

Stopping the Willow Project on Social Media: An Exploration of the Social Problems Process in a Sub-Environmental Issue

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ABSTRACT

The Social Problems Process (SPP), a sociological theoretical model, encompasses an in-depth examination of the stages a social problem (SP) passes through to achieve remediation. This project aims to explore the SPP of the environmental sub-SP of fossil fuel continuation as demonstrated by the Willow Project (WP), an accepted policy that allows for intensive oil drilling in environmentally vulnerable landscapes, contributing to exacerbated climate conditions. The aim of this exploration is to better understand the SPP in contemporary SPs and role of social media. The present study uses qualitative content analysis, emphasizing frequency and themes, of WP-related Instagram posts. A total of forty-four posts were collected and analyzed across two account categories: activist/educational (n=5) and news/informative (n=5). Approximately 86% of the analyzed posts were collected from the activist/education account category (n=38) with primary themes of taking action and animal/environmental consequences. Contrastingly, the news/informative account category produced minimal coverage prioritizing contextual information. These findings support the WP sub-SP passing through the initial three stages of the SPP: claims making, media coverage, and public reaction. This work contributes to filling in the gaps of literature exploring SPs within social media with an acute focus on the connections between environmental SPs, public perception, and youth.

Introduction

From casual sexism to disastrous terrorism, social problems (SPs) are prevalent in vast ways throughout society. Some SPs, especially those relating to environmental crises, have and will continue to impact humans across classes, genders, races, geographic locations, etc. Climate change and relating sub-issues, such as environmental degradation and global warming, align with both the objective and subjective definitions of SPs (Best 2008). Notably, many sociologists have challenged the validity of the objective approach of defining SPs (Best 2008; Blumer 1971; Hubbard, DeFleur, and DeFleur 1975; Schneider 1985). Nonetheless, as Blumer (1971) described a SP becoming reified once societally recognized, environmental-based issues have long since earned mass acknowledgement and concern within society. For instance, the initial scientific indication of global warming phenomena in response to fossil fuel usage was released in the mid 1890s, with the concern and harsh realities only growing since (Weart 2012). However, environmental issues' labeling as a social problem is not a prominent debate in the present time nor is its discussion the purpose of the current paper.

Most SPs hold the commonality of being social constructions, which supports the analysis of SPs through the SPs process (SPP) as this approach allows for understanding through focusing on how and why certain conditions are labelled as SPs (Best 2008). Building from the subjective definition, SPs are constructed when a collective of people recognize the conditions and later acquire social legitimacy (Blumer 1971). The SPP is an all-encompassing approach to examine why and how these conditions were recognized as such. Common examples of SPP application focus on varying phenomena caused by large societal movements or events (e.g., COVID-19 impacting the educational institution and health policies) (Best 2020). Building on this, I argue that a SP itself may serve as an umbrella for more sub-categorically defined issues. This is exemplified in environmental SPs due to their systemic and deep-rooted nature within society, leading to numerous microscale SPs. From this and pertinent to the current paper, I hypothesize that when examining these 'sub-issues' of a SP (i.e., sub-SPs), the SPP still functions and is prevalent at an acute scale. In the current paper's context, environmental sub-SPs consider a wide range of issues such as air pollution, ocean acidification, and deforestation, among others. This paper focuses on the sub-SP issue of fossil fuel continuation through exploring the online response to the proposal and approval of the Willow Project in the United States.

The Willow Project is a recently Biden-administration-approved (as of March 2023), eight-billion-dollar oil drilling operation led by ConocoPhillips, a multinational fossil fuel company (Turrentine 2023). The plan allows for ConocoPhillips to expand

drilling practices into the vulnerable Arctic environment, bringing harsh consequences to the National Petroleum Reserve in Alaska and Teshekpuk Lake, which are ecologically sensitive and significant areas (Chiappinelli et al. 2023; Garthwaite 2023; Turrentine 2023). The projected outcome of this project is approximately six hundred million barrels of oil—a questioned estimate that could exponentially increase U.S. carbon emissions (Turrentine 2023). This area of Alaska has already experienced climate change stressors including increased ocean temperatures, ocean acidification, coastal erosion, thawing permafrost, and more (Garthwaite 2023; Turrentine 2023). Given the vulnerability of this area, further environmental stressors can only reap additional negative consequences and exacerbate current conditions (Garthwaite 2023). Regardless of the site's environmental status, the support of oil drilling's continuation is detrimental to climate crises' calls, failing to align with U.S. President Biden's promises of beneficial climate-oriented policies (Megerian 2023; Milman 2023).

