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Corporate Ventriloquism: Corporate Advocacy, the Coal Industry, and the Appropriation of Voice

Peter K. Bsumek, Jen Schneider, Steve Schwarze, and Jennifer Peeples

After generating half of the electricity in the US annually for nearly three decades, coal's share dropped below 40% in the spring of 2012 and is expected to continue falling. The coal industry in Appalachia has responded by waging a multi-front corporate advocacy campaign, and is attempting to unify a range of people who are "speaking with one voice" about coal. Using theories of voice and appropriation, we argue that the coal industry's rhetoric operates through a process that we term corporate ventriloquism. In this rhetoric, the industry appropriates elements of neoliberal and neoconservative ideology, adapts them to the cultural circumstances specific to coal, and "throws" this voice through "front groups" to create the impression of broadly based support for coal. Through corporate ventriloquism, the coal industry masks its own influence over the spaces and conditions for "voice" and undermines the value of voice in public discussions about the future of coal. Unpacking the implications of corporate ventriloquism for voice and environmental communication, we conclude that corporate ventriloquism becomes the preferred modality of voice under neoliberalism.

Keywords: *voice; coal; energy; neoliberalism; neoconservatism; corporate advocacy; appropriation; astroturf*

In the second decade of the 21st century, the US coal industry is facing unprecedented challenges. While for many years coal provided nearly half of U.S. electricity, in the spring of 2012 that share dropped to below 40% and is expected to continue falling (Energy Information Administration 2012).¹ Coal production is increasing not in Appalachia, the primary U.S. source for coal historically, but in Wyoming's Powder River Basin (Goodell, 2006). Market competition from the natural gas industry combined with well-organized climate and anti-mountaintop removal (MTR) campaigns have significantly curtailed the production of new coal-fired power plants in the United States (EIA, 2012). Under the Obama administration, the Environmental Protection Agency appears to be somewhat more amenable than the Bush administration to regulating carbon emissions as a pollutant, and more interested in enforcing Clean Water

Act provisions applicable to MTR mining (Broder, 2012). Combined with sharp reductions in the number of coal mining jobs due to the increased efficiency of coal mining techniques, these circumstances have put the coal industry in Appalachia in a precarious position.

The coal industry in Appalachia has responded to these circumstances by waging a multi-front corporate advocacy campaign. This campaign combines traditional tactics such as litigating, lobbying, and backing pro-coal candidates in local and national elections. But it also involves a series of sophisticated, coordinated public relations campaigns that seek to secure the hegemony of coal both regionally and nationally. Through trade associations and advocacy organizations that produce websites, advertisements, videos, and other messages, the campaigns seek to unify a range of people who are “speaking with one voice” about coal (“One Voice”).

These campaigns and their creation of a “voice” for the coal industry are the focus of this chapter. Using theories of voice and appropriation, we argue that the coal industry’s rhetoric operates through a process that we term *corporate ventriloquism*. In this rhetoric, the industry appropriates elements of neoliberal and neoconservative ideology and adapts them to the cultural circumstances specific to coal in Appalachia. It then “throws” this voice through “front groups” to create the impression of broadly based support for coal. Through corporate ventriloquism, the coal industry masks its own influence over the spaces and conditions for voice and undermines the value of dissenting, textured, and independent voices in public discussions about the future of coal.

We begin the essay by putting Nick Couldry's theory of "voice" under neoliberal regimes into conversation with rhetorical theories of appropriation to build the concept of corporate ventriloquism. We then map the complex array of organizations that enable the coal industry to speak as if it were a legitimate voice of the people. Next, we offer a two-part analysis of a "Faces of Coal" campaign, which is emblematic of the industry's use of corporate ventriloquism and its neoliberal commitments. Our conclusion draws out several implications about corporate ventriloquism and its relationship to voice, neoliberalism, and environmental controversy.

Neoliberalism and the Crisis of Voice

This chapter extends discussions of appropriation by moving from existing social movement analyses of strategy, tactics, terminology, and structure to focus on the use and manipulation of "voice" as an element of appropriation. Our consideration of voice relies on the work of media and communication theorist Nick Couldry (2010), who theorizes a "crisis of voice under neoliberalism." Based on economic theories popularized by Friedrich von Hayek and Milton Friedman, neoliberalism is guided by the assumption that individual and political freedoms are dependent upon a political economic system of free markets, free trade, and strong private property rights (Harvey, 2005). Couldry positions neoliberalism as a discourse and an organizing rationality. According to Couldry, the "market-driven politics" of neoliberalism has undermined the regulatory powers of government and facilitated the expansion of market rationality into nearly all aspects of public and private life. Neoliberalism has led to the deregulation of markets

and industries, the privatization and “marketization” of public services, and the decline of trade unions. With regard to environmental policy and regulation, marketization is characterized by the shift from “command and control” regulatory approaches to those based on “market incentives” such as “cap and trade” (see Hajer, 1995). The hegemony of neoliberalism extends beyond government policy by producing the cultural conditions that constrain *and* constitute subjectivity and agency in both the social and the political realms.

By focusing on voice, Couldry demonstrates how neoliberal rationality constrains and constitutes subjectivity and agency. As such, neoliberalism limits the possibilities of what can be said, frames political controversies as primarily economic in nature, and reproduces neoliberal ideology, like the idea of a free market, as “common sense.” Couldry thus provides a normative theory of voice, which is offered as a counter-rationality to the hegemony of neoliberalism.

