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IMAGINED PUBLICS AND ENGAGEMENT AROUND RENEWABLE ENERGY TECHNOLOGIES IN THE UK

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of the imperatives for actors within the institutional framework of energy socio-technical systems to engage with the public, the aim of this paper is to consider interdependencies between the principles and practice of engagement and the nature of the imagined publics with whom engagement is being undertaken. Based on an analysis of 19 interviews with actors in the renewable energy industry, the paper explores how publics are imagined in the construction of the rationales, functions and mechanisms for public engagement. Three main themes are identified. First, the perceived necessity of engagement - which is not contingent on public responsiveness. Second, engagement is primarily conceptualised in terms of instrumental motives of providing information and addressing public concern. Third, preferences for engagement mechanisms were often a function of the specific characteristics attributed to imagined publics. Implications of this analysis for future engagement around siting renewable energy technologies are considered.

Introduction

Public engagement is often considered to be a good thing. As governments worry about the 'democratic deficit' of institutions remote from citizens, so a raft of initiatives have been proposed to engage the public in the hope of increasing both the legitimacy of institutions and public satisfaction across various domains of public life. In the public policy arena the watchwords of responsive public services (Cabinet Office, 1999) and civic renewal (Civil Renewal Unit, 2003; Blunkett, 2003) continue to shape practice. Following the now seminal House of Lords (2000) report, in developing policy options around innovations in science and technology it is increasingly routine for commitments to be made to solicit or attend to the views of the public. In relation to the environment, the right to public involvement was crystallised in the Aarhus Convention (United Nations, 1998) which embodied a commitment to 'access to information, participation in decision-making, and access to justice on environmental matters'. Similarly, in the UK the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution (RCEP) drew attention to the requirement to develop 'more direct methods to ensure that people's values, along with lay knowledge and understanding, are articulated and taken into account alongside technical and scientific considerations' (RCEP, 1998). In all these areas however, public engagement - both in theory and in practice – is attended by a range of reservations and dilemmas (Irwin, 2007, Petts, 2008, Stirling, 2005, Wilsdon and Willis, 2004) often relating to the concern that institutional public engagement is more about smoothing the path of potentially contentious technologies than about ensuring better decision making. Wynne (2003) for example, notes the way in which deficit models of public understanding of science continue to be re-created within public engagement initiatives. From a planning perspective Owens (2000, 2004) notes the weakness of engagement processes that have limited capacity for the expression of conflict and counter argument suggesting that this will in turn diminish the capability of the public to stimulate policy learning.

In this context we are interested in how practices of engagement are evolving within the specific domain of renewable energy project development. The aim of the paper is to focus on the discourses of key industry actors with commercial interests in the siting of renewable energy technologies in order to consider how these reveal interdependencies between the principles and practice of engagement and the nature of the imagined publics with whom engagement is being enacted. In order to lay the foundation for our empirical analysis we will first note the regulatory imperatives to engage with lay publics around the siting of renewable energy technologies (RETs) and highlight key insights from previous work reflecting on the value of engagement in this area. We will then outline our approach to delineating the concepts of engagement and the public and discuss other work that has drawn out the ways in which models of the public are revealed in claims about engagement. Finally, the conceptual framework for the current analysis will be introduced.

Engagement with the public around siting renewable energy technologies

In setting the scene for the current analysis, one practical dilemma around engagement well described by Williams (2004, para 2.18) is particularly relevant. "On the one hand (public agencies) must seek to involve and respond to the views of the public. On the other, they will seek to promote and fulfil central and local political and bureaucratic agendas." In the context of global warming the political agendas for increasing UK reliance on renewable energy technologies (RETs) in the UK are particularly strong. The UK government has stated that RET development will make a key contribution to the goal of cutting carbon dioxide emissions by 60% by 2050 and must make clear progress towards this goal by 2020 (Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), 2007a). Alongside this, the UK government

revised the target to provide 10% of UK electricity by renewable energy aspiring to double that level by 2020 (Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (BERR), 2008). Most recently, the UK renewable energy strategy aim is to reach a 30% target by 2020 (Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC), 2009).

One dimension of this development trajectory is the increasing range of explicit requirements for, and advice about, public engagement during the siting of RETs. The direct imperative for developers to engage stems from the regulatory infrastructures around both energy and planning. This is reflected in the stance of both the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) (now DECC), and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) (now Communities and Local Government (CLG)). Local community engagement and support is seen as key to the continued development and the increasing deployment of renewables (DTI, 2003). Early engagement with local communities is seen to be 'reflected in lower costs, fewer delays and less uncertainty in the planning process' (DTI, 2007a, p.259). The planning perspective is encapsulated within a series of planning policy statements, where developers of renewable energy projects are enjoined to "engage in active consultation and discussion with local communities at an early stage in the planning process, and before any planning application is formally submitted." (ODPM, 2004a: p.7). The most recent Planning White Paper states that 'there must be full and fair opportunities for public consultation and community engagement' (HM Government, 2007: p.20). Furthermore, these regulatory requirements have been translated into best practice guidance protocols around specific RETs (British Wind Energy Association (BWEA), 1994; South West Renewable Energy Agency (REGENSW) 2004; DTI, 2007b, DTI, 2007c).