Benefit-cost analyses in past economic explorations have indicated that the benefits of expanding oil drilling practices in environmentally vulnerable areas may exceed the costs (Hahn and Passell 2010). While oil drilling supports the U.S. economy, allows for technological and scientific developments, creates job opportunities, and more (Office of Oil & Natural Gas 2020), its continuation poses a multitude of environmental concerns. The practice of oil drilling itself has major environmental consequences including disruption of ecosystems, harm onto mammals, vegetation clearing, contamination, and contributing to the increase of average global temperatures furthering the impacts of global climate change (Turrentine 2023; U.S. Energy Information Administration 2022). Thus, the backlash that such an oil drilling project received is not an isolated event. Protests against drilling have sparked over the years and across the globe from Argentina to Australia (Alcoba 2022; Lewis 2019). In this paper, the Willow Project, specifically the online response, will be explored through the SPP as an example of an environmental sub-SP.

The entirety of the SPP includes six stages: (1) claims making, (2) media coverage, (3) public reaction, (4) policymaking, (5) social problems work, and (6) policy outcomes (Best 2008). The initiation of claims making is seen when one brings about a topic to others' attention through claiming the issue as troubling in some manner that should be addressed; the people spreading this claim are referred to as claims makers (Best 2008). Environmental SP claims have been made by both activists/social movements and expert/scientist claims makers. Most commonly, activists/social movements build their efforts around the scientific research and data produced by experts/scientists. Moving forward into the subsequent stages, environmental issues have

certainly gained increasing media coverage and public reaction over the years (Funk et al. 2020; Simpkins 2021). Environmental SPs have continually passed through the initial stages of the SPP, though—like many other SPs—have yet to be fully remedied. Despite advancements and increased attention in national policy towards mitigating environmental consequences, this SP has continued to repeat the SPP, as policy that does bring the SP into the latter three stages of the SPP typically fails to bring about the positive change necessary to properly combat the environmental crises and hence remediate the SPs (Kamarck 2019; Plumer and Popovich 2021; Tyson 2021). The present paper aims to explore the journey of the Willow Project sub-SP through the SPP to explore the extent the issue succeeds in the SPP; as Willow was a policy proposal, the succeeding into stage four of the SPP would be pertinent to the remediation. This will serve to bridge gaps in literature regarding modern environmental issues within sociological theoretical understanding and application of the SPP. Further, the current work demonstrates the importance of youth and social media as pertinent topics of exploration.

There has been speculation that public opinion and concern regarding environmental issues are nothing more than reflections of the public's consumption of mass media—which act as a definer of issues for public concern—given the comparisons between general public opinion and mass media coverage of environmental issues (Funkhouser 1973; Hansen 1991; Lowe and Rudig 1986). However, most relevant literature focuses on mass media, prominently through television and newspapers, as the research was conducted prior to the emergence of social media (Hansen 1991; Schoenfeld, Meier, and Griffin 1979). There are scarce explorations on environmental SPs/SPP and social media/internet (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, blogs, etc.). Theoretically, the argument may be made that the SPP would act rather similarly in social media as they do in other traditional media forms; however, social media's growing demand and popularity justifies the need to adequately fill in this gap through addressing this societal force and its potential influencing power over SPs.