Couldry distinguishes two levels of voice: voice as process and voice as value. As process, voice is “the process of giving an account of one’s life and its conditions,” a chance to speak on one’s own behalf (p. 7). Eric Watts (2001) notes that in rhetorical scholarship, this notion of voice is associated with “speaking” and informs critical projects designed to enable marginalized or alienated people to “find their own voice” (p. 182). According to Couldry, neoliberal rationality excludes and undermines the process of giving voice by excluding alternative viewpoints. This takes place when institutions fail to register individual experience, ignore collective views, and when societies are encouraged to believe that “voice need not be taken into account, because a higher value

or rationality trumps them” (Couldry, 2010, p. 10). Under these conditions, the process of finding voice, unless it expresses market rationality, is rendered mute and moot.

This is why, for Couldry, voice means more than a chance to speak and be heard. It is not enough to give an account of one’s life if the only rhetorical situations available are constrained by market rationality and its identities and values. Couldry’s second level of voice is therefore voice as value. As a value, voice is “the act of valuing, and choosing to value, those frameworks for organizing human life and resources that *themselves* value voice [as a process]” (p. 2). Here Couldry is concerned with the way in which neoliberalism exerts influence over the conditions for voice. Neoliberal rationality, for Couldry, “provides principles for organizing action (in workplace, public services, fields of competition, public discussion) which are internalized as norms and values” (p. 12). Key among these norms and values are the association of freedom with the “entrepreneurial” self—the individual as a free and independent agent in a free market—and the devaluing and dismissal of forms of social solidarity such as trade unions.

Neoliberalism establishes paradoxical terms for voice, in other words. According to Couldry, neoliberalism seems to permit the *apparent* expansion of voice (say, through ever-expanding consumer choice), while voice is *in fact* limited to market expression. Individuals are offered ample opportunities to “voice” their opinion in the marketplace or using economic logic. Yet opportunities to express ideological commitments outside of market logics are increasingly scarce. At stake, then, is not only the creation of more opportunities for giving “an account of one’s life,” but also the types of “*values* [that can be] articulated through such voices” (p. 137).

In the remainder of this chapter, we explore this paradoxical nature of “neoliberal voice” by investigating how the corporate advocacy campaigns of the coal industry celebrate the process of voice—multiple, individual expressions of “self”—while simultaneously muting and dismissing those voices that articulate values counter to neoliberal ideology. This case study is, then, an extension of Couldry’s (2010) project in that it attempts to uncover the neoliberal processes that obstruct the means of valuing voice. Rhetorical theories of appropriation can aid this extension by further unpacking the paradoxes of neoliberal voice.

Appropriation and Corporate Ventriloquism

Communication scholarship on coal industry information campaigns is limited. Some sociologists, however, have analyzed how the coal industry uses these campaigns to shape cultural understandings of coal mining and the coal industry within Appalachia. Bell and York (2010) note that “when there is a large scale-reduction in jobs, and employment no longer connects an industry to the community it pollutes,” economic rationality cannot fully explain why communities continue to support that industry (p. 116).² In situations like this, they argue, other kinds of ideologies must bolster economic rationales, enabling companies to maintain their cultural and political dominance in the region. Similarly, Rebecca Scott (2010) discusses the way that coalfield residents “are constructed and construct themselves as coalfield residents and how the discursive structuring of their subjectivity shapes their environmental politics” (p. 17). Noting that “social analyses of mining are usually limited to economic and political fields,” she

argues that coal mining—and MTR in particular—is a “deeply cultural act, and the complex environmental politics of coal mining are, in part, struggles over the meaning of the practice,” and that these meanings are further “enmeshed in networks of material signification” (p.17).

These networks of material signification, which include ideas about private property, land ownership, gender, race and class commitments, and national identity, are an important rhetorical resource for the coal industry as it attempts to address its material decline (Scott, 2010, p. 17-18). Another rhetorical resource utilized by natural resource industries facing organized opposition has been to modify their public persona as a means of popularizing their industry (e.g., Smercnik & Renegar, 2010). One such approach has been to tap networks of signification by appropriating the powerful structures and/or discourses of other organizations in order to obtain, co-opt, or counter their influence or identity. Environmental communication scholars have identified four primary means of appropriation seen in environmental controversies: lateral appropriation, greenwashing, astroturf campaigns, and aggressive mimicry. To that list we add corporate ventriloquism.

The most benevolent of the four means of co-optation is *lateral appropriation*. Anspach, Coe, and Thurlow (2007) define lateral appropriation as “any instance in which means commonly associated with and/or perceived as belonging to one marginalized group are used by another marginalized group to further its own ends” (p. 100; see also Peeples 2011). Lateral appropriation is an important tactic for groups who have limited material and symbolic resources (Anspach, Coe, & Thurlow, 2007). It is also used by powerful organizations, like corporations, to adapt hegemonic discourses to new

circumstances. Unlike the other forms of co-optation, lateral appropriation does not attempt to challenge or undermine the discourse it appropriates. Rather, it extends it into new discursive fields.

