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## Performing politics on social media: The dramaturgy of an environmental controversy on Facebook

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### ABSTRACT

Social media has become an important stage for environmental politics where different actors seek to shape and contest meanings. Meaning making on social media is studied through an empirical study of a controversial coal seam gas project in Australia. Key Facebook pages associated with opposing viewpoints on this controversy are analyzed using the dramaturgical concepts of scripting and staging. The analysis reveals that the Facebook performances are multisensory, staged to appear personal, and tightly scripted. It is argued that although these characteristics serve an important solidarity function among like-minded individuals and groups, they leave limited space or tolerance for counter-scripts. This in-depth empirical analysis suggests that social media platforms are transforming the way publics form and meet, but their capacity to bridge opposing viewpoints on divisive issues remains limited.

**KEYWORDS** Public debate; social media; dramaturgical analysis; political contestation; coal seam gas

### Introduction

Social media or social networking sites feature prominently in many contemporary political debates, especially environmental conflicts. Today, brands such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are woven into the digital fabric of households, communities, and organizations around the globe (boyd 2015). These platforms utilize Web 2.0 technology where virtual users can communicate with each other as well as create, contribute, and share content (Bechmann and Lomborg 2012). As a communication medium, social media offers a rich 'performative palette' where users can engage in multimedia, storytelling, diverse expression, cultural references, humor, and play (Papacharissi 2010a, p. 307). These and other features of social media facilitate the formation of 'networked publics' around diverse domestic, local, and global issues (boyd 2010). For democracy, social media has created opportunities for citizens to participate in political issues from

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within the private sphere, where they are ‘alone, but not lonely or isolated’ (Papacharissi 2010b, p. 244). Everyday citizens in a socially mediated world are perhaps more real and present, but also less predictable (Rosen 2006).

The implications of social media for environmental politics are not well understood. To date, research has concentrated mainly on how environmental groups and activists utilize social media to build local and global environmental campaigns (Bortree and Seltzer 2009, Merry 2014, Katz-Kimchi and Manosevitch 2015, Hodges and Stocking 2016). Studies find that social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, are used by environmentalists (along with other online resources) to mobilize publics, build identity, disseminate information, promote offline activities, and raise funds (Mercea 2012, Hestres 2014, 2015). Of course, environmentalists are not alone in using social media for strategic ends. Various other actors, including individuals, groups, corporations, and institutions, engage on social media to influence stakeholders, public debate, and political outcomes (Waters *et al.* 2009, Bechmann and Lomborg 2012, White *et al.* 2015). Indeed, for many contentious political issues, especially environmental conflicts, social media has become an important stage for discursive contestation where multiple actors seek to shape and reframe meanings over contested issues. Yet, surprisingly little is known about how this meaning-making process is enacted on social media, particularly how social media platforms are shaping the way opposing views are presented and contested.

Here, we engage in these questions by analyzing how a divisive environmental controversy is ‘performed’ by conflicting groups on social media. Our analysis focuses on the use of Facebook in the controversial Narrabri Gas Project (NGP) – a proposed coal seam gas (CSG) project in eastern Australia. Like many unconventional gas disputes around the globe (see Duffy 2005, De Rijke 2013), this is a highly polarized controversy about the appropriate use and preservation of local resources such as gas, land, and water. More broadly, the NGP controversy speaks to global debates on energy security, fossil-fuel dependence, and climate change. As with most contemporary environmental conflicts, political contestation around the NGP takes place both online and offline.

To study how this controversy is performed on social media, we employ dramaturgy – a novel methodological approach in both empirical studies of new media and environmental politics. We view social media as a *stage* where political communication is performed, and use the dramaturgical concepts of scripting and staging to analyze six different Facebook pages active in the NGP controversy. On each page, we analyze the key narratives, central characters, imagined audiences, and props such as slogans, photos, sound bites, and films. We also consider the interactivity of each page, paying particular attention to how opposing sides of the controversy

interact with each other, if at all. Our analysis is qualitative; it draws on publicly available text and audio-visual material on each Facebook page, as well as interviews with key actors in the debate conducted by the authors in the region in November 2015.

We begin by briefly discussing some of the ways in which social media may be reconfiguring how environmental controversies are performed. Next, we present our dramaturgical framework for studying political contestation on social media, which is then applied to selected Facebook pages supporting and opposing the NGP. Drawing on the empirical analysis, we identify three core performative characteristics of environmental controversies on social media: multisensory, personal, and tightly scripted. We conclude by reflecting on the broader implications of these empirical insights for enacting environmental politics.