Social media's role in society is an inevitable topic demanding sociological attention. Generation Z, those born in the late 1990s to early 2000s, engages with social media at the highest rates in comparison to other generations—using it particularly as a main source for consuming news (Auxier 2022; Briggs 2022; Vogels, Gelles-Watnick, and Massarat 2022; Watson 2022). Further, this young population has demonstrated persistent dedication to efforts alleviating climate crises (Jahns 2021; Lashbrook 2021; Tyson, Kennedy, and Funk 2021). Given Generation Z's strong presence and engagement on social media and their commitment to the environment, social media's role in the SPP

regarding environmental SPs is a topic of worthy exploration. Since end goals for claims makers typically align with remedying the SP, deeper understanding and optimizing the potential influence of social media in this process should be of utmost importance and focus. Thus, the current paper aims to initiate the exploration of environmental issues' SPP on social media through examining and analyzing the case of the Willow Project on Instagram.

Millions of social media posts, viral hashtags, petition signatures, etc. demonstrate the response of the public (especially Generation Z on platforms like TikTok and Instagram) in light of the Willow Project being proposed once again (Nilsen 2023; Phillips 2023; Thiessen, O'Malley, and Gutierrez 2023). Cries of this decision feeling like a "betrayal" demonstrated how these people found the potential approval of the Willow Project to be sealing the demise of the world's climate (Phillips 2023; Thiessen et al. 2023). The activism shared and engaged in over social media platforms was an undeniable force; yet, due to concerns that the courts would have ruled in favor of the drilling company due to their decades-old leases, Biden ultimately approved the Willow Project (George and Horowitz 2023). In the aftermath of this approval, numerous officially recognized environmental organizations including Earthjustice, Greenpeace USA, Natural Resources Defense Council, Friends of the Earth, and others collaborated in suing the Biden administration (Chiappinelli et al. 2023). Hence, this period of intense online and in-person activism presents itself as a prime example of the influential role social media plays within the SPP for the environmental issue of fossil fuel continuation. Though much engagement was through TikTok, I have chosen to focus my analysis on Instagram posts due to the ease of analyzing infographic-type posts.

The present study explores if and how the SPP is present within Instagram posts regarding the Willow Project. I expand upon previous literature focusing on environmental SPs and mass media's role on environmental perceptions. I approach this content analysis with the synthesizing concept that the initial three stages of Best's (2008) SPP are to be exemplified in Instagram posting trends regarding the Willow Project across two different categories of accounts to better evaluate the patterns of media coverage.

Methods

To analyze the collected Instagram posts, I utilized qualitative content analysis emphasizing frequency and themes (Mayring 2014). The Instagram accounts explored were categorized into two overarching groups: (1) activist/educational (n=5) and (2) news/informative (n=5). The first category's accounts were selected based upon their nonprofit or official organization recognition, centrality of environment/climate justice to

their account, and educational driven posts. The first group of accounts is listed below:

- @intersectionalenvironmentalist
- @environment
- @greenpeaceusa
- @earthjustice
- @nrdc_org

The secondary group of news-oriented accounts was selected based upon public perception deeming them as being a part of mainstream news media (Shearer and Mitchell 2021). The news/informative accounts are listed below:

- @nytimes
- @apnews
- @abcnews
- @cnnclimate
- @msnbc

I incorporated the analysis of both these account categories to create a more encompassing view of the Willow Project's presence on Instagram. These groups collectively served as proxies to understand the SPP's stage two (media coverage) and three (public reaction). Additionally, given the nature of the first group's accounts, it is understandable that they would dedicate media attention to this issue as they are seemingly the claims makers (SPP stage one of claims making). However, the presence of Willow Project posts from the second group would be extremely beneficial to the continuation of this issue in the SPP, on which is the aim of exploration for the current paper.

To collect the data, I searched each account on Instagram and explored each profile's posts. The posts collected and analyzed were posted within the range of January 1, 2023 to April 1, 2023. Notably, the current project does not include the consideration of Instagram story posts as these automatically delete after 24 hours. The data was managed and organized in an Excel spreadsheet. Once Willow Project posts were identified, themes present were notated in the spreadsheet; thematic categories were induced during data collection and analysis and were altered if necessary to best fit the data. The post date, visual details, caption, and link were also notated in the spreadsheet.