The second form of appropriation is *greenwashing*, which Cox defines as “the act of misleading consumers regarding the environmental practices of a company or the environmental benefits of a product or service” (2010, p. 345; see also Shapiro (2004)). Pezzullo adds that greenwashing also includes “the deliberate disavowal of environmental effects” (2003, p. 246). As with whitewashing, the appropriation of environmental discourse is cosmetic, leaving the product, production, organizational structure, and/or corporate agenda intact. Cox (2010) describes three purposes of greenwashing: 1) product promotion, 2) organizational image enhancement, and 3) organizational image repair. The company name or logo is often the focal point, as the purpose of greenwashing is for the organization (at least superficially) to alter its public image.

Astroturfing, the third type of appropriation, refers to the “the controversial tactic of creating the illusion of a largely spontaneous grassroots protest that has in fact been organised by corporate-backed groups” (Murray, 2009).³ Tactics can range from “public” letter writing campaigns that are organized, paid for, and even written by companies, to establishing community organizations and NGOs, “front groups,” that are directly or indirectly funded and managed by corporations. The purpose of this appropriation is to persuade potential constituents or decision-makers that the message comes from citizens who have vested interests in the outcome, as opposed to corporate

beneficiaries who have difficulty engendering either the level of empathy or rights that are given to “the people.”

The final strategy of appropriation, *aggressive mimicry*, is similar to astroturfing, but takes appropriation one-step further. An entity engaging in aggressive mimicry co-opts an opposing organization’s structure and discourse in order to sow doubts about their opponent’s identity, with the intended effect of distracting or destroying the opponent (Peeples, 2005). For Wise Use, a 1980’s anti-environmental movement, it was claiming to be the “true environmentalists” (Peeples, 2005). Co-opting organizations are at times unable to make great legislative and political strides as they can be seen as inauthentic or false. But their power lies in forcing their opponent to defend its discourse, structure, and identity, thereby diverting time and limited resources from the mimicked movement’s goals (Peeples, 2005).

Our analysis extends this discussion of co-optation by describing how the coal industry uses strategies of appropriation in ways that contribute to “the crisis of voice” identified by Couldry. Informed by the theories outlined above, we identify a practice that we have termed “corporate ventriloquism,” which we define as *the rhetorical process of corporations transmitting their voice through seemingly less powerful entities in ways that advance the interests of those corporations and undermine the value of voice in democratic processes*. In the case of the Appalachian coal industry, corporate ventriloquism relies upon astroturfing to generate an alternative persona from which to speak. But it also laterally appropriates neoliberal market rationality, drawing on neoconservative discourses of family values and national security, to constitute a regional Appalachian identity and a national American identity that are dependent on coal.⁴ In the

same move, the neoliberal discourse calls into question any voice that opposes the hegemonic coal doctrine as “anti-American” or against Appalachian prosperity, thereby silencing any expression other than the one appropriated and approved voice of coal. Rather than merely decrying astroturf groups as fake or inauthentic, we advance the notion of corporate ventriloquism in order to help critics observe the ideological work accomplished by that process.

Astroturf: Mapping the Friends, FACES, and Voice of Coal

Several industry-affiliated organizations promote the interests of coal in Appalachia. They frequently work together to organize rallies and protests, disseminate talking points via press releases and lobbying, and produce media messages and educational materials to advance industry positions. The most prominent of these organizations are the National Mining Association (NMA), a national trade organization whose primary mission is lobbying in Washington, D.C., and the West Virginia Coal Association (WVCA), which coordinates pro-mining lobbying efforts at the state and regional level. These umbrella organizations also fund, or share funding with, a number of affiliate organizations, including Coal Mining Our Future, the Coalition for Mountaintop Mining, Citizens for Coal, the American Coalition for Clean Coal Energy, and Friends of America.

The two most visible campaigns of the WVCA are Friends of Coal (FOC), which launched in 2002, and Faces of Coal (FACES), which launched in 2009. According to

the corporate watchdog website SourceWatch, the WVCA funds FOC, whose emphasis is primarily on improving the public relations and marketing environment for coal mining in Appalachia (SourceWatch, 2011). In turn, Friends of Coal funds the group FACES (Federation for American Coal, Energy and Security), which also serves as the home of the “Faces of Coal” group/campaign, whose mission is to underscore the economic and social dependence Appalachians have on coal mining (SourceWatch, 2009). While both groups address their campaigns to the Appalachian region, the FACES organization also addresses its campaigns to national audiences.

Both FOC and FACES represent themselves as grassroots groups. FOC claims to be run by volunteers; the FACES website states that it is made up of “an alliance of people from all walks of life who are joining forces to educate lawmakers and the general public about the importance of coal and coal mining to our local and national economies and to our nation's energy security” (“About Us”). Such language suggests that these campaigns are the result of local, homegrown efforts to promote coal mining. This suggestion is further supported by language that connotes “small-town” values and organization. For example, FOC describes itself as “an army of coal miners, their families, friends, neighbors, local and state business leaders, elected officials, doctors, lawyers, teachers, pizza delivery guys and students” (West Virginia Coal Association, 2011, p.4).

A key element of the marketing strategy of both FOC and FACES, therefore, is to emphasize the ways in which coal is “us.” This is a distinctly nostalgic vision of “us,” which emphasizes conservative articulations of shared cultural and political values: family, free markets, and football. In essays, brochures, videos, event sponsorship, and

baseball hat logos, the message of FOC and FACES is that coal is constitutive of Appalachian and, in many materials, American identity. According to one essay on the FOC website, “Coal is West Virginia! Coal is America!”⁵ Such a statement stands in stark opposition to progressive arguments about “big coal” and corporate malfeasance (e.g., Goodell, 2006). According to the FOC/FACES narrative, if you are against coal, you are against “us,” against America, against progress, against what we *do* (jobs), and against our way of life, which relies on cheap electricity produced by coal.