### **The implications of social media for enacting environmental politics**

Conflicts over environmental issues are typically rife with performative aspects. They involve contested languages, images, objects, and interactions (Szerszynski *et al.* 2003, Doyle 2007). Performances are also central to the way individuals, groups, and institutions shape meanings in environmental controversies (Hajer 2005). Empirical studies reveal how particular settings or social interactions in environmental politics (such as participatory forums or protests) can be highly scripted and staged in order to construct and reshape meanings (e.g., Barnett and Scott 2007).

The work of Benford and Hunt (1992) is particularly useful in understanding the performative dimensions of meaning making in political controversies. Using a dramaturgical lens, the authors discuss how social movements script (offline) performances, such as campaigns and rallies with core narratives, central characters, and audiences. Performing political contestation also involves recruiting a cast of supporting characters, who assist the performance, either on stage (e.g., at a rally) or behind the scenes. Benford and Hunt (1992) also draw attention to the dramaturgical devices that are used to construct the identities of characters, for example the performance may refer to a particular event and attribute blame to a group or institution. Labels or symbols may be used to depict particular characters in a certain light, for example protagonists may be viewed as victims while antagonists seen as immoral or evil. Props and symbols are also employed to evoke an appropriate emotion or mood. There is also an interactive element to the drama. Performances are often designed and managed in response to the actions (or counter-performances) of antagonists. According to Benford and Hunt (1992), this dynamic requires that the staging and scripting be tightly managed: characters need to exercise

‘dramaturgical discipline’ and remain ‘on message,’ while overly zealous actors may need to be reined in. Contingencies also need to be planned for in the event of unforeseen or counter-performances on center stage.

Today, political controversies are performed in a host of online and offline spaces. In this article, we are particularly interested in how environmental conflicts are performed on social media platforms because they ‘complicate what it means to be public, to address audiences, and to build publics and counterpublics’ (Baym and boyd 2012, p. 320). Indeed, we contend that there are some particular features of social media that potentially alter how political controversies are scripted and staged, and how audiences interpret these performances. In the first instance, political expression on social media is ‘experienced and performed through a variety of text, visual, audio and graphic communication forms’ (Loader and Mercea 2012, p. 5). These multisensory props can transport audiences into new ‘virtual’ settings, where they can ‘experience’ a toxic spill, or a pristine forest. Second, political communication on social media is often personal and personalized (Bennett and Segerberg 2011, 2012). Its effectiveness depends on the capacity of social networks to contribute and share content (Baym and boyd 2012). Third, the audiences on social media are imagined (Litt 2012); they can be invisible, constantly changing, and multiple. Audiences can also be vast. People may communicate one-to-one around user-generated content, but this may be conversation performed before large audiences (Marwick and boyd 2010). Competition for audience attention is also high, with many social media users watching multiple performances simultaneously (sometimes from the comfort of their own homes; Papacharissi 2010c). Fourth, social media sites can be interactive where audiences are able to participate actively in the performances. In some cases, audiences become characters in the performance by contributing scripts alongside the stage managers (site creators). In this respect, social media represents a ‘live theater stage’ (Corrigan and Beaubien 2013, p. 322). Finally, there is often a high degree of anonymity associated with some social media sites, and it can be unclear who is directing or managing the performance.

What these and other features of social media imply for environmental debates is unclear. They may change the political cartographies of environmental issues by injecting new ways of making sense of policy positions, and by presenting them in appealing ways to wider publics. Social media offers spaces for ‘informal talk’ where people make connections between their everyday lives and political or social issues (Wright *et al.* 2016), and thus it has the potential to enable more malleable and innovative forms of political expression, such as storytelling and the use of diverse audio and visual tools (Bennet and Toft 2010, Loader and Mercea 2012). And since audiences can co-produce scripts, question meanings, and reconfigure

debates, there is potentially greater political improvisation. These features suggest that social media could help facilitate broad dialogic communication (see Sweetser and Weaver Lariscy 2008, Bortree and Seltzer 2009, White *et al.* 2015), as well as open up space for new voices to enter debates and potentially form alternate alliances that cut across, or bridge, opposing positions.

However, there is still much empirical work required to understand the nature of political communication and exchanges in social media (Wright *et al.* 2016). One particular challenge in social media is staging performances that make sense to multiple audiences without ‘sacrificing coherence and continuity’ (Papacharissi 2010a, p. 307). It also remains unclear how the structure and communication protocols of social media sites (often shaped by commercial interests) are affecting the way networked publics communicate, with some studies finding they can hamper solidarity (Coretti and Pica 2015). There is also emerging evidence that social media sites tend to reinforce individuals’ existing views on the issue at stake rather than challenge or merge them (Bennett and Segerberg 2011, Hodges and Stocking 2016). In the area of environmental politics, research has focused more on social media communication within like-minded groups than between opponents; findings reveal that dialogical communication is rare (see, for instance, Bortree and Seltzer 2009, Merry 2014).