Results

After searching through all 10 accounts, I collected a total of 44 posts, of which ~86% were produced by the activist/educational accounts. Their attention and efforts centered towards preventing the approval of the Willow Project and continuing to fight after its acceptance. I collected 38 posts from this first group. Dates of posts ranged from

February 9, 2023 to March 30, 2023. The @greenpeaceusa account contributed the most posts by producing 50% of this group’s total posts; meanwhile, @intersectionalenvironmentalist contributed only 5% of posts in the group’s total. Eight total themes were derived, with two instances of sub-categories: announcements (approval, lawsuit) and environmental consequences (animal/local environment, global climate change). See Figure 1 below for thematic breakdown.

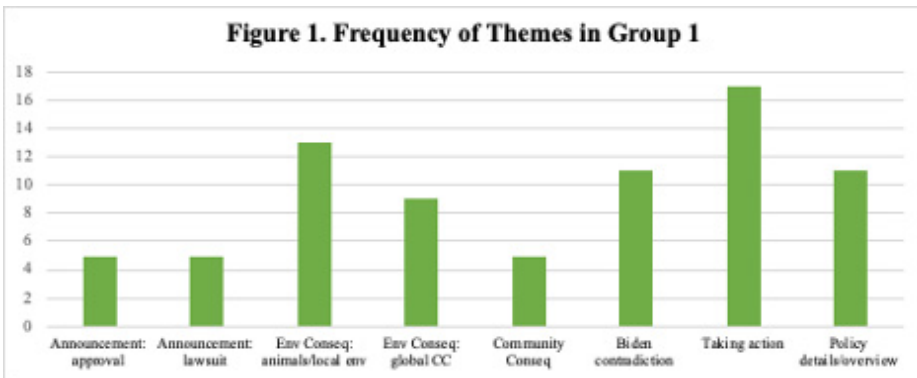


Figure 1. Frequency of Themes in Group 1

From the above figure, four categories of themes were most common: (1) Taking action, (2) Environmental consequences: animals/local environment, (3) Biden contradiction, and (4) Policy details/overview. Their distribution in percentages for overall posts collected in group one is illustrated below in Figure 2.

Themes	Frequency %
Taking action	45
Env Conseq: animals/local env	34
Biden contradiction	29
Policy details/overview	29

Figure 2. Prominent Themes’ Frequency Percentages in Group 1

An example post by @greenpeaceusa is provided (see Figure 3 below), demonstrating through both the visual post and caption the themes of (1) Policy details/overview and (2) Taking action.



Figure 3. Post by @greenpeaceusa (02/17/23) with caption:

America's potentially biggest new oil field in decades, Conoco Phillips' Willow Project, is set to move forward in Alaska's western Arctic, home to sensitive caribou and arctic fox ecosystems and near Indigenous Communities.

After almost a year of protest from supporters like you and from environmental organizations and frontline communities, @potus is the only one left who can stop the project. We have till the end of February, less than 15 days, to tell him to #StopWillow! (Greenpeace USA, 2023).

These accounts used similar hashtags such as #WillowProject and #StopWillow. Additionally, three formats of posts can be identified as (1) standard post: single image with text, informative caption; (2) infographic: in-depth information in post, multiple slides; and (3) video with either person talking to the camera directly or text overlaid captured nature/animal shots. Notably, a fourth format may be considered due to the two meme posts collected.

On the other hand, the second account group consisting of news/informative

accounts produced drastically different results. In total, I collected only six posts from these five accounts. Similar themes were derived as for the above group; notably, two new thematic categories introduced included (1) situational information: offering a concise summary of the background, not emphasizing one aspect more than another and (2) support versus oppose: detailing who/what groups support and those who oppose of the Willow Project approval. The themes of Biden contradiction and situational information both held the most posts ($n=2$ respectfully).