Although what counts as “grassroots” is contested (Cox, 2010), the fairly heavy-handed top-down funding and organizational structure, as well as a specific intent to make these campaigns *seem* as if they originated with everyday people and not from the industry itself, suggests astroturf. The idea that these are grassroots campaigns serves the rhetorical pairing of “coal” and “America,” but does not necessarily reflect the origins of the campaigns.⁶

Corporate Ventriloquism and the FACES of Coal

FOC and FACES specifically target Appalachian audiences, but also are aiming to have national reach. To do so, the industry utilizes a two-pronged strategy. First, it builds “dummy” grassroots organizations through which it can “throw” its voice. This is the practice of ventriloquism. Next, it utilizes the persona of that grassroots organization to deliver its messages to targeted national audiences. Our analysis examines the neoliberal and neoconservative dimensions of coal’s voice in these messages.

Constructing a Neoliberal Voice

The astroturf efforts of the Faces of Coal campaign became clearest in August 2009, when progressive bloggers discovered that images from the FACES website—images of people who were literally meant to represent the “faces” of coal—were actually generic images from a service called iStockphoto, which supplies marketing campaigns with stock photos. The story, which was first posted at the progressive blog DeSmogBlog, quickly made the rounds of progressive blogs all over the web; within a week, bloggers at Treehugger, MSNBC’s The Rachel Maddow Show, Grist, The Daily Kos, Appalachian Voices, and the Huffington Post had reported or reposted about the FACES debacle. Several bloggers interpreted the use of iStock photos as a sign of astroturf, a faking of grassroots support for the coal industry.

This interpretation was amplified when bloggers discovered that the FACES website was hosted by an organization called “Adfero,” which was not a grassroots organization at all, but rather a K Street (lobbying) public relations firm. According to Jim Hoggan at DeSmog Blog, “Adfero doesn’t specialize in spontaneous public advocacy. It specializes in crafting a ‘custom-tailored message’ and then recruiting ‘key contacts’ who can slam that message home” (Hoggan, 2009). For Hoggan, Adfero’s involvement offered clear evidence that FACES was the product of “inside-the-beltway, fossil fuel funded conservative lobbyists.” Within hours of this accusation, the attribution to Adfero had been removed from the FACES website, and the website was moved to a server in Michigan (Johnson, 2009). Other bloggers were quick to point out that the actual supporters (funders) of FACES were not listed on the website (Sheppard, 2009).

The FACES iStockphoto flap illustrates several important components of the coal industry's strategy. Primarily, the incident highlights astroturfing as a tactic that recognizes the rhetorical power of individual voices by making them *seem* present without actually being so. The "faces" that are intended to represent the inclusion of voice are actually empty signifiers of a dialogue that never takes place. In addition, the incident reveals the ways in which the industry attempts to "throw" its voice, to place its values and justifications literally in the mouths of individuals, albeit individuals who have no identity beyond that of surface representation.

Further, the incident reinforces how the industry's ventriloquism relies on appeals to economic identity, hailing its audience as consumers. The campaign directs attention away from coal extraction and pollution and toward coal consumption, an act which implicates everyone, and that can be rationalized and sanitized more easily. It is telling that none of the stock photos depicted miners or other coalfield workers. Rather, the "faces of coal" were shown participating in everyday activities—lifeguarding, playing high school football, whitewater rafting, standing in front of a flower business (Randolph, 2009). These individuals are connected to coal primarily through consumption, or as individuals whose idealized middle-class American lifestyles are (presumably) supported by coal.

This is a fundamentally neoliberal appropriation of voice: the "faces of coal" and the viewer of the campaign alike are called to interpret coal primarily through the market logic of consumerism. They "speak" to coal, about coal, or for coal as consumers. The FACES website did not attempt to provide a platform where coalfield workers and residents might "give an account of the conditions of their lives" (Couldry, 2010, p. 4).

Instead, it attempted to hail its audience as “generic” model Americans by positioning them as electricity consumers, and asking them to identify with the way that coal enables their lifestyle.

Since the iStockphoto flap, the FACES website has been updated to include information about the organization’s supporters, and it features what appear to be actual Appalachian residents who support the coal industry. The navigation menu has an “our supporters” tab that links to a “supporter quotes” page. This page contains a long series of photographs of individuals—some blue collar, but also many who look like doctors, nurses and other professionals—with quotes such as, “If it wasn’t for coal our area would become a ghost town. Everything revolves around the mining industry. Coal is our present and our future.” The quotes are attributed to supporters using a first name and last initial (“Supporter Quotes”). The page also has a “featured profile” button; at the time of this writing, it featured an artist who does oil paintings of Appalachian wildlife, accessible to her (it is implied) more readily after mountaintop removal mining: “Sharon hopes that her oil paintings inspire Americans to come to West Virginia to see the natural beauty of the landscape and wildlife that is present in her hometown—and largely the result of mine reclamation. She wants to save the mining jobs in West Virginia, because if you save the mining jobs, you save the state.” Finally, there is a “supporters list” with associations and organizations that have donated to FACES, which was glaringly missing during the iStockphoto incident.

