story. However, this transpires quite differently in each context. Canadian online news networks are more diffuse and tightly connected with other English-language resources (British and American). In the Russian coverage, *Greenpeace* is a central node with two stories generating the most online traffic. In Canada, links to *Greenpeace* are less explicit and extra searching is required to discover that this was the main source of factual information linking *Donors Trust* funding to climate denial campaigns. The visualisations make this clear with *Greenpeace* at the centre of the Russian network and far out on the periphery of the Canadian network.

The two contexts also differ in terms of the origins of the DT news. In Russia, the first news appeared in January 2013 after the original stories were published in Britain. By contrast, *Progressive Bloggers* and *Desmogblog* broke the story in Canada in January 2012 shortly after *Greenpeace* first circulated the results of its ongoing investigation. While *Greenpeace* is central to the Russian network, the stories examined do not refer to material from this earlier period. The scope of the DT stories in the Russian news network is limited to the translation and circulation of news from other sources. Some of the coverage questions the credibility of the sourcing for the original stories. However, there is no further analysis or reflection on *Donors Trust* in the Russian context. The translation of “climate change” news from international or domestic sources to Russian mainstream media is hence considered irregular as it occurs primarily through local specialised media. As a methodological tool, ANT helps account for a lack of compatibility between key network attributes, such as the poor climate agenda in Russia and the distance of non-mainstream sources of information from policy-making power. The general media agenda has little interest in climate news and the role of translators is played by websites with weak ties to the mainstream news landscape.

The Canadian material differs in that a range of ideological perspectives are articulated across the small network of sites that covered *Donors Trust*. NGOs and environmental groups with specialised interests, right-wing commentators and local news outlets each putting their own distinct spin on the DT story. Yet, despite this diverse cross section of perspectives, coverage remained limited to the periphery of Canada’s online media landscape, resembling news penetration in the Russian network. In sum, what characterises these empirical cases are patterns of online network diffusion that attest to the lack of attention influential mainstream and alternative media agenda-setters paid to an international climate story with significant implications.

Conclusion

This article demonstrates that actor-network theory provides a useful tool for studying agenda-setting in online networks. Our starting point was the fact that the intermedia agenda-setting potential of the *Donors Trust* story was limited in both empirical cases. Various kinds of actor-network attributes – news story origin, national climate change agendas, networks of power and sites of mediated information – help us to explore an assemblage of interconnected factors that impede the intermedia agenda-setting process in two empirical cases. Taken together, the network attributes and corresponding lack of attention to the DT story suggests that online news networks do not create fundamentally new channels of intermedia agenda-setting. Instead, online news networks tend to mirror existing power relationships in these two distinct media landscapes. The usefulness of ANT as a method and theoretical framework is that it helps to identify the invisible boundaries where translation from one realm of knowledge is possible, but not always successful. This was the case in the Russian media landscape, where a general lack of interest in climate change (Poberezhskaya 2014, 2016) was reflected in online networks which supposedly provide more opportunities to spread awareness of DT and climate denial. Likewise, in Canada, despite the presence of many more voices and a strong civil society dedicated to raising concerns about climate change, these actors remained on the margins of the dominant agenda-setting cycle.

These findings raise critical questions when considered in relation to other recent climate news stories, such as Climategate (2009), Canada's withdrawal from the Kyoto Protocol (2011) and Russia's conflict with *Greenpeace* activists in the Arctic (2013). These stories had a more widespread resonance across global news media networks. Our findings suggest these divergent patterns of diffusion – lack of diffusion in the *Donors Trust* case and widespread diffusion in the other cases – can be better understood through further efforts to combine network analysis with the analysis of ideology and systems of media power. These are important undertakings if we are to develop a better understanding of the mechanisms and processes of information dissemination in an era characterised by the exceptional interconnectedness of media landscapes. This study takes initial steps toward establishing methodological and conceptual frameworks that can produce more detailed accounts of online intermedia agenda-setting. As new media technologies continue evolving, and news stories increasingly proliferate through interpersonal sharing and relaying online, it is crucial to investigate further how controversial stories like *Donors Trust* circulate (or lose their momentum) within the vast digital networks of social media. This would add a new level of complexity to actor-network theoretical approaches and require more elaborate techniques of data gathering.

Notes

1. Despite intriguing similarities and differences, the choice of these particular nations was not intended for international comparison. Rather, the primary purpose is to demonstrate the relevance and usefulness of combining actor-network theory (ANT) with intermedia agenda-setting to make sense of news story diffusion in networked media space.
2. It is important to note that the attributes described here correspond to the data collection period when the Conservative party held a majority government in Canada. The authors are aware of the outcome of recent Canadian elections and, in particular, the newly elected Liberal Party's dissimilar approach to national climate policy and international climate negotiations.

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Appendix: *Donors Trust* Story Selection

British publications

1. <http://www.independent.co.uk/environment/climate-change/exclusive-billionaires-secretly-fund-attacks-on-climate-science-8466312.html>
2. <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2013/feb/14/funding-climate-change-denial-thinktanks-network>

Canada

1. <http://www.straight.com/blog/346636/climate-denial-koch-brothers-style>
2. <http://www.burnabypipelinewatch.ca/content/secret-funding-helped-build-vast-network-climate-denial-thinktanks>
3. <http://blog.solidwastemag.com/obamas-next-opponent-our-vast-network-of-climate-denial-think-tanks/>
4. <http://www.climateactionnow.ca/aggregator/sources/3>
5. <http://saltspringnews.com/index.php?name=News&file=article&sid=23166>
6. <http://www.pathslesstravelled.com/2013/03/secrets-of-rich.html>
7. http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/sangita-iyer/ethical-oil-canada_b_2750333.html
8. <http://canadafreepress.com/index.php/articles-health/greenie-lying-bastards>
9. <http://forums2.castanet.net/viewtopic.php?f=22&t=48872>
10. <http://www.mapleleafweb.com/forums/topic/22344-exposed-the-dark-money-atm-of-the-conservative-movement/>

Russia

1. <http://www.inopressa.ru/article/25jan2013/independent/climat.html>
2. <http://ecoportal.su/news.php?id=68135>
3. http://www.saveplanet.su/mynews_27879.html
4. <http://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=1015334>
5. <http://www.greenpeace.org/russia/ru/news/blogs/green-planet/blog/43822/>
6. <http://www.liveinternet.ru/users/sergejsh/post262811561/>
7. <http://www.inopressa.ru/article/15feb2013/guardian/eco.html>
8. <http://rusplt.ru/articles/business/borba-s-vetrjanimi-melnicami.html>
9. <http://www.energyland.info/news-show-mir-tek-100053>
10. <http://clicr.livejournal.com/81142.html>