A mentionable observation is the lack of any Willow Project related posts by the @nytimes and @msnbc accounts. Meanwhile, @apnews and @abcnews only produced one post each; these were both released on the day of the project's approval (March 13, 2023). Contrastingly, @cnncclimate's initial Willow-related post was on March 2, 2023. This account produced four posts regarding the project. An additional pattern found was this group's emphasis in their posts' captions to visit resources linked in their bio for more information ($n=5$). This contradicts the previous group's mention of visiting their bio, which was almost exclusively for information on opportunities to take action.

Discussion

Though the Willow Project was approved—despite the online uproar—I found supporting evidence of this sub-SP's engagement through the first three stages of the SPP (claims making, media coverage, and public reaction). This sub-SP failed to advance beyond these initial stages given the project's approval; however, it is worthy to note—though not a policy change for stage four—that a lawsuit was conducted by numerous environmental organizations against the Biden administration regarding this approval. The claims-making stage was very clear to identify in the activist/educational accounts' posts through the announcements and urging their audience to take action. Two of the three news/informative accounts that posted about Willow solely announced the approval or political contradictions rather than highlighting the threat the project holds. The SPP's stage two of media coverage is covered to an extent. Posts about the Willow Project were prominent on activist/educational profiles, with some consistently posting about this issue leading up to the decision. Nonetheless, this focus could be expected from these accounts due to their role as claims makers. However, the mainstream media's accounts (news/informative group) covered this issue significantly less.

Although I would not argue that this means the Willow SP halted its way through the SPP at this stage due to its minimal attention from mainstream media, this fact does seem to be a foreshadowing call that its journey is soon to end given that media coverage and policy changes tend to go hand in hand (Grossman 2022). Public reaction, stage three of the SPP, can be argued to have been adequately achieved. Over

half a million views of the hashtag #WillowProject on TikTok, hundreds of thousands of posts using #StopWillow on Instagram, and millions of petition signatures, etc. equates to a prominent public reaction on this issue. Millions of young people, climate activists, experts, and the like became exponentially concerned about the continuation of fossil fuel and the project's inevitable consequences on the environment, supporting the campaign of stopping the Willow Project from moving forward. Ultimately, despite public backlash, no aligning policy was instilled as the project was approved. Notably, the Biden administration did work towards ameliorating the impacts by denying two of the five proposed drill sites, upon ConocoPhillips relinquishing rights to over 60,000 acres of ecological vulnerable land (U.S. Department of the Interior 2023). Thus, I argue that the Willow Project, as an example of a sub-environmental SP of fossil fuel continuation, was halted at the conclusion of the third stage, public reaction, in the SPP. If the project had progressed to the latter stages of the SPP, policy implications would have led to remediation, the desired outcome of the claims makers. While the plausible ultimate denial of the Willow Project would not have remediated the entirety of the fossil fuel continuation sub-SP, it could have demonstrated promising progress towards that intended remediation. Additionally, its potential completion of the SPP would have exemplified the influence that virtual activism, particularly on social media platforms, holds regarding environmental policies. However, since the Willow Project was approved and ceased at the SPP's third stage, it now serves as an apparent example of fossil fuel continuation.

Additional analyses revealed notable patterns in Willow-related posts. To begin, the activist/educational accounts tended to utilize a fearmongering tactic to spark their audience's concern for the Willow Project. This was done prominently through referring to the Willow Project as a "carbon bomb." I will not contest the severe long-term consequences this project poses to the climate crises at hand given the estimate of its ultimate release of approximately nine million metric tons of carbon emissions (Turrentine 2023). However, the usage of fearmongering in climate media—even if the claims are factually sound—has shown negative consequences on younger audiences' mental health, public perceptions of environmental issues, and possibly disadvantageous impacts in reaching stubborn audiences such as those who are doubtful of climate change (Killough 2023; Nebert 2021; Russell 2022). Given the use of this strategy, media's coverage of environmental issues not only has a close connection with public perception of issues but more specifically may have negative, fear-driven consequences (Funkhouser 1973; Hansen 1991; Killough 2023; Lowe and Rudig 1986; Nebert 2021). This pattern, being observed in the current small sample of 44 posts across ten accounts, presents an

opportunity for future research to expand upon.

