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Heroes of the Day After Tomorrow: “The Oil Worker” in Norwegian Climate Coverage 2017–2021

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ABSTRACT

In 2019, mentions of “oil worker” in Norwegian newspaper coverage of climate change more than quadrupled, mostly reflecting a rise in politicians vying for the support of this critical constituency. This article explores the rise of the oil worker in newspaper coverage in the period 2017–2021, identifying the main agents of change in the dominant narratives and demonstrating that agency tends to be ascribed to politicians rather than to the oil workers themselves, despite an outpouring of “thank-yous” to those workers for their contribution to society. We also distinguish between the various ways in which oil workers have been framed as heroes and find that newspapers in the Western part of the country portrayed oil workers as “national income heroes”, while left-wing papers attached a sense of pride to the social democratic history of the oil industry. Opinions were more polarized on the potential for oil workers to become climate heroes. While some suggested a conditional form of heroism, the “heroes of tomorrow”, based on the willingness of the workers to transition, others focused on the bravery of oil workers in seeking dialogue with their counterparts in the climate debate and thus becoming the “heroes of couples therapy”.

KEYWORDS

Climate change; hegemony; oil workers; Norway; climate journalism; green transition

Introduction

Something interesting happened in the Norwegian news in 2019. The number of media articles (news, commentaries and letters to the editor) that mentioned both “climate” and “oil worker” more than quadrupled, and the term “hero” began appearing in such media narratives. Did this increase in mentions signal greater representation of the oil workers themselves and their perspectives on climate change? That would differ from what scholars have found to be the case in Canada, a country that is similarly dependent on exports of oil and gas and where both fossil fuel companies (Stoddart et al. 2017) and oil workers themselves (Hackett and Adams 2018) have been relatively invisible in media coverage. If oil workers themselves were suddenly the protagonists in public discussions over how Norway could transition into a more climate-friendly future, that *could* make them

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“agents of change”, instead of “objects to be changed”, which Karen O’Brien (2018, 158) sees as a crucial precondition if we are to keep global warming below 1.5°C. This article asks three interrelated questions about media representations of oil workers and climate change. 1) How can we interpret and explain the rise in media coverage of “the oil worker” in the context of climate change? 2) Who are presented as the main agents of change in Norwegian newspaper coverage of oil workers in the climate change context? 3) In what ways were oil workers portrayed as heroes in this coverage? By answering these three questions, we also shed light on how other social actors (including politicians, journalists and activists) appropriate these narrative constructions of the oil worker. To address the research questions, we analysed two contrasting yet complementary data sets: Norwegian newspaper articles covering the topic of oil workers in the context of climate change in the period 2017–2021 and focus group interviews with trade union representatives from Norway’s oil industry conducted in 2018 and 2019.

In the next section, we present our methodology and reflect on our own roles in the field we are researching. We then provide some important contextual background for our analysis. We describe how Norwegian oil and climate hegemony has become more strained and how an emerging notion of a market-led, actor-less “green shift” since 2015 has allowed for a particular rendering of “the oil worker” becoming salient in the narratives of the petroleum industry, as a response to climate mobilization. In the analytical part of the article, we first seek to explain and interpret the increase in mentions of “the oil worker” in 2019. We examine how the (perceived) vilification of oil workers, expressed through the concept of “oil shame”, and the countering “proud oil worker” campaign of 2019 allowed different actors to perform symbolic acts of gratitude and shows of recognition. Second, we will consider how politicians – not oil workers themselves – emerged as the main agents of change in this coverage. Third, we identify three heroism narratives involving oil workers in the news media. In our conclusion, we summarize our findings and explain some implications for journalistic practice.

Material and Methods

Our methodological design combines media analysis and focus group interviews. The focus groups provided important insights into the oil workers’ own perspectives of media coverage of them as a group, as well as their own ideas about the roles they could play in a green transition. The findings from the focus groups not only provided us with background information but also gave us inspiration for our media analysis and provided insights into the media stories from the perspectives of the workers themselves. The media analysis partly tests some of the oil workers’ perceptions about how they are portrayed and highlights how narratives about oil workers have been shaped in the media.

Six focus group interviews with 42 oil worker union representatives from five unions for workers in offshore production and supply and service industries were conducted between November 2018 and August 2019.¹ The unions are Fellesforbundet (for workers across various industries, including the supply industry to the petroleum sector); Industri Energi (for workers in petroleum and process industry); Electrician and IT Workers’ Union (EL og IT, which represents electricians in the public and private sectors, including those working in the petroleum industry); SAFE (for oil workers); and

the Norwegian Society of Engineers and Technologists (NITO, for engineers and technologists across sectors) Two of the authors, Jordhus-Lier and Houeland, conducted the interviews. The participants were asked to reflect on the notion of a green transition, their roles as oil workers and trade unionists in such a transition, and their relations with other actors in society. The latter question included a discussion on public perceptions about them and their views of the media coverage concerning them. This material was transcribed, coded, and subjected to a thematic analysis, which informed the arguments presented in this article.