Two things are worth noting about this new and improved FACES website. First, although the organization now comes clean about its supporters, it is in many ways a more effective vehicle for corporate ventriloquism than it was before. This is because the

“our supporters” tab flattens the relationship between individual supporters and corporate sponsors. The mix of elements on the “our supporters” tab treats the quoted individuals, local governmental organizations, and businesses associations (including the West Virginia Coal Association) as coequal “supporters” of FACES. It also claims over 60,000 individual supporters and lists a small sample by first name, last initial and hometown. In effect, the website reduces large-scale and highly-funded organizations, like the West Virginia Coal Association, to just one of many supporters listed alphabetically. This reinforces the description of FACES noted earlier, as “an alliance of people from all walks of life,” whereby the West Virginia Coal Association (the organization that originally created FOC and FACES) becomes just another supporter. This flattening supports the claim that FACES is where everyone is given equal voice.

Flattening corporations so that they seem like individuals is another neoliberal strategy. Neoliberalism values individualism (with individuals defined as corporations *and* consumers) above all else because neoliberal rationality privileges market relationships over other forms of social organization (Couldry, 2010 p. 66). This rhetorical move is conducted masterfully by Don Blankenship, former CEO of Massey Energy Company, then the largest coal producer in West Virginia. In a 2010 public debate with Robert Kennedy, Jr. in Charleston, West Virginia, Blankenship no less than five times responded to Kennedy’s attacks on “the industry” by hailing the audience *as* the industry:

It is easy to say that the industry is evil. The industry is ruthless. The industry is destroying the climate and destroying the environment. [But] you are the industry.

The people in this room, the people that are in the banks, the people that are

working in the coal mines. The people—we're the ones that are making the decisions. . . . We are the industry. You are the industry. The people that are your neighbors and your teachers are the industry. So I don't know—again—what it is that we want to be so easily critical of “the industry” (in finger quotes).

Because that is us. (Blankenship, 2010)

By arguing that the people are the “the industry,” Blankenship effectively erases the disproportionately powerful role coal companies play in Appalachian society. In so doing, he throws the corporate voice onto and through the people, creating in one rhetorical move a unification between the industry and Appalachia, and an identity that is not merely pro-coal and pro-industry, but *is* coal and *is* industry. The framing of the Appalachian and American self as fundamentally corporate and consumerist is essential to undermining alternative voices. Ironically, Blankenship also provides his audience with the one form of social solidarity that is available to the neoliberal subject: a conglomerate of individuals organized for the purpose of defending industry and expanding free markets.

Appealing to Neoconservative Values

While reliant on astroturfing strategies, coal's corporate ventriloquism also utilizes the strategy of lateral appropriation. In the case of the coal industry, this means appropriating neoconservative discourses, which equate freedom with family and national security, to buttress neoliberal ideology. Through this process the coal industry utilizes the networks of material signification, identified by Scott (2010), as rhetorical resources

to shape the meanings of coal. As it does so, it also attempts to reconstitute those networks in terms of neoliberalism.

The FACES airline ad we examine in this section (Figure A) appeared in airline magazines in December 2010.⁷ The ad targets affluent frequent flyers, which the *Arbitron In-flight Media Study* describes as “a very select group of Americans” and as “successful professionals with sophisticated tastes and the income to pursue their interests” (Williams, 2006 p. 1). As such, it is not appealing to a narrow Appalachian identity, and the dominant feature of the ad—an image of a young boy running with an American Flag in a pasture—seems to have absolutely nothing to do with coal or electricity. Instead, the image is a generic reference to America, idealized American family life, and idealized American citizenship. This appropriation of neoconservative themes, both in the image and in the accompanying text, reveals how the coal industry attempts to create a consubstantial relationship between the coal industry, the market economy, and the nation. Further, it reveals how the coal industry’s corporate ventriloquism conflates diverse national voices and viewpoints into “one voice.”

[Insert Figure A here]

The FACES airline ad specifically valorizes the “heartland” virtues that are prominent in American culture and politics. The ad’s boldest visual element is a photograph of an American flag, held upright by a child. The reader symbolically enters the image from below, as if seated on a lawn chair at the edge of the intimate scene, and looks up with the child toward the flag. The intimate framing connotes family, and the

child unmistakably functions as a signifier of hetero-normative family values and whiteness. However, this is not only a reference to “family values”; the ad articulates those values as American citizenship. Rebecca Scott suggests that in America the idealized rural citizen is characterized as “independent, brave, honest, and most important, always ready to sacrifice for the good of the nation” (2010, p. 37). America sustains and protects the family (the flag unfurls above the boy). The family sustains America by acting as the keeper of its virtue, and by serving its interests (the boy holds up the flag). Within this set of symbolic associations, the idealized American family is constituted as the bedrock of America.

The pastoral signifiers in the image are just as unmistakable—the red barn, pasture fencing, and mountains in the distance all connote the tranquility, peace and innocence that are referenced in both British and American Romantic traditions (Williams, 1973; Garrard, 2004). As Raymond Williams notes, country life has often represented “an innocent alternative to ambition, disturbance and war” (Williams, 1973, p. 24). The FACES ad thus constructs a quintessentially American scene, calling to mind the innocence, purity and Christian piety associated with idealized rural life in America, a common theme in Appalachian rhetoric about coal (Scott, 2010).