Other notable observations derived from analyses include consideration of how the accounts frame their posts. For one, there was no targeting towards the ConocoPhillips company, which is the driving force behind the Willow Project and other oil drilling impacts in Alaska. Instead, the posts were specifically targeted towards the Biden administration, calling for him to follow his climate promises by not approving the project; this is supported by the repeated theme of Biden contradiction ($n=13$). This offers insight into how easily environmental issues can become politicized (Kamarck 2019). It is logical to highlight the president's role in the Willow Project, especially when emphasizing opportunities to take action to stop its approval. However, I find it surprising to see the absence of "villainizing" the multi-million fossil fuel company, particularly given the legal restrictions and limited ability present in the situation the administration faced regarding their decision on Willow (George and Horowitz 2023). Additionally, the posts tended to assume their audiences' understandings. For instance, in captions, the accounts would detail the factual consequences the Willow Project approval would bring (e.g., "...would produce as much pollution as 76 coal power plants do each year and devastate local wildlife..." from @nrdc_org on 02/27/23) but did not include detailed educational descriptions of the climate/environmental science on *why* or *how* pollution, carbon emissions, drilling, and the like have these negative impacts on the environment. While this could be due to the accounts' expectation that their target audience is environmentally aware and intelligent, it could still present as a sort of knowledge barrier for others outside of their typical audience. The lack of explanation alongside the layer of fearmongering could have the opposite effects of intended beneficial online exposure to the Willow Project.

A final observation I will briefly expand upon is the heavy usage of animals in posts. Animals, from polar bears to birds, were pictured in numerous posts (~30%). Meanwhile, a mixture of Alaskan landscapes, people/protestors, and oil drilling infrastructure contributed to the remaining posts given images were present. Posts that portray sickly polar bears huddled together demonstrate the usage of guilt appeals in media (Wen 2016). This connects with the previously discussed fearmongering-aligned tactics, as the portrayal of suffering animals play the role of targeting an audience's guilt with hopes that this feeling sparks dedication and drive towards the efforts of stopping the harm—in this case, stopping the Willow Project. This practice, in particular found in the Willow Project posts and broader environmental issues, offers future potential of investigation within animal sociology. I make this claim as these posts visually favored animals, rather than the impacted communities of people or specific environmental

landscapes. Hence, this strategy appears to support the idea that people may be more inclined to care about environmental-related crises if animals are being impacted or threatened, rather than when people are at risk; this serves as a prime topic for animal sociological exploration.

Limitations

The current study exhibits some limitations. First, my exploration of social media posts was limited to Instagram. While this platform is popular and greatly contributed to the online uproar against the Willow Project, similar future research should additionally explore other platforms including TikTok and Twitter. Second, I acknowledge that discussion from mass media (i.e., news/informative) sources extends beyond social media, entering traditional media such as articles and news stories via television. I encourage future researchers to consider these alternate medias in examination. Third, the sample size for the post data equaled $n=44$, while account sample size equaled $n=10$. Thus, I recommend for future research to utilize a larger account sample size, which should assumingly result in a greater post sample size.

Conclusion

Social problems surround us in our daily life and during extreme events. Environmental SPs encompass numerous sub-SPs, including fossil fuel continuation. Using the Willow Project's online backlash, an example of an environmental sub-SP of fossil fuel continuation, I explored how Best's (2008) Social Problems Process was portrayed via Instagram posts. Content analysis revealed that the Willow Project sub-SP experienced the initial three stages of the SPP (claims making, media coverage, and public reaction) but did not continue further. Thematic analyses revealed prominent themes of taking action, environmental consequences for animals/local environment, Biden contradiction, and policy details/overview. Additional analyses revealed various details regarding post framework in reaching audiences. This work contributes to the literature of the SPP and its presence in social media, particularly for environmental based issues.

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