These preliminary empirical studies suggest that social media can open up, but also close down, political debate. How these dynamics play out in practice requires methodologies that enable in-depth analysis of political contestation in context. To this end, we turn to dramaturgy.

### **A dramaturgical approach to studying social media**

Dramaturgy is essentially concerned with the way people conduct and manage themselves in social situations (Goffman 1959, Manning 2005). A dramaturgical perspective views everyday behaviors and interactions as theatrical performances. As a social science methodology, dramaturgy can shed light on the way meanings emerge, change, and adapt in social interactions (Brissett and Edgley 1990). In political science, for example, researchers have used dramaturgical analysis to examine how meanings have been shaped by the staging, scripting, and setting of particular policy interactions (e.g., Hajer 2005, Hajer and Uitermark. 2008, Hendriks 2009).

Dramaturgy offers insights for empirical studies of social media because it is sensitive to the way actors stage and script their performances in relation and in response to prevailing performances. It also enables the analyst to study not only text, but also the way multimedia and other props are used to shape and convey meanings. Applying dramaturgical concepts to social media, however, is relatively novel, and to date, it has been mostly

applied to sociological rather than political questions, such as the presentation of ‘self’ online (e.g., Hogan 2010, Bullingham and Vasconcelos. 2013, Markham 2013). One of the few scholars to have applied dramaturgy to political uses of Facebook is Marichal (2013), who studied the setting, appearance and manner of 250 politically oriented Facebook groups. Whereas Marichal (2013) applied dramaturgy to analyze how users present and manage their own political identity on Facebook, our focus is how a political controversy is *scripted* and *staged* on Facebook pages, and how these performances shape meanings.

To operationalize the interrelated dramaturgical concepts of staging and scripting, we examine various dimensions of Facebook pages, as outlined in Table 1 – an analytic framework developed and adapted from Hajer (2005) and Benford and Hunt (1992). Our data extend beyond the textual content of each page (cf. Marichal 2013). We also analyze the audio and visual aspects of each page, focusing particularly on the colors, images, and symbols employed.

### Performing a controversy on Facebook: the NGP

The dramaturgical analysis centers on six Facebook pages associated with the controversy surrounding the proposed NGP situated in the Australian state of New South Wales (NSW). Historically, CSG production in NSW has mostly been limited to one project on the outskirts of Sydney. Despite the NSW government’s enthusiasm to develop other local supplies, CSG projects have been stymied by a number of factors, including community protest and a persistent lull in world oil prices. As of March 2016, the NGP remains the one proposed CSG project in NSW with a reasonable potential to go ahead (see Black 2016).

The proponent of the NGP, Santos, plans to develop 850 gas wells across approximately 1000 km<sup>2</sup>. The majority of the project area lies within the Pilliga State Forest, but it also includes some private agricultural land. If it

**Table 1.** Dimensions of dramaturgical analysis for online settings.

Dimension	Definition and questions
Scripting	<p>Creating a particular political effect by casting the characters in the performance and directing their expected behavior</p> <p>What is the central narrative?</p> <p>Who are cast as the main characters, and what role do they play in the performance?</p> <p>Who is the imagined audience?</p> <p>What happens to the scripting and performance in any discussion forums?</p>
Staging	<p>Organizing, managing, and directing materials and audiences to ensure that the performance ‘works’</p> <p>Who manages the performance?</p> <p>What role do they play on the stage (center or backstage)?</p> <p>What props, images, and sounds are used, and how?</p>

proceeds, the project is projected to supply the equivalent of between 25% and 50% of NSW's gas demand over an operational life of more than 20 years (Buckley 2014, Knox and Baulderstone 2014).

The controversy surrounding the NGP is highly polarized. Opponents include farmers, townspeople, and environmentalists whose concerns range from impacts on groundwater, the Great Artesian Basin and agriculture, to human health, climate change, the ecological values of the Pilliga Forest, light pollution from gas flares, and the potential for the project to expand further into the Pilliga and valuable farming land in the future. A number of local groups have formed to oppose the project, as well as more established state and national environmental groups being involved. In mid-2013, around 30 groups formed the North West Alliance – an umbrella organization of local and supporting groups that oppose coal and CSG in north-western NSW (The Wilderness Society 2013).

Those strongly supporting the project include Santos, some local residents, farmers, businesses, and contractors. Supporters of the NGP emphasize the economic benefit it would bring to the region and state, the supply of gas for NSW, and the strict regulations governing the proposed activities. In September 2014, the Narrabri-based group 'Yes2Gas From the Pilliga' was formed to contribute to the debate, and to counter the anti-CSG perspectives that were dominating public expression (Brown 2014). The current conservative coalition State Government also publicly supports the NGP project (e.g., Narrabri Courier 2015).