For our media analysis, we searched Norwegian newspaper content published between 15th February 2017 and 15th February 2021 using the search string *oljearbeider** AND *klima** (oil worker and climate). . After removing duplicates and irrelevant items, we had a list of 355. Each item was given a number, which we use as a reference in this text. Of these, 55 were editorials or op-eds published in more than one paper. All items were categorized manually in an Excel sheet and coded as either news or not news (editorials, letters to the editor, and commentaries written by staff). In the news articles, we coded the main source or interviewee, and in the opinion pieces, we coded the author(s) and political party affiliation (if any).

We employed an analytical strategy inspired by Entman's (1993) frame analysis, which we used to identify salient frames in our material. We sought to identify the most salient features of heroism in the news or opinion pieces: *Who* is presented as the main hero? *What* are presented as the most notable heroic acts or characteristics? *How* do those acts relate to climate change? Stephen Reese argues that there is a "strong tendency in framing research to define the object too strictly as manifest content, captured in salience" (2007, 151). We take this criticism seriously; hence, our consideration of salience does not treat each text in isolation but strives to recognize the broader socio-political context in which it was written. Our background section below sketches this context. This interpretive strategy enables us to discover socially shared frames that persist over time and that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world (Carragee and Roefs 2004; Ytterstad 2015).

We also found the narrative policy framework developed by Elizabeth A. Shanahan (Shanahan et al. 2013, 2018) useful in guiding our search for hero narratives and narrative shifts. Shanahan is interested in examining how the roles of social actors are portrayed and transformed through "angel shifts" and "devil shifts". The former occurs when "groups emphasize their own side as a hero capable of fixing the problem" (Shanahan et al. 2013, 460), and the latter describes "situations when the power of the 'evil' opposition is emphasized while the power of the 'good' side is minimized" (Shanahan, Jones, and McBeth 2018, 337). Importantly, Shanahan, Jones, and McBeth (2018, 337) asserted that those on the side of the losing narrative "tend to strategically construct narratives with the devil shift, whereas the narrative arc of winning coalitions shifts their narrative strategy to the angel shift." This corresponds well to the case in question where, as we demonstrate, it is not the oil workers themselves but other actors – *many other actors* – who have contributed to the angel shift in our material.

It is worth mentioning that the authors of this paper feature both directly and indirectly in the material considered. Ytterstad has been active in public dissemination and in organizing events on climate jobs as a strategy to wean Norway off its dependence on oil (Ytterstad 2015). Both unions and environmental organizations make the case for

climate jobs in the period scrutinized (170, 209, 305, 402). The other two authors of this article (Houeland and Jordhus-Lier) published a report on polarization in the climate change debate in December 2020, based on the focus group material used in this article. The report was commissioned by the left-wing think tank Manifest and Green Industry 21, an alliance between industrial unions and environmental organizations for working together on “the green shift”. Towards the end of the study period, in mid-February 2021 when their report became part of a public debate in the media, Jordhus-Lier and Houeland feature as the most recurrent source in the material (2, 7, 15, 17, 18, 19). Green Industry 21 used the report to call for dialogue between oil workers and environmentalists. Thus, the report was explicitly used to create a narrative in which oil workers are presented as willing negotiators, which we formulate as “the heroes of couples therapy”. We cannot pretend to be neutral observers, as we represent an author collective that has invested time and effort in working with actors involved in this debate. Based on our connections and points of access, however, we are well situated to interpret the media landscape of which we are part.

Background

To understand how politicians and media actors portray “the oil worker” at the end of the decade, it is important to recognize how a distinctly Norwegian hegemonic separation of climate policies and petroleum extraction has been challenged as a result of popular mobilizations from 2013 onwards, the fall in the price of oil in 2014 and – of particular relevance to the public debates in the Norwegian media – public relations campaigns launched by the industry.

Separating Oil Extraction from Good Sense

Hegemony can be defined as a “far-ranging exercise of leadership which aims to become commonsensical” (Ytterstad 2012, 36). In the Norwegian context, the stubborn core of the hegemony exercised over the last three decades by different coalitions of political parties has been the rejection of a planned reduction in oil and gas production as a climate change mitigation strategy. Two key pillars of Norway’s mitigation strategy – carbon trading with the EU and reforestation initiatives in the Global South – have been (dis)placed outside of oil. The last pillar – carbon capture and storage – has been an integral part of the attempt to portray Norwegian exports of oil and gas as part of the solution to global warming rather than its cause (Anker 2018; Dale and Andersen 2018).

There is more to common sense than hegemony, however. The healthy nucleus of common sense consists of good sense, which Antonio Gramsci described as “a conception of necessity which gives a conscious direction to one’s activity” (Gramsci, Hoare, and Smith 1971, 327). In Norway, as elsewhere, good sense on global warming (Ytterstad 2020) has been strengthened by ever more pressing reports from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the International Energy Agency (IEA) on the need to stop the licensing of new oil and gas fields. One manifestation of this good sense has emerged gradually, and in spurts, in the form of waves of popular mobilizations over the last decade that do pinpoint Norwegian oil as part of the problem. In 2013, the

Climate Election Alliance was established, uniting more than 100 different civil society organizations in Norway, which converged behind demands to scale down Norwegian oil and gas. Then, in 2019, the school strikers in Norway voiced their demand to halt the licensing of new oil and gas fields in the Barents Sea.

