

PhD thesis: Statoil in the Canadian Oil Sands: Tar versus Oil and the trouble of storytelling

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## Summary

While petroleum production and industry actors have received much attention when it comes to environmental issues, market alterations and geopolitics, less heed has been directed towards the specific accounts of reality such actors simultaneously produce. This study shows that to make oil “work” in today’s society is about more than physical extraction, transportation and distribution: Also worldviews and arguments for oil production activities and oil as reasonable product are imperative. It is about properly ‘configuring’ the setting in which the product must enter.

The research project has followed the Norwegian state-owned oil producer Statoil (today Equinor), in their decade-long involvement in the Canadian oil sands, from 2006 to 2016. To move on land posed some challenges as well as opportunities for a company that mainly specializes in offshore production. Approximately 70 per cent of the discovered oil resources in the world are of heavy oil quality, with the Canadian oil sands in Alberta as biggest known site. This fact alone made the oil sands an attractive business case, initially. However, Statoil, internationally credited as a “clean and green” producer, then also became part of the most land-seizing, energy demanding and emission-intensive oil production the world has seen – often referred to as “the Mordor of oil production”. As such, Statoil entered quite an unfamiliar, controversial ‘site’, which had certain effects for the company and the public debates at home, and in Canada. Taking Statoil’s specific experiences with engaging in the production of Canadian oil sands seriously, this study reveals how they had to balance many different concerns when doing so. How did Statoil strive to make room for the oil sands as an acceptable solution in their portfolio, in a world increasingly aware of climate concerns? What were the initial arguments for entering, and how did Statoil communicate their involvement?

Based in the interdisciplinary research field Science and technology studies (STS), this study seeks to push the field further, by having an explicit methodological ambition of showing how stories and storytelling can be studied in new, specific ways. The study employs well-known concepts from STS, and combines this with resources derived from narrative theory, to make a novel approach focusing on how narratives are used, and produced, by prominent societal actors. Investigating both the content of Statoil’s oil sands stories, *and* the circumstances that prompted their storytelling, this study demonstrates how content and context is coproduced *within* the stories made. Simultaneously asking ‘how have Statoil’s activities and stories about own project been met and protested to, in certain settings’; other actors also enter and perform in the material and analyses. In this way, the study shows how opposition towards Statoil not only comes from NGOs and other obvious antagonists, but also from within the Canadian oil sands industry.

By going in-depth on a handful of empirical episodes and situations Statoil were part of in the years they operated in Alberta, the study sheds light on the *conflicting narratives* made about the oil sands, and the crucial role different production technologies play in this.