The controversy over the NGP project is performed in numerous offline and online spaces. This has encompassed many 'conventional' spaces such as print and electronic news media, parliamentary debates, council meetings, legislative inquiries and planning procedures, elections and political party room discussions, scientific inquiries and expert commissions, stakeholder forums, community meetings, and protests. At the same time, the controversy has been enacted in 'new' spaces, including Web sites, Facebook, blogs, Twitter, e-petitions, and YouTube films. In this article, we focus specifically on how the controversy is performed on Facebook, which we learned from interviews (conducted in November 2015) has been an important communicative space for many actors associated with the controversy. Facebook pages focused on the NGP debate began to appear in 2010, with numerous others launched in following years through until the end of 2015 – a trend that may well continue into the future. Although we focus on Facebook, we acknowledge the ongoing significance of a range of offline and online activities in the NGP controversy, and in ongoing research, we are exploring their interrelationships.

In our analysis, we examine two Facebook pages supporting the NGP, and four Facebook pages opposing the project (see Table 2). In total, there are currently around 20 Facebook pages that are entirely or significantly

**Table 2.** Selected Facebook pages in the NGP controversy.

Facebook page	Role in the controversy	Type of Facebook user	Friends/members (as at February 11, 2016)
Santos	Proponent of Project	Energy/utility	1379 likes (since March 2014)
Yes2Gas	Local group (Narrabri) supportive of Project	Community	776 likes (since Sept 2014)
People for the Plains	Local group (Narrabri) against Project	Community	1266 likes (since Jan 2014)
Coonabarabran Residents Against Gas	Local group (Coonabarabran) against Project	Public Group	1132 members (since Feb 2014)
Protecting the Pilliga	Regional group against Project	Non-profit Organization	6521 likes (since Oct 2013)
Chooks against Gas	Individual against Project	Personal blog	2172 likes (since June 2010)

dedicated to *opposing* the NGP. We selected the four opposition pages for our analysis on the basis of their focus on the NGP, diversity, and ongoing activity. However, elements from the numerous other oppositional pages are also included where relevant.

In each Facebook page, we examine how the controversy over the NGP is performed in terms of its scripting and staging. Our analysis considers the organizational description of the page, the imagery and text in the cover and profile images, the imagery and text of original and shared posts, as well as comments over a four-month period (between November 2015 and early March 2016). During this period, there were several on-ground protests in Narrabri, as well as at Santos sites located in and around the Pilliga Forest.

### **Santos**

The NGP is the only project for which Santos has a Facebook page. Santos's Facebook performance presents the NGP as an uncontroversial project with significant employment and economic benefits to the Narrabri community and surrounding region (Figure 1). Santos is portrayed as a locally focused and positive presence in the Narrabri community. The intended audience appears to be local farmers and residents, who are scripted as the beneficiaries of the project. In the page description, the benefits of the project are highlighted upfront – the project will deliver gas, jobs, and money to the region and NSW. There is no mention of Santos's business motives, such as anticipated profits, nor is there any mention of the controversy that surrounds the project.

At center stage of the Santos Facebook performance stands human relationships and community. These human connections are emphasized, while the actual gas production activities are minimized. Photos in the main



**Figure 1.** Cover image from Santos's Narrabri Gas Project Facebook page, captured 15 January 2016.

cover image, and in numerous posts, depict Santos as an integral 'part of the livelihood and social fabric of the local community. Central characters are friendly Santos staff who warmly engage with local people. This scripting is reinforced by the company's motto 'we have the energy,' which can be interpreted to mean 'we have the energy to engage with you.' Other posts reinforce the projection of Santos as Narrabri's benefactor, for example Santos sponsoring a scout group and sporting teams, or Santos staff shaving their hair for charity. Less prominent are posts more directly related to gas exploration and production; for instance, the audience is directed to a video of a groundwater expert, as well as to company statements and news articles.

Overall, Santos's NGP Facebook page seeks to depoliticize its controversial gas proposal. It does this by scripting a tight performance about Santos in the local community, and by largely avoiding direct reference to tensions or conflict. Santos also actively seeks to reframe how the debate is perceived. Consider, for example, the following post directing the audience to a company statement<sup>1</sup>:

If you have been following media and social media of late, it would be easy to conclude that the discussion around coal seam gas is an 'us versus them' debate, with resource companies on one side and those wanting to protect the environment on the other. Nothing could be further from the truth.

While the scripting of this page may be tight, the open architecture of Facebook makes it difficult for Santos to maintain strict dramaturgical discipline; some of its audience have left scathing comments. These provocative and mostly uncontrolled counter-scripts are an awkward fit on a corporate Facebook page. While some of the most inflammatory comments are regularly removed by the backstage administrator (according to the

page's 'house rules'),<sup>2</sup> there remain numerous comments that are critical of Santos and its supporters.