In addition to the emergence of such expressions of good sense, Norway's hitherto hegemonic climate change policy has suffered severe internal strains. The credibility of the policy pillars, which include carbon trading, rainforest schemes, and carbon capture and storage (CCS), have all been subject to sustained critiques, not least by journalists (Anker 2018; Ytterstad 2016). The fall in the price of oil in 2014–2015 and the downturn in the industry resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic has incited fear, not just of a global climate catastrophe but also of an inevitable economic collapse unless countries such as Norway diversify their economies before it is too late (Bjartnes 2015; Ryggvik 2021). In practical politics, the specter of a crisis of the Norwegian economy has led to a reassertion of the significance of oil for both the economy and climate change alike. In June 2020, the Norwegian parliament voted for a crisis stimulus package for the petroleum industry. The political argument was that any future green transition in Norway hinges on the skills of oil and gas workers (Ryggvik 2021; Ytterstad 2021).

A “Green Shift” Without Actors?

The media in parliamentary democracy is an arena for the struggle of opinions, “the *kampfplatz* of common sense *par excellence*.” (Ytterstad 2012, 73). Given the strains within the Norwegian climate change policy and the new emphasis on “the oil worker” in industry narratives, which we present below, an analysis of the increase in mentions of related terms in Norwegian climate coverage is pertinent.

The media and the journalists working within it are also actors who help shape the opinions of their publics. The international media have at times challenged Norwegian climate policy head on. A recent analysis by CNN names Norway as amongst the top “climate hypocrites” in the world. Previous studies of Norwegian newspaper coverage of climate policy suggest a tendency to simply reproduce the tensions between Norwegian aspirations to be a climate champion on the one hand and a major oil and gas exporter on the other (Eide and Ytterstad 2011; Hornmoen 2014; Naper 2014). In 2013, however, Anders Bjartnes, the editor of the online niche media Energi og Klima (Energy and Climate), coined the term “green shift”. This term was declared the new word of the year in 2015 by the Norwegian Language Council and has played an important role in public debate on climate change ever since. It is noteworthy, however, that Bjartnes did not define the “green shift” as something normative or as the result of conscious human agency (Veimo and Ytterstad 2020). The “green shift” was rather “a continually ongoing, inescapable and unstoppable process, involving reduced climate emissions and improved resource productivity in all sectors of society, at the same time offering new opportunities for value creation.” (Bjartnes 2015, 23 our translation)

The lack of established protagonists in the green shift makes it possible for certain actors to appropriate certain categories – such as “the oil worker” – for their own ends (Sigurjonsdottir 2018). However, for journalists seeking to influence the climate debate, it may also be tempting to follow Bjartnes and designate the market as the main driver of the green shift (Ytterstad 2016). As we explain below, both media commentators and politicians of various

stripes have been tempted by this actor-less version of the green shift as they mount their challenges to the insistence on oil as the answer to the climate crisis.

“The Oil Worker” to the Rescue!

The new emphasis on “the oil worker” relates to shifts in the broader narratives about the oil industry. The oil industry increasingly underlines the financial contribution petroleum revenues and taxes make to job creation, highlighting the importance of oil workers themselves in this regard (Sæther 2021).

Two examples from 2017 illustrate how the industry’s resourceful communication departments portray oil workers as heroes, the versions of which we identify in our own analysis of Norwegian newspapers. On April 14th 2017, the Norwegian Oil and Gas Association (Norsk olje og gass) launched a 6-minute long video on Facebook called *We Are Oil Workers* (Norsk olje og gass 2017).² The first oil worker to speak is Sara Elvelund Sandvik, a geologist working for Lundin. With dramatic music and footage of the North Sea in the background, she explains that her job is to search for oil. She claims that we are “completely dependent on having access to new areas we can explore” and stresses the need for government permission to do so. This video was launched just before the Labor Party 2017 Congress, at which a long-standing and protracted battle on whether to allow licensing for oil outside the Lofoten Archipelago was to be settled (Houeland, Jordhus-Lier, and Angell 2020). This construction of “the oil worker” – encompassing all workers from geologists to those who provide coffee on the platforms – is remarkable not only because it comes from an employers’ business association but also because previously, the expression to “work in the oil” has been more common than the term “oil worker” (Houeland and Jordhus-Lier 2021).

Later in 2017, Norsk olje og gass launched its report *The New Oil*, based on a project team’s travels “across Norway lengthwise twice”, during which the team had “spoken to close to 11,000 people face to face, of which 7000 were students or pupils” (Den nye oljen 2017, 4).³ The report presents a step-by-step explanation, accompanied by a visualization, of the “the tunnel model” for communicating the relationship between the Norwegian oil industry and climate change (Figure 1).