Although the image is symbolically important, the ad also features a long text box where we learn the ad is in fact for coal. The bolded headline of the ad reads, “**American Power depends on American Coal.**” Power, in this statement, takes on two meanings; it stands for energy as well as international military, economic and cultural hegemony. This text also reinforces the visual ideograph of the flag, and parallels the visual imagery of dependence: just as the nation depends on the family, so too does the

nation depend on coal. A large blank space separates the headline from a list of four couplets, which supply the reader with evidence for the claim of dependency on coal. The space encourages the reader's eye to wander back to the image of the boy with the flag reinforcing the connection between the image and the claim, "American Power Depends on American Coal." The eye then returns to the factoid couplets.

The couplets are arranged into three sets of two factoids that support the claim of American dependence, and are followed by a final couplet, which first threatens the reader, and then offers reassurance.

Coal is America's most abundant energy source.

Coal is America's most affordable energy source.

Coal provides nearly 50% of America's electricity needs.

Coal keeps that electricity affordable for millions.

America needs jobs.

America needs economic growth.

That won't happen without electricity generated from coal.

Keep the Lights on, America.

The first two couplets are arranged with parallel construction, each sentence beginning with the term "coal," while the third couplet begins with the term "America." This structure further defines and reiterates the relationship between coal and America: each depends on the other in a syllogistic or constitutive manner. America needs coal to be "powerful;" coal needs America to use its "power."

The first couplet stresses coal as an "energy source," and its first sentence is a clear reference to energy independence, encouraging the reader to think of problems

associated with foreign sources of energy such as war in the Middle East and price spikes. The comfort and innocence portrayed in the image is now threatened. The second sentence on affordability plays to both individual consumer interests and the importance of an affordable energy source for geopolitical power. The term “energy source” is ripped from the pages of policy white papers and the punditry of Sunday morning talk shows. This couplet defines American power in terms of geopolitical power.

The second couplet emphasizes “electricity” and suggests that what is good for the nation is good for the individual consumer. The first sentence, “Coal provides nearly 50% of America’s electricity needs,” emphasizes the beneficial relationship between coal and the nation and suggests that the electricity that powers your family’s home is likely generated by coal. The second sentence repeats the affordability theme in the first couplet and emphasizes the direct benefit of coal to the individual consumer—your electricity bill is “affordable” because of coal, while also suggesting that affordable electricity is good for the nation’s economy. This point is further emphasized in the third couplet.

The third couplet provides general statements about what “America needs” that warrant the reader’s support of coal. Namely, America needs “jobs” and “economic growth.” The first sentence does double duty. It first anticipates environmental controversy associated with coal in the overly simplified frame of “jobs vs. environment.” This frame dismisses environmental concerns associated with coal, erases the complexities associated with declining jobs in coal country, and narrows the economic frame within a neoliberal context. It also functions as a trope that reiterates the

connotations in the image associated with hetero-normative family. “Jobs” in this case, and in this proximity to the image in the ad, is a clear reference to being a family provider and a breadwinner. Thus, the reference to jobs in the airline ad is not just an economic argument, but also a morality claim. American family values depend on jobs. The ad builds on this theme in the next sentence, “America needs economic growth.” Here the reference is not to the jobs that underpin the morality and virtue of the nation, but on the link between economic growth and national security. Family security depends on national security.

In the final couplet, parallel construction is abandoned in favor of a threat followed by a reassuring slogan. The first sentence, “That won’t happen without electricity generated from coal” is the threat. At first glance, it asserts that jobs and economic growth will be jeopardized “without electricity generated from coal.” However, when coupled with the associations of family values with jobs and geopolitical power with economic growth, the ad goes beyond the simple claim of jobs vs. the environment. Rather, the ad as a whole implies that the entire American way of life is threatened, and even being attacked. The last line in the couplet is then set apart from the previous seven lines and bolded: “**Keep the Lights On, America.**” This command clearly echoes the timeworn slogan from billboards throughout Appalachia, “Coal Keeps the Lights On.” In this context and in relation to this image, it seems bizarrely out of place. The image of the boy and flag is completely devoid of any references to lights; however, the reference to “keeping the lights on” clearly connotes home and family life. The old saying, “We’ll keep the lights on for you” is evoked.

The FACES ad is a quintessential example of how the coal industry and its proxies strategically appropriate “one voice” to rhetorically finesse material contradictions generated by neoliberal ideology. By drawing upon ideographs (Family, Security, Prosperity), commonplace tropes (pastoral, heartland), and the metaphors of neoliberal ideology (market competition, economic growth, power) the ad positions its audience as atomized, self-sufficient individuals—breadwinners and caretakers who have “earned” independence and are responsible for providing their families with security. Coal is simultaneously represented as a consumer good (an “abundant” and “affordable energy source”) upon which the family depends, and as the resource upon which the nation depends for “power.” The reference to “power” in this case does triple duty, referring to the electricity that powers our homes, the cheap electricity and the jobs created by the coal industry that power the nation’s economy, and the resultant geopolitical power associated with a strong economy and independence from foreign sources of energy. Power comes from the seamless unity of the social, economic and political realms, but economic growth fueled by coal plays the pre-eminent role.

Ultimately, the ad reinforces the neoliberal orientation toward coal found on the FACES website by bolstering it with a powerful appeal to a neoconservative American identity. The audience is asked not only to identify with coal as a consumer and a patriot, but also to embrace their dependence and reliance upon the coal industry. In other words, the relationship between the household breadwinners and caregivers and the coal industry is analogous to the relationship between the boy in the image and the breadwinners and caregivers who are asked to identify with him as they sit in the seat of an airplane.