### Yes2Gas

The Facebook page 'Yes2Gas From the Pilliga' is the only one dedicated to community-level support for the NGP (Figure 2). Its central script is that the project offers numerous economic benefits for the local region. The central characters are 'everyday' locals who support the project, and who feature prominently on the cover image. While this is a performance that emphasizes 'the local,' the names and faces of those managing the Yes2Gas Facebook performance remain hidden backstage. Nonetheless, the audience does get to meet some individual supporters on the Facebook photo gallery from profile posters that have also appeared in local print media.

The intended audience for this performance includes local residents, business people, and farmers in the Narrabri region. In many respects, this page is staged as a counter-performance to various Facebook pages that oppose the NGP. Text and imagery are used to stage a 'no-nonsense' rational performance on the benefits of the project. For example, the main cover image depicts a checklist list of five key benefits of the project, as might be displayed in food labeling or advertising. The green background to the page creates an 'environmental' tone to the performance, as does the leading item on the list ('environmentally sound'). The self-described aim of the page is to provide 'accurate information' about the CSG project in the 'Pilliga Scrub' (our emphasis), thereby rectifying 'mis-information' about the project and its likely



Figure 2. Cover image from Yes2Gas Facebook page, captured 19 January 2016.



**Figure 3.** Infographic from NSW Trade and Investment displayed on the Yes2Gas Facebook page, captured 6 November 2015.

impacts, and the values of the area where it is proposed (scrub rather than forest). Numerous ‘infographics’ – visual representations of information – seek to educate the audience about the necessity and safety of CSG in NSW, and the soundness of Santos’s planned activities (see, for instance, [Figure 3](#)).

In contrast to the Santos page, the Yes2Gas performance portrays a drama with heroes and villains. Santos is cast as a benevolent central character offering prosperity. While antagonists are not front and center, their presence and casting in this performance is implied through particular content, such as posting and sharing newspaper articles critical of the anti-CSG movement (e.g., ‘Narrabri is “sick of CSG protestors” ’ on February 2, 2016). Comments and posts from antagonists regularly undermine the coherence of Yes2Gas’s Facebook performance. Our analysis suggests that these counter-scripts have been regularly removed by the page’s moderator; unlike Santos, the Yes2Gas group has less to worry about in terms of accusations of censorship.

### **People for the Plains**

People for the Plains is the main group opposing the NGP in the Narrabri region. The central script on its Facebook page ([Figure 4](#)) is that local rural people want to protect their valued industries, as well as land and water, from coal and CSG extraction. Although the area is officially known as the



**Figure 4.** Cover image from People for the Plains' Facebook page, captured 19 January 2016.

Liverpool Plains, the name of the group and the Facebook page omits 'Liverpool' from 'Plains,' relying on familiarity with the region and suggesting that the imagined audience is very local.

The central characters in this performance are the defiant people who oppose and fight fossil-fuel development, mostly within the northwest region of NSW, and who were shown to be out in force in a photo that formed the cover image between November 2015 and February 2016 – with around 200 people gathered with bright yellow protest signs. Other high-quality close-up images provide personal stories of individuals and families, who are holding signs declaring their home locality, in some cases their indigenous identity, and their main reason for opposing CSG. The style of dress in the photos further emphasizes the rural identity of these opponents, and the fact that they are protestors who do not fit traditional stereotypes of 'environmentalists.'

Overall, the People for the Plains performance is one that draws strongly on personalized content, projecting and appealing to local rural identity. At the same time, connections are made to other places and other issues, broadening the basis for the central script and highlighting the universal dimension of local concerns.

### ***Coonabarabran Residents Against Gas***

This is a Facebook performance hosted by the Coonabarabran Residents Against Gas (CRAG) (Figure 5) – a group of local residents from the town of Coonabarabran, 120 km south of Narrabri, located near the southern edge of the Pilliga Forest. Although Coonabarabran officially lies outside Santos's gas exploration area, many local residents are concerned about the impact of CSG on the region's groundwater, ecology, and local industries.



**Figure 5.** Cover image from Coonabarabran Residents Against Gas Facebook page, captured 19 January 2016.

The central script of the CRAG Facebook page is that CSG is detrimental to the future of Coonabarabran and the surrounding region.