Figure 1. The Tunnel Model.

In the visualization, oil workers hold the support beams at the back of a tunnel so that others – “persons like Elon Musk or Al Gore” – can dig out the tunnel at the front to reveal a renewable future. The report then goes on to provide the following communicational advice:

In the future, more of the supporting beams will consist of renewable energy sources, but in the meantime, the oil and gas industry must continue to build beams to keep the tunnel open. It is important to emphasize that this explanation is preceded by an acknowledgement of the pollution, like “yes, we pollute, unfortunately, but without us the tunnel collapses” (Den nye oljen 2017, 41 our translation).

Oil Workers in the Media

This background partly explains the increased prevalence of the term “oil workers” in Norwegian climate coverage, but it does not explain why mentions of the term peaked in 2019. Both our focus group interviews and our media analysis suggest that the peak was prompted by a vilification of the “oil worker”. Below, we examine what happened and then show how politicians not only contributed to the “angel shift” in the narratives but also emerged as the most important voices in the media coverage.

Shame, Pride and Thank-You

In an environment of increased public pressure in support of climate change mitigation, the oil workers we interviewed between November 2018 and August 2019 felt they were seen primarily as obstacles. In their view, they suffered a loss of public status and had a sense of “being shamed”. They described feeling voiceless and misrepresented in the media. One worker in the supply industry formulated this fall from grace as follows:

To simplify, there has been a development from us being “the good guys” to us becoming “the bad guys”. We contributed to the positive development of society, employment and value creation. Now, we are primarily contributing to the destruction of the planet. (focus group, Fellesforbundet, 2018)

In May 2019, Ommund Stokka from the Industri Energi trade union wrote a column in the left-wing paper *Klassekampen* in which he contrasted the image of workers as “oilfield trash” in other rich countries governed by dictatorships with the situation in Norway, where “natural resources are under democratic control, and “oil worker” is an honorary term’ (218). In August, the petroleum geologist Sara Elvelund Sandvik published an op-ed on the website of the public broadcaster NRK entitled “The Oil Shame” (Sandvik 2019). This is the same Sara Elvelund Sandvik that Norsk olje og gass employed for the *We Are Oil Workers* video in 2017, described above. In October 2019, Ommund Stokka wrote another column for *Klassekampen*, which opened as follows: “On social media oil workers are compared with the guards of the concentration camps. Or dope dealers’. These three interventions by oil workers highlight the widening gap between oil workers’ perceptions of themselves (and historical or local narratives of honor) and the external perception of them as part of a negative force, or a “devil shift”.

We did find direct vilification of oil workers elsewhere in our material. Three items compare the oil industry with the slave trade (28, 208, 219). A particularly interesting

example in the context of the “devil shift” is a debate in the conservative Christian paper *Dagen* between two priests on whether or not to send priests to the oil platforms. One of the priests argues, “We are not in the North Sea to support an industry but to support the employees. It is kind of similar to when we go to prisons in Colombia. We are not there to support drug trafficking but to support the one who has ended up in jail.” (280). While this story is not representative of our material, it is illustrative of the devil shift that spurred a retaliation, in the form of an angel shift, from oil workers, political parties, chief editors, and business representatives.

The “proud oil worker” social media campaign emerged in September 2019, and the “proud oil worker” Facebook group now boasts over 20,000 members. Although the campaign was not coordinated as such, it was triggered by Idar Martin Herland, who added a “proud oil worker” frame to his Facebook profile picture, which was then used by many in the oil industry. Of the 67 instances where oil workers are represented in our material, 30 were published in the months following this campaign.

The leader of the Norwegian Friends of the Earth conservation organization dismissed the claim that oil workers were being shamed (218, 220), and a *Dagbladet* editorial echoed this in an editorial entitled “The Dangerous Shame”. The editorial speculated about whether “oil shame” was a term the oil industry itself had come up with, to arouse sympathy for the oil workers. (205). This editorial illustrates how journalism sometimes challenges the oil industry narrative at the core of the Norwegian climate change policy. However, whether the term “oil shame” was a red herring planted in the media by the oil industry or (as we believe, based on our focus group interviews) a real reflection of the sentiments of oil workers, we observed how an angel shift took shape as a series of “thank-yous” in response to the “proud oil workers” campaign.

“Be Proud of the Oil Workers!” is the title of an op-ed by former Oil and Energy Minister Kjell-Børge Freiberg from the Progress Party. This op-ed was published in seven different newspapers, and its main message is mirrored in many of the other texts in our material. The Labor Party also expressed pride in the oil workers, and the Green Party expressed its thanks for the oil, while the economics commentator of the Norwegian National Broadcaster (NRK) entitled her op-ed on the opening of the gigantic Sverdrup petroleum field “We Cannot Shame Ourselves Out of the Climate Crisis” (Becker 2019). As an indication of the extent to which this reaction to the shame narrative was socially shared (Reese 2007), the first author of this paper (Ytterstad) was interviewed as an expert in climate journalism – alongside climate scientists and climate psychologists – under exactly the same title in a large spread published in December 2019 (Bergskaug 2019). It was not without reason, then, that a prolific commentator from the Green Party called 2019 the “the year of shamelessness” in Norway (157).