This helps explain why FACES chose to place the ad in airline magazines. The cultural situation in the United States post 9/11, and the unique hyper-reliance of airline travelers upon the security-industrial complex, make the relationship of dependent freedom, of making sacrifices for freedom, a familiar one. By articulating coal to the values of family, freedom and security, the ad implies that any negative aspects of coal extraction, production, or consumption are simply the price of freedom, the sacrifices we make for “our way of life.”

Corporate Ventriloquism as the Voice of Neoliberalism

Our analysis has described corporate ventriloquism as the key process by which the coal industry has attempted to negotiate a range of economic, cultural, and ideological challenges. Through strategies such as astroturfing of grassroots organizations and lateral appropriation of neoconservative discourse, the industry has crafted a voice through which it articulates coal production and coal-generated energy with economic prosperity and neoconservative values of family, nation, and security. Rhetorically, this articulation ultimately advances a neoliberal ideology that is conducive to the interests of the coal industry, but problematic for both the process and value of voice in public discourse surrounding coal.

Thus, we have aimed to demonstrate that corporate ventriloquism provides a useful entry point for examining the tension between voice and neoliberal ideology as identified by Couldry. In the remainder of this essay, we discuss some of the specific

implications our analysis has for understanding Couldry's crisis of voice, as well as the role of voice in environmental controversies.

First, **corporate ventriloquism aids neoliberalism by consistently positioning audiences as market participants, thereby eliding the difference between the expression of voice and the functioning of markets.** As astroturf groups reframe industry interests by exclusively depicting the jobs, lifestyles, and everyday practices that are supported through corporate activity, they constitute audience members primarily as market participants. In our case study, local residents are invited to celebrate their economic connection to the coal industry, while the far-flung audiences of the FACES ads are positioned as consumers desiring affordable energy and workers desiring jobs and economic growth. The gendered, familial, and national dimensions of identity serve to reinforce one's roles in the market. The lateral appropriation of neoconservative imagery and tropes, along with an economic framing that constructs considerations of ecological degradation or social injustice as the price of freedom in a competitive global market, forecloses voice by celebrating "the citizenry's presumable essential socioeconomic solidarity to the exclusion of its constitutive political differences" (Vivian, 2006, p. 4). Other forms of identity-making or articulations of voice which might critique or lie outside of market activity are noticeably absent or foreclosed.

Second, **corporate ventriloquism enables industries to celebrate and undermine voice in environmental controversies.** Couldry notes that in democratic contexts we can often identify "rationalities that *do not* directly deny the value of voice outright (indeed, in some contexts they may celebrate it), but work in other ways to undermine the provision of voice at various levels" (2010, p. 10). The advocacy

campaigns of FOC and FACES provide an exemplar for the contradictory and at times paradoxical character of voice in neoliberalism. On one hand, these campaigns appear to valorize the inclusion of individual voices through personal photos and quotations. The faces of “real” people on the FACES website become models for members. On the other hand, the rhetorical resources appropriated by coal do not enable individuals to provide “an account of one’s life and its conditions” beyond generic yet powerful themes of family, patriotism and consumerism that reinscribe neoliberal ideology. These rhetorical resources arguably undermine the value of voice in Couldry’s sense by constraining individual accounts within the neoliberal presumption that “market functioning is the privileged reference-point” for all other modes of social organization (2010, p. 23).

Third, **corporate ventriloquism may become the preferred modality of voice under neoliberalism, to the extent that it obscures the fundamental tension between voice and neoliberal ideology.** The simultaneous celebration and undermining of voice noted above reveals a key moment in negotiating the contradictions of neoliberalism. While the existence of astroturf groups implicitly acknowledges that voice matters, neoliberalism devalues voice relative to effective market functioning. Thus, neoliberal ideology must incite a diverse array of market-oriented voices in order to negotiate “the tension between neoliberal doctrine and the value of voice” (Couldry, 2010, p. 11). Put differently, corporate ventriloquism is a way of recognizing voice under conditions of neoliberalism—but it is a voice that, in reinscribing neoliberal ideology, is not really a voice at all.

Fourth, **resistance to corporate ventriloquism requires more than identification of the “fake” character of astroturf groups.** Merely identifying groups

as corporate-funded forms of astroturf is a necessary, but insufficient step for activists and critics who wish to thwart the dominance of corporate interests. Beyond identifying the instrumental creation of “fake” grassroots groups, our analysis of corporate ventriloquism explains how astroturf groups rhetorically hail an audience around a set of “real” interests and shared values, unifying all those who see themselves as connected with an industry. It is this deeper cultural alignment around the neoliberal equation of market functioning with the public interest that must be interrogated in order to resist the operations of corporate ventriloquism.

Finally, **corporate ventriloquism aids neoliberalism by effacing the differences between individuals and corporations.** This is another way that corporate ventriloquism differs from astroturfing. While astroturfing characterizes industry-supported organizations as spontaneous, grassroots collections of interested citizens, corporate ventriloquism goes one step further to characterize corporate interests as on par with citizen participants in the economic and political milieu. In our case study, rather than hide their identity as supporters, companies and trade associations reveal their connection to astroturf organizations, but then contextualize that connection by placing themselves alongside other individual supporters. This flattening obscures disparities in financial and political power wielded by different participants in the coal-industrial complex, making all voices appear equal. It also reinforces the legal construction of the corporation as an individual. This implication is especially significant in light of recent legal decisions such as *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, which expanded First Amendment rights to corporations and dramatically altered the political economy of voice in the United States.