The intended audience of ‘like-minded’ people is explicitly stated in the page’s description. The main cover image – a cartoon representation of Siding Spring Observatory nestled in the scenic Warrumbungle mountain range with a starry night above, competing with the light pollution from CSG gas flares – is unlikely to be recognizable to people not familiar with the area. Unlike the other pages analyzed, this page is a ‘Public Group,’ with more than 1100 members visible under the ‘members’ tab. In other words, the backstage performers are visible here. While this provides the potential for diverse, improvised performances, in practice the prolific posts (often several a day) are contributed almost exclusively by one person. Further, the majority of these posts are ‘shared’ from other Facebook pages, suggesting that a strong function of this page is to build, spread, and strengthen a sense of community, common knowledge, and overlapping storylines among networked groups and individuals. The protagonists who appear on this page are mostly those who are fighting CSG locally, many of whom are engaged in nonviolent direct action in the Pilliga Forest. Images of native animals also occasionally appear as characters on this page, scripted as victims in the CSG drama and expanding the boundaries of concern (see [Figure 6](#)). Santos and other CSG companies are clearly scripted as the antagonists on this stage. Comments that appear on some of the many posts are supportive of the page – it is unlikely that people with contrary opinions would voice them here.

Overall, the role of the CRAG Facebook page is the injection of a Coonabarabran voice into what is often framed as a ‘Narrabri’ project, and its service of connecting and updating like-minded people in the region.



**Figure 6.** Screenshot of video shared on CRAG Facebook page, captured 9 February 2016. Originally from Facebook page ‘No2Gas from the Pilliga.’

### *Protecting the Pilliga*

In contrast to the People for the Plains and CRAG Facebook pages, it is unclear what specific group is behind the Protecting the Pilliga Facebook page (Figure 7). However, it does appear to be linked to the main Web site dedicated to opposing CSG in the Pilliga Forest ([www.stoppilligacoalseamgas.com](http://www.stoppilligacoalseamgas.com)), and with more than 6500 ‘likes,’ of the six pages analyzed, it has attracted the largest number of supporters (see Table 2). This Facebook



**Figure 7.** Cover image from Protecting the Pilliga Facebook page, captured 15 January 2016.

page combines specific local concerns about the Pilliga Forest with broader agricultural issues in northwest NSW. The name of the group and the majority of posts focus on the Pilliga, while the cover and profile images focus on agricultural identities – including protestors on horseback and farmers holding a large protest banner. The central script on this page is that the Pilliga Forest is precious, the surrounding farmland is invaluable, and CSG poses an unacceptable risk to the ecology, groundwater, and communities. The intended audience for this page appears to be anyone who shares these broad concerns.

The majority of posts on this page are original and are focused on offline, on-ground protests, with many photos drawing the audience into the unfolding drama in the Pilliga Forest. These protestors (or ‘protectors’) are cast as the protagonists, while Santos is cast as the chief antagonist. Unlike the other anti-CSG Facebook pages analyzed here, there are at least occasional interjections from uncast characters with contrary views, and these comments appear to remain largely untouched by the backstage administrator of the page.

Overall, the performance creates a joint community of agriculturally and ecologically concerned people. As such, the performance enacted online seeks on the one hand to expand the controversy, and on the other to personalize, by celebrating and encouraging individual direct action.

### **Chooks Against GAS**

The Facebook page ‘Chooks Against GAS’ (Figure 8) provides a humorous and eccentric angle on the CSG debate that has attracted a relatively large number of ‘likes’ (2168 on February 2, 2016).

This page is an example of one not solely focused on the Narrabri region, but where opposition to Santos and the NGP is nonetheless prominent among the prolific posts (often numerous posts every day). The central script of this page is that CSG destroys land, air, and aquifers, and is contrasted with the simple and practical pleasure of keeping chickens in the backyard. There is a call for ‘chook lovers’ to ‘unite,’ to join Chooks Against Gas ‘in actively protecting our land . . . the land that grows the food for all Australians (and our chook grain!).’ The main cover image has changed several times in the span of a few months, demonstrating the playfulness and activity on this stage.

People in the posts on this Facebook page are described as ‘humans,’ as though from the perspective of a chicken – a character’s voice that is reinforced through the representation of a chicken’s face on each post made from common keyboard characters: <(<). The individual responsible for the performance remains backstage and operates more as a puppeteer. The profile image is a cracked egg, and the numerous photos attached to



**Figure 8.** Cover image from Chooks Against Gas Facebook page, captured 23 February 2016.

the page reveal colorful hand-sewn chickens as the deliberately constructed characters in this performance. Within the long description, the page advertises these chickens for sale – the anonymous chook maker behind this page appears to be running a small business in connection to their activism.

Overall, this Facebook page represents a deliberate performance with a quirky feminine tone that helps to personalize and soften the often militant edge of activism, expanding the issue to those who may not otherwise be engaged.

### **Discussion: multisensory, personal, and highly scripted performances**

The dramaturgical analysis of the selected Facebook pages reveals environmental controversies enacted on social media share many features with offline venues of political contestation. In the NGP case, we see how Facebook pages are scripted and staged to emphasize or support particular values (cf. Benford and Hunt 1992): they project particular frames, provide interpretations of events and decisions, assert particular ‘facts’ and contest others, promote particular events, and cast protagonists and antagonists to highlight the trustworthiness (or lack thereof) of key players. Similar to offline performances, social media performances can also be very place-based. The enactment of the NGP controversy on social media is surprisingly local; the imagined audiences are local residents and communities (rather than elites, experts, or decision makers). While some Facebook performances drew on data, information, and experiences from outside the region, social media is being used to mobilize local communities and shift local debates.