Although peaking in 2019, the “thank-yous” to Norwegian oil workers persisted throughout the period of the media coverage examined in this study. Successive oil and energy ministers published thank-yous in multiple papers. Terje Søviknes (Oil and Energy Minister 2016–2018) began his op-ed of August 2017 by stating, “Oil workers have been our heroes – and secured us a welfare development we only could dream of before the oil adventure started” (318). Sylvi Listhaug, who replaced Freiberg as oil and energy minister in 2019, became the symbol of “petro populism”. She is still dressed as an oil worker on her Facebook page (7), a year after resigning

as oil and energy minister. However, such support not only came from the government parties; opposition parties also sent thank-yous to oil workers. In July 2020, the leader of the Center Party wrote an op-ed that was published in six different papers. The title varied depending on the geographical area, but the message of thanks to oil workers remained the same:

To the industrial workers at Ågotnes, to all working at Norwegian shipyards and to oil workers in the North Sea, thank you for your tough and courageous work over many years, which has contributed enormously to the financing of the welfare state ... We depend on your work every single day. (67)

With its snipes at “Oslo commentators, lobby organizations and professors”, this op-ed was part of the re-emergence of polarization between the center and the periphery in Norway. This particular spin on the thank-you demonstrates how oil workers are framed *differently* in different hero narratives. Before we unpack features of heroism in the coverage, we reflect on whose voices dominate in our material.

Politicians as the Agents of Change

In our focus group conversations with oil workers, which took place before the oil shame and proud oil worker debates, the participants expressed a feeling that they lacked a voice in the media. One focus group participant claimed, “No, we do not get through [in the media]. The newspapers do not bother to ask us for information; they do not care” (NITO representative). Our media analysis confirms that oil workers are rarely talked *to*, even when they are being talked *about*. Oil workers (or their union representatives) are either the senders of opinion pieces or the main sources of news in only 19% (67 items) of the total coverage. The peak occurred in 2019 – from which 30 of the 67 items considered here are drawn – when the proud oil worker campaign was rolled out. In 2020, these figures returned to 2017 levels (12 in 2017 and 11 in 2020), and half of the 12 in 2020 came from a single op-ed by a Conservative MP who had visited an oil platform.

Over the course of four years, we only coded 11 opinion pieces with oil workers as the main author, and this is a generous count given that one was retired (262), another designated himself as a “former oil worker” turned climate activist (82), and another was a local representative of the Conservatives in Stavanger (307). Another one Andreas Bakkehaug (78), who wrote a piece for VG, the second largest paper in Norway, had left his job as a rig worker to work for the above-mentioned Norsk olje og gass project called the New Oil. Just five contributions are from unionists from Industry Energi, and three of these are from Ommund Stokka, who is part of the union’s leadership and a regular columnist for *Klassekampen*.

Even when bona fide oil workers or unionists *are* unequivocally represented, the focus is usually on politicians or party-political developments. A demonstration by oil and gas workers (some flown in from across Norway) outside the Labor Party Congress of April 2017 is a crucial part of the story this paper tells. Idar Martin Helland was present and was interviewed in the financial paper *Finansavisen* under the headline “Wants to Resurrect the Labour Party as an Oil Party” (403). He recruited 130 of his colleagues and formed the Workers’ Society of the Oil Industry as a separate branch of the Labor Party. Other examples of the focus on party politics come from news items on the establishment by

oil workers of an entirely new political party in Norway, a “red–blue” (and mildly climate sceptical) party called the Industry and Business Party (INP), who believed they would enter parliament from Rogaland in 2021 (111, 161, 162).

Thus, the increase in mentions of “the oil worker” in climate change coverage in Norwegian newspapers did not reflect an increase in the representation of the *voices* of oil workers. What we have seen instead has been a rise in politicians vying for the support of oil workers and – to a lesser degree – oil workers who want politicians to protect their *jobs*. In both instances, the main agents of change in the media coverage are politicians, not oil workers themselves.

Salient Frames of Heroism

What then are the salient features of heroism as it applies to oil workers in this coverage? In the first part of our analysis, we show how a frame of “national income hero” dominated over depictions of oil workers as “Norwegian model heroes” and thus as potentially important actors in a green shift. In the second part, we unpack how different political parties have framed the heroism of oil workers differently at different times. Lastly, we describe the emergence amongst oil workers of heroes who enter into dialogue with young people and environmentalists; we refer to these as heroes of couples therapy.

The National Income Hero

The most salient frame within which oil workers are depicted as heroes is the coverage that can be dubbed the national income hero. This frame reflects the oil workers’ own depictions of themselves as contributors “to a positive societal development, employment, and value creation”, as explained above.