The juridical trick of defining corporations as individuals illustrates the hegemony of neoliberalism. The advantage now enjoyed by corporations to spend money to influence elections, combined with their already sizable financial advantage with regard to influencing public policy through lobbying and litigation, creates a playing field that is not just uneven, but rigged, putting advocates of alternative perspectives at a significant disadvantage. This suggests that the political, legal, and economic structures that enable this advantage must become a focus of scholarly criticism and environmental advocacy.

Matt Wasson (2012), director of programs for the environmental advocacy organization Appalachian Voices, provides a cogent example of this problem in his analysis of 2012 presidential election results in Appalachian, where pro-coal candidates increased their share of the vote in comparison to the 2008 election. Wasson argues that not only have national environmental advocates long ignored coal communities, focusing their attention on climate change and shutting down coal fired power plants, but that local groups are simply unable to compete with the resources of the coal industry and its allies:

There are groups like Kentuckians for the Commonwealth that are doing extraordinarily effective organizing in regions where coal is mined, but when a group like Americans for Prosperity comes in with an \$11 million ad campaign and bottomless pockets for on-the-ground organizing, we're in the position of bringing a knife to a nuclear showdown (Wasson, 2012).

Wasson suggests that mainstream environmental organizations should pay more attention to organizing and promoting alternative economic opportunities in Appalachia. Further, he notes that "mountain top removal and drinking water pollution are potent 'gateway issues' that have inspired many residents to question the honesty and benevolence of the

coal industry and their political allies” (Wasson, 2012). Advocacy organizations like Appalachian Voices and Kentuckians for the Commonwealth have been utilizing these gateway issues to broaden the scope of their resistance campaigns, making connections between environmental injustice and the neoliberal distortion of corporate power.

However, in a region where the coal industry is king, and in a country where the deck is increasingly stacked (both ideologically and structurally) in favor of corporations, it is difficult to imagine that this process of voice can be heard in the absence of a renewed valuing of voice.

Conclusion

Corporate ventriloquism should thus be seen as a significant contributor to “the crisis of voice under neoliberalism.” The coal industry’s use of corporate ventriloquism may be a harbinger of things to come under neoliberal “democracy,” which distorts democratic practices to the extent that it forecloses public participation, corrodes social ties, and privileges free-markets above all else. By exposing the paradoxical nature of neoliberal voice and calling attention to its implications, we have endeavored to demonstrate that corporate ventriloquism is more complex than astroturf. In utilizing corporate ventriloquism, corporations do not attempt to hide behind “front groups”; rather, they construct a corporate voice that is positioned as the voice of citizenship. This voice is itself the ultimate expression of neoliberal ideology. In turn, this corporate voice serves as a powerful persona for laterally appropriating, adapting, and articulating rationales for neoliberalism. The concept of corporate ventriloquism enables us to focus both on the

way corporations laterally appropriate such rationales, and on the way they construct their voice.

The matter of voice and the question of whether corporations can or should speak for us, or as one of us, are themselves issues to which communication scholars and citizens in general must give voice. Foregrounding the importance of voice, and reimagining social organizing principles around the importance of valuing voice, offer one way to connect advocacy with critiques of the ideological and rhetorical rationales that enable structural imbalances in the political economy of voice. Indeed, communication scholars are uniquely positioned to comment on the importance of balancing the advocacy playing field.

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¹ Though there are a number of factors leading to this precipitous decline, the bulk of the decrease is largely due to an increasing reliance on unconventional natural gas produced from hydrofracturing (fracking) shale plays.

² For example, the number of coal miners employed in West Virginia has decreased from over 125,000 in 1945 to less than 25,000 in 2005. See Bell and York (2010, p. 114-115).

Shirley Stewart Burns' 2007 book *Bringing Down the Mountains* details the social, economic, and environmental costs of such shifts to residents of Appalachia.

³ For a discussion of corporate astroturfing and climate change see the *New York Times* editorial "Another astroturf campaign" (2009).

⁴ David Harvey (2005) situates neoconservative discourse as an extension of neoliberalism. Nationalism, militarism, and conservative "family values" are mobilized to sustain neoliberalism.

⁵ <http://www.wvcoal.com/docs/Coal%20Facts%202011.pdf>

⁶ Measuring the actual impact of these campaigns is beyond the scope of this paper; however, FOC touts its success on its own website, where it states, "Before the Friends of Coal campaign began, surveys indicated that many people in the state had concerns about the coal industry and its role in the state. A study taken just a couple of years ago indicated that most people today trust the industry (65 percent), up by some 17 percent since 2002" ("FOC Bowl," 2009). Similarly, According to the marketing firm Preston-Osborne, which handles the FACES campaign in Kentucky, "Compared to a baseline survey conducted in April 2009, there was a notable drop in the percentage of respondents who strongly agree that mountain top coal mining should be banned in Kentucky" (<http://preston-osborne.com/portfolio/faces-of-coal-3/>).

⁷ It is possible that this print advertisement appeared in other publications. We do know that it appeared in airline magazines in December of 2010. On the FACES website a pdf version of the ad is labeled "Airline Ad." If the ad was published elsewhere it likely targeted similar affluent audiences. The image in the ad was also used in a poster, labeled on the FACES website as "WV Fair Ad," with different text. .