At the same time, the analysis demonstrates that social media is providing opportunities for diverse actors to participate in the performance of environmental controversies in multiple and innovative ways. In this study, the social media performances range from a highly stylized public relations efforts, for example Santos's NGP Facebook page, to relatively simple and low-budget pages, such those by Yes2Gas and the Chooks Against Gas. The dramaturgical analysis also demonstrates the diverse characters cast in the performances of environmental issues on social media, for example local farmers, businesses and their employees, women and children, as well as non-human entities such as native wildlife, chickens, and landscapes. These are not the typical characters that one might expect associated with a CSG project, such as engineers, elites, and elected officials.

The dramaturgical analysis sheds light on the dramatic and at times antagonistic politics that plays out on social media. By focusing our analysis on a local environmental controversy, we can observe the interplay and relationships between performances on different Facebook pages. There are numerous instances of where performances by protagonists on one side of the debate are aimed at answering the criticisms thrown by perceived antagonists. A number of Facebook pages are specifically staged as counter-performances to compete with other performances, either online or offline. On some pages, the response to these counter-performances is to co-opt the stage and rescript it. For example, the Yes2Gas Facebook page is designed as a counter-performance to Facebook pages opposing CSG; then, in response, anti-CSG actors have created two mock Yes2Gas Facebook pages, replicating the profile logo but with an anti-CSG script. Yet another anti-CSG Facebook page has based its name and logo on the Yes2Gas group – calling itself 'No 2 Gas from the Pilliga.'

Despite their various differences, the Facebook performances we examined share at least three common characteristics: they are multisensory, staged to appear personal, and tightly scripted.

Multisensory items feature prominently in the enactment of environmental controversies on social media. In our six Facebook pages, photos and film are used not only to mobilize support and build solidarity, but also to rescript the discursive and geographical contours of the controversy. For example, the anti-CSG performances are rich with images of people, protests, community gatherings, and rural settings to reframe the proposed project as a threat to livelihoods and land around Narrabri and beyond. Activists bring audiences into the Pilliga Forest through films of onsite protests, and seek to destabilize the notion of 'safe CSG' by circulating images of people and places affected by CSG activities from around Australia and globally. Similarly, pro-CSG Facebook pages use audio and visuals to rescript the debate: they present groundwater experts attesting the safety of CSG extraction, and depict farmers and communities working

together with the gas industry to show how CSG can mutually exist with agriculture and local business.

There is a very personal dimension to the way environmental controversies are staged and performed on social media. The identities, voices, and images of ordinary people are crafted into personal stories for the audience to relate to. The staging of human relationships is perhaps not that surprising given the importance of personal networks for distributing social media content (Bennett and Segerberg 2011, 2012). In the NGP case study, opposing sides of the environmental controversy use personalized staging to different effect. The anti-CSG Facebook performances appear improvised and organic, but interviews with local activists suggest that there is a kind of 'strategic personalization' occurring where pages are deliberately scripted by individual activists and groups to appeal to the personal. As one activist explained to us, 'it's gotta be personal.'<sup>3</sup> One effect of this personalized scripting is that the performance of the controversy is emotional and passionate; it is framed as an existentialist battle to save 'our land, our water, our children's futures.' In contrast, the Santos Facebook page scripts 'the personal' to depoliticize the controversy. It uses images and text to script a performance in which a resource company works productively side-by-side with farmers, businesses, and the local community. Its performance includes stories of Santos staff involved in charity events, community functions, and generous sponsorship of local sporting teams and individuals.

The third common characteristic of performing environmental contestation on social media is a coherent script underpinned by strong dramaturgical discipline. This is surprising given that social media offers a networked, interactive, and potentially improvised platform of political communication. Yet, in almost all of the Facebook pages we studied in the NGP case, the performance is tightly scripted, with a predictable cast of characters and a target audience. Different factors appear to hold the performance together and keep the script 'on message.' On Santos's NGP Facebook page, the coherence of the script is held together by communicative rules (executed by the page manager) on what is and what is not acceptable. On other Facebook pages, such as the Yes2Gas page, the coherence of the script is held together by strong group norms about 'the problem,' 'the antagonist,' and what needs to be done. One consequence of such tight scripting is that there is limited room within the performance for questioning and contestation. When counter-scripts appear on the virtual stage we observed that they are regularly censored, removed, ignored, or vilified.