One example of such a depiction is a caption created by a journalist in *Adresseavisen* (383) to a picture showing oil workers stepping on board a helicopter. The text is an op-ed by two members of the youth section of the Green Party entitled “A Safe Ending of the Oil Adventure in 15 Years”. The caption, however, reads “Phasing out? In 15 years, this will be wound up. Here are oil workers on their way to the helicopter that will transport them to the Åsgard field in the Norwegian Sea where they will secure the income of the country.” Similar captions that take the form of journalists’ comments can be found elsewhere (215, 385) and indicate how journalism sometimes reinforces an industry narrative emphasizing the financial contribution of oil to the Norwegian economy.

A much less subtle example of the framing of oil workers as national income heroes comes from an op-ed by a Conservative MP. The title is “Be Proud of the Norwegian Gas Industry!”. The author is a representative from Rogaland describing her very first visit to an oil platform, Statfjord C, and her text reflects what Robert Entman means by *salience* (1993) in a communicative text.

In 2016, Statfjord C produced oil barrel number 5 billion. By then, the platform had given us (NOK) 1,5 billion in income, the equivalent of 3 million man years for nurses, or nearly 20 percent of the Norwegian sovereign oil fund.

This op-ed was published in *Rogalands Avis* but also by four local papers on the South West Coast (330). This publication of a single opinion piece in numerous papers within

a single region of Norway is suggestive of how *mythical news archetypes* (Gutsche and Salkin 2016, 468) can help explain why the hero narratives disseminated in the oil region of Norway focus mostly on national income heroes. Although income from oil is framed as vital for Norway as a whole, it is particularly important in that petroleum-dependent geographical region.

Our 355 media items come from 66 different papers, most of which are local newspapers from across the country. Whereas most of these published one or two relevant items during the four-year study period, four papers stand out as having the largest share of coverage. *Stavanger Aftenblad*, a paper rooted in liberal-Christian tradition from the “oil capital” Stavanger in Rogaland published 37 such pieces; the national left-wing paper *Klassekampen* published 36; the Oslo-based former Labor Party organ, *Dagsavisen*, published 26; and the Rogaland-based equivalent, *Rogalands Avis* (which is part of the same newspaper chain as *Dagsavisen*) published 24. Thus, these four papers, with their respective regional and left-wing social democratic readerships, account for more than 37% of the total coverage.

There are very few examples of oil workers or oil workers’ unions being represented as the primary “agents of change” within their own “sphere of influence” (O’Brien 2018, 158). The most notable one comes from the internal magazine of the SAFE union. A shop steward of this union has helped ensure that the food delivered to workers on platforms is produced by Norwegian farmers. In our material, this piece of news is relayed in the farmers paper *Bondebladet* (192). However, in this narrative, oil workers act as agents of change as consumers at their workplace, not as producers of petroleum. In the focus group material, the workers emphasize that consumers are the main agents of change.

However, an online op-ed written by Idar Martin Herland, the proud oil worker personified, is worth mentioning here. This was a response to the thank-you extended to him and other oil workers by Energy Minister Freiberg (224). Herland agrees with Freiberg that a fifth of the country’s state income and that the financing of the Norwegian welfare state comes from the oil industry but holds that this is the result of a specific social democratic policy – contrary to that of Freiberg’s own party, which supported low taxation of international oil companies and opposed state control. Herland locates his pride in the political policies developed by the Labor Party in the 1970s, formulated in the Petroleum Law and the so-called 10 oil commandments, which were to ensure national, democratic control, a state-owned company (Statoil), and a moderate rate of extraction that considered and supported onshore industries and the environment (Ryggvik 2021; Sæther 2017). Herland wanted to revitalize this model to confront global warming:

That is why the Workers Society of the Oil Industry proposes that the 10 oil commandments become green and form the framework for a sustainable further development of the Norwegian petroleum sector and at the same time establish new value chains within the green shift. We must create a future where we can live off saving the climate!

We found this version of the Norwegian model hero more pronounced in *Klassekampen*, whose columnist Ommund Stokka from Industri Energi contrasts the Norwegian democratic model (281, 340), characterized by a strong labor union, with the market-based Thatcherite transition from coal, which he sees as a conscious dismantling of trade union strength (340). He warns the political left of the potential loss of labor power that could accompany the dismantling of the oil industry. In a 2020 piece entitled “The

Green Opportunity”, Roy Pedersen and Ståle Johansen from Fellesforbundet allude to the agenda of just transition (Stevis and Felli 2015), insisting that oil workers cannot be relegated to unemployment or part-time work, that “green industrial development in Norway” must guarantee stable, well-paid work, and that this “requires confrontations” with aggressive employers (125).

The Heroes of the Day After Tomorrow

Another salient feature of the heroism of the oil workers concerns *time*. The angel shift whereby oil workers are depicted as those who can “fix the problem”, much like the green shift narrative that emerged in 2015 (Veimo and Ytterstad 2020), does not clarify how or *when* this is supposed to happen. In this respect, the Progress Party and the Green Party are polar opposites in our material.

The implication behind the many declarations of support for oil workers by members and ministers of the Progress Party is that the oil workers – and the oil industry – do not need to change but are heroes as they are. Theirs is an un-distilled thank-you, not just for the income provided by the oil workers but also for the oil itself. Jon Georg Dale, the Progress Party’s spokesperson on climate policies, put it as follows: “If any doubt should remain, the Progress Party will stand shoulder to shoulder with the oil workers until every last drop is pumped up” (122).

The Green Party is equally consistent in its narrative framing of the oil workers as “the climate heroes of tomorrow” (30, 37, 178). The workers are portrayed as tomorrow’s heroes, based on their competence. However, in this narrative, the workers may need retraining to realize their potential as agents of change. A spokesperson for the youth section of the Green Party, Hulda Holtvedt, wrote,

The answer to the coronavirus crisis must be to make Norway less vulnerable to a fall in the price of oil price and to climate change. It is still not too late to use this opportunity to retrain former oil workers, offer compensation to those who want to change their jobs or retire early, and bet big on new green jobs. (42)

The Labor Party has found itself caught in the middle between these polar opposites. Anne Nyeggen, head of the newly established Forum for Green Growth, published a 2020 op-ed in both *Dagsavisen* (134) and *Rogalands Avis* (142) entitled “Hero Yesterday, Hero Today, and Perhaps Tomorrow?”.

With bold action now, oil workers can take their competence and transfer it to a green and renewable energy industry. Then you can polish your hero glory anew ... If we are to exploit the window that is open for a green shift, we must hurry. If we postpone the journey by 5–10 years ... the transition costs will be all the more expensive.

The “window” referred to here is a *market* window. When commentator Hilde Øvrebekk speaks of the green shift (often in opposition to the Green Party, see 30, 33, 282), she also refers to market developments. It is worth emphasizing that both Nyeggen and Holtvedt from the Green Party stress the possibility that oil will *not* be such a stable source of income in the future. This is in accordance with the overall arc of the green shift narrative. Left, right, green and journalistic commentators alike seem to believe that in order to convince oil workers and bring about a broader shift in public opinion, they need to reframe the climate

crisis as primarily a threat to the Norwegian economy (330). The specter of the economy crash landing, not the timeframe of the climate crisis, is the reason for the hurry we are in.

The Heroes of Couples Therapy

In family life, when tensions rise and no resolution is in sight, one option is to enroll in couples therapy. While there is a degree of heroism involved for the therapist in such situations, heroism is primarily required of the parties who go (and keep returning) to couples therapy. In our material, the Labor Party arguably emerges as the voice of the “therapist” attempting to unite oil workers and young environmental activists.

In an op-ed published in *Klassekampen*, Arvid Ellingsen, a trade union employe and a representative of the Socialist Left Party, challenges a climate activist to “Talk to an oil worker” (128). Journalists also occasionally assume this mediating role. A commentator in *Stavanger Aftenblad* worried about the split between young people and the oil industry (282, 322). Referring to a heated discussion between youth organizations and the General Secretary of Norsk olje og gass, she suggests that the conversations that followed with two young oil workers are what we need (322).

Regarding the parties of the couple, it is mostly environmental organizations that seem to take the initiative. In the wake of the proud oil worker campaign, environmental activists and green politicians reached out several times to oil workers or unions (173, 174). In October 2019, Silje Ask Lundeberg from Naturvernforbundet visited the Troll platform (187) as a clear response to the proud oil worker campaign and what was termed the polarization of the political landscape with respect to the climate and the oil industry (150). The heroes of these stories are environmentalists such as Lundeberg and Bakken Riise (150), who reach out to engage in dialogue with oil workers, and the Green Party (173, 174), which reaches out to trade unions. However, towards the end of our study period, partly as a result of our own contribution, as mentioned above, we see joint media appearances by Atle Tranøy, the corporate employe representative of the large energy corporation Aker ASA, and Anja Bakken Riise of the environmental organizations called The Future in Our Hands (15, 17, 18, 19). Jordhus-Lier also contributed to an NRK radio show with these two entitled “Couple Therapy”. Although the oil workers in our focus groups described a devil shift in public perceptions about them, whereby their role was depicted in an increasingly negative light and their power was portrayed as stronger than they believed it was, they also admitted that they themselves occasionally and unhelpfully demonized environmentalists:

We should not demonize the environmental movement either, and in my mind, we must try to find some kind of approach where we are not primarily concerned with shooting at each other. (Fellesforbundet representative)

The vexing question, of course, is whether common ground on climate action can be found. Sharing the perspectives of oil workers in the focus group with environmentalists, we observed shared feelings of disempowerment and frustration about the lack of political leadership and concrete actions (Jordhus-Lier and Houeland 2021).

“No more nice words; we need a concrete plan”, said Greta Thunberg when she sailed into New York for the Climate Action Summit in 2019 (Ytterstad 2021). Roy Inge Nilsen, a shop steward at Rosenberg – a supplier company to the oil industry – said something

similar in a long reportage in *Klassekampen* (367) back in 2017: “If they want a green shift, they have to present a concrete and credible plan for what we shall build. Then I am in. Now, it is just an empty green bag. There is nothing in it”. This reverberates with the main narrative that emerged from the oil workers we talked to, concerning unclear expectations of them and vague ideas about a future green industry. Their main concern was to keep their jobs in the current industry. However, some of them also recognized the potential of dialogue and expressed an interest in what we here refer to as “couples therapy”:

If we all are a little more humble. To sit in separate camps and just say: “we, we will stop” or “we, we will continue” [oil extraction] ... For me, we, for example, trade unions and environmental parties, have to put our heads together from time to time. (Industri Energi representative).