It is important to note a significant discrepancy between the presence and agility of actors from different sides of the NGP controversy on Facebook. The anti-CSG actors appear to dominate the Facebook stage

in terms of the number of pages, the number of individuals who regularly post and/or comment, their creative use of the technology, and possibly also their success at feeding a broader public narrative. There may be demographic, cultural, and political economic factors influencing this phenomenon, and it is a question worthy of closer investigation. The dramaturgical approach used in our analysis helps to provide at least part of the explanation. The anti-CSG actors are more accustomed and at ease with performing their politics before public audiences. They script compelling drama with local protagonists and victims. They vilify antagonists, and use powerful imagery and slogan to change meanings. Overall, it is the local and grass-roots anti-CSG community groups who are most adept at using the dramaturgical affordances of social media.

## Conclusion

Social media provides an active and dynamic stage for contemporary environmental politics. It represents not only a platform for mobilizing global environmental campaigns, but also a stage upon which local communities are seeking to reshape and influence place-based controversies. Here, we have shed light on this meaning-making aspect of social media through a dramaturgical analysis of a local environmental controversy performed on Facebook. We developed and applied a novel framework to analyze the scripting and staging of six Facebook pages associated with a divisive CSG controversy in eastern Australia. Our analysis finds that performances of environmental politics on social media are multisensory, staged to appear personal, and tightly scripted. Images, photos, and films are used to contest the geographical and discursive boundaries of the gas project. Performances are staged to appear personal; ordinary people and townsfolk are cast center stage, and the performances rely heavily on their stories and experiences. Perhaps most surprisingly, we find scripts on Facebook are tight and coherent. There is little improvisation, and when counter-scripts interrupt the main performance, responses can be uncivil or ignored. Our research has focused specifically on the performances of environmental politics on social media. Broader questions remain about how the politics performed on social media is connected to offline debates and activities (see Bennet and Toft 2010). The interaction between the online and offline worlds and their effect on political decisions are themes we are investigating in ongoing research.

Our dramaturgical analysis suggests that social media sites enable like-minded 'networked publics' to form, but they provide little opportunity for these parallel enclave communities to meet and interact. The performances we analyzed on Facebook were more aimed at building solidarity

(by sharing information and stories) and antagonizing opponents than forming bridges across deep community divisions. Indeed, there is little evidence in our case study of diverse perspectives coming together to engage in reasoned open public debate, as some green democratic theorists would hope (e.g., Eckersley 2000, Dryzek 2010). In most Facebook pages we studied, characters with contrary scripts are not made to feel welcome in the first instance, and when they exert their presence, they can be cast out, censored, or excluded. Our analysis also found that social media provides very few opportunities for open public debate and critical questioning of core assumptions in controversies. This conclusion may well be a product of the divisive nature of our case study, and is one that accords with empirical studies of online climate change politics (see Schäfer 2012). It may be that for polarized issues, the performative characteristics of social media make bridging across difference particularly difficult. Further research could usefully explore this phenomenon by comparing different types of environmental controversies.

Normatively speaking, although it is important to enact environmental politics in ways that encourage diverse positions to productively come together (Dryzek 2010), the formation of like-minded enclaves may actually benefit some environmental issues. In the case studied here, the anti-CSG groups represent weaker interests in the face of strong fossil-fuel dependence and political concerns about energy security for the state of NSW. For such groups, the formation of online enclaves offers a resource-effective way to build movements and reach large audiences (Horton 2004), and potentially reflects the ‘more level playing field’ of the web compared to news media (Gavin 2010). Indeed, one of the strengths of Internet technologies for politics is the way they remove the physical constraints of forming publics over vast geographical distances, or between administrative boundaries. Not having to meet face-to-face means that people can participate in environmental controversies without the burden of being physically present. For some high-profile environmental issues, such as climate change, the Internet has given rise to new kinds of networked advocacy organizations, such as 350.org (Hestres 2015). In our more place-based controversy, what we find is that the Internet, particularly Facebook, is providing ‘meeting spaces’ where dispersed and often disenfranchised publics can connect, and share stories and strategies.

Overall, this study suggests that social media sites such as Facebook have the potential to extend the boundaries of where and how publics form and meet, especially through the use of alternative repertoires and symbols. However, their capacity to transform polarized debates and bridge opposing viewpoints on divisive environmental issues remains limited. The architecture of the networked publics mediated through social media encourages

horizontal forms of interaction. Yet, in the case of divisive environmental issues, it is the tightly scripted performances that define the scope of such interactions.

## Notes

1. A company post to Santos' NGP Facebook page on 18 February 2016. <https://narrabrigasproject.com.au/2016/02/careful-custodians/> Accessed 19 February 2016
2. See 'House Rules', <https://www.facebook.com/santosnsw/app/208195102528120/> Accessed 19 February 2016
3. Interview conducted by two of the authors with local CSG activist in Coonabarabran, 24 November 2015.

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