Conclusion

Why has there been such an increased emphasis on the “oil worker” in recent Norwegian newspaper climate change coverage? This shift can partly be explained by the narratives of the oil industry itself. Sara Elvelund Sandvik, a geologist working for Lundin, was the protagonist of a publicity stunt staged by Norwegian Oil and Gas in April 2017 entitled *We Are Oil Workers*. In August 2019, she published an op-ed called “The Oil Shame”, which inspired a counter campaign focusing on the “proud oil worker”. In 2019, coverage of the oil worker peaked with a “devil shift” immediately followed by an “angel shift” in the news media. The focus group interviews we conducted with oil workers in 2018 had already shown us that oil workers themselves increasingly felt they were portrayed as obstacles to climate transformation. By the fall of 2019, politicians from left to right were contributing strongly to the view of oil workers as heroes “capable of fixing the problem” (Shanahan et al. 2013, 460) by conveying their “thank-yous” to Norwegian oil workers in newspapers across the country.

The main voices in this coverage of “the oil worker” have been those of politicians, not the oil workers themselves or their trade union representatives. This can mostly be accounted for by politicians vying for support among oil workers. However, the oil workers themselves did contribute by calling for politicians to protect their *jobs*. The “proud oil worker” initiative launched by Idar Martin Herland in 2019 was explicitly formulated as a drive to revive the view of the Labor Party as an oil workers’ party.

The most salient feature of heroism in the news coverage in question is the narrative construction of oil workers as “national income heroes”. This is echoed across the political spectrum and appears to be part of the common sense narratives of some journalists too, who have presented oil workers as going out to the North Sea to “secure the income of the country”. This frame arguably reinforces the stubborn core of oil in the hegemony of Norwegian climate change policy. The rescue package for the oil industry during the Covid-19 pandemic was framed successfully in similar fashion. (Ryggvik 2021).

There are, however, other frames in our material that (at least partly) challenge the separation of a phasing out of oil and gas extraction in the North Sea from good sense on global warming. When Herland was thanked by the oil and energy minister from the Progress Party for the income the state receives from oil, he reframed his pride as something

that comes from the social democratic history of labor involvement in the policy process. He now wants part of the oil revenues to be earmarked for green investments. All Green Party politicians represented in the material and some from the Labor Party emphasize that oil workers could become the heroes of tomorrow by transferring their competence into “a green and renewable energy industry. *Then you can polish your hero glory anew*” (134,142, emphasis in original). Politicians eager to speed up the green transition invite oil workers to become heroes by changing course and becoming the “heroes of tomorrow”. The final feature of heroism that emerged from both the focus groups and the media analysis is the hero of couples therapy. Here, the oil worker is expected to take a humbler approach. This form of heroism not only requires action but also, and more importantly, the ability to reflect on and mend relationships in a polarized climate debate. This hero is willing to talk with environmentalists and reach out to young people of the Greta Thunberg generation.

In the material analysed for this article, Norwegian journalists, commentators, and editors all emphasize the need for dialogue. In general, they appear not to endorse – at least not wholeheartedly – the accusations of “climate hypocrisy” levied by young people, environmentalists, and the international news media. This is illustrated by an op-ed entitled “We Cannot Shame Ourselves Out of the Climate Crisis”, penned by the economics editor of the public broadcaster NRK. The op-ed seems to continue a tradition within Norwegian media (Eide and Ytterstad 2011; Hornmoen 2014; Naper 2014) whereby “the great Norwegian dilemma” whereby “our very visible efforts for climate change” are juxtaposed with “some of the most filthy things” (Becker 2019) is simply registered or reproduced and not fundamentally challenged.

This article is being finalized during a general election campaign in Norway that may herald a shift in journalistic practice. Triggered by the latest IPCC and IEA reports and a summer of floods and fires, the continued exploration of Norwegian oil and gas has again made it to the top of the political agenda. This time, the Norwegian oil industry is being challenged more directly. If a green shift *away from oil* (Normann and Tellmann 2021) were to become a shared political goal rather than a speculation regarding market demand, if a line were to be drawn for the winding up of Norwegian oil and gas extraction and concrete plans for new replacement jobs were to emerge, these measures would provide journalistic practice with new opportunities to engage their publics on the urgency of the climate crisis (Hackett et al. 2017).

Notes

1. The focus group study has been approved by the Norwegian Center for Research Data, approval number 196271.
2. Interestingly, the video features mostly young female oil workers, although the industry is dominated by older men (Houeland, Jordhus-Lier, and Angell 2020).
3. We received permission from Norsk olje og gass to re-use this image.

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