Research has noted the value of engagement in facilitating positive public attitudes to the process of siting RETs. Negative emotions and assessments of the project as well as the

triggering of active opposition are invariably associated with being marginalised in decision making processes and having concerns ignored - even when the engagement options are framed in terms of communication and consultation (Haggett, 2008). Similarly, Wolsink (2007: 2694) noted that, 'if local interests are not given a voice in the decision-making processes, conditional supporters may turn into objectors'. Devine-Wright (2005) and Loring (2007) similarly highlight the relationship between active local involvement and positive public perceptions.

Engagement and the public

How engagement is constructed - what it denotes, what its aims are and claims about how it is done - is a core focus of our analysis. To locate the subsequent discussion the categorisation scheme proposed by Rowe and Frewer (2000) is useful in broadly distinguishing between three foci of engagement: communication, consultation and participation. These are differentiated by virtue of the flow of information that occurs between the parties and its significance in the decision-making process. Communication involves one way information flow from the 'sponsor' to the public and feedback is not sought. Consultation may involve two way information flow but the information flows back without there being any dialogue. Participation involves a two way exchange of information between sponsor and public with the possibility for transformed opinions in both parties. Mechanisms which embody these principles range from the more traditional (e.g. public meetings, surveys) through to those that encourage early involvement and partnership (e.g. citizen forums and deliberative polls) (McComas, 2001; Horlick Jones, Walls, Rowe, Pidgeon *et al.,* 2007). We are thus interested in the ways in which those that have responsibilities for siting renewable energy technologies construct the formal opportunities

for communication, consultation or participation that they instigate. One dimension of this involves a consideration of the rationales for engagement implied in these constructions: are they normative, substantive or instrumental? (Fiorino, 1990). Stirling (2005: p.220) notes that:

> Under a normative view, participation is just the right thing to do. From an instrumental perspective, it is a better way to achieve particular ends. In substantive terms, it leads to better ends.

Alongside this, we are interested to discern models of 'the public' that are implicated in constructions of engagement. The public is heterogeneous, there are multiple publics (Renn, 2006); where some see benefits others see reason for dispute and the rationales for both may vary widely (Gross, 2007). Whilst thus being ambiguous and fluid, the category of the public is also socially and politically meaningful (Sheller 2004, Staeheli and Mitchell, 2007).

Models of the public

Whether explicit or implicit, or whether focusing on acceptance or opposition, a dominant frame for conceptualising public responses to siting issues has involved the concept of NIMBYism (Not In My Back Yard) (Burningham, Barnett & Thrush, 2006). Schively (2007) notes the range of meanings that attach to the term – most often involving characterising people as self interested, uninformed and unrepresentative of the community they are part of. The validity of this model of the public has been critically examined (Burningham, 2000, Burningham *et al.* 2006, Wolsink, 2006) and latterly McClymont and O'Hare (2008) have noted the danger of the activities of groups labelled as NIMBY being viewed as 'bad' participation when juxtaposed against the 'good' participation instigated by government.

The main focus of this paper is upon identifying the models of the public that are visible in key actors' conceptualisations of engagement around siting RETs. This aim can be situated in relation to a small but growing literature around models of publics held by scientific experts and others in powerful positions who, by virtue of these, are able to 'act on' the public. Examples of how the public are constructed as 'other' are provided in the work of Burchell (2007) and Michael and Brown (2005). Michael and Brown suggest that these constructions of the public are instantiated through the enactment of engagement processes, which they term "formalized mechanisms of voicing" (2005: p.51). This link between models of the public and preferences for engagement processes is also noted by Schultz, Braun and Griessler (2007). In the context of public engagement around genetic science, they note that particular methods of elicitation - namely citizen juries and focus groups – are used to construct the movement of "pure publics" to "informed" citizens (p. 116). Stilgoe (2007) too makes the link between expert models of engagement and models of publics while Davies (2008a, 2008b) notes the value of considering expert constructions of engagement (specifically of communication) and the way in which these simultaneously construct those being communicated (or engaged) with. Barnes *et al.* (2003) have extended this exploration to a consideration of public participation relating to provision of public services   This notion that publics are constructed in engagement is neatly encapsulated in the notion of 'imagined lay persons' (Maranta, Guggenheim, Gisla, & Pohl, 2003). The authors contend that "the conceptions that the experts have of the lay person ...affect how feasible interactions are framed" (p.151) and that "the interactions of experts and lay persons are structured by the place ascribed to the latter in the models and theories of experts" (p.152). One way in which imagined lay persons are made visible is through expert "products and actions". Engagement is one such product. The following analysis explores expert constructions of engagement with

a view to exploring the extent to which they are contingent upon models of publics (or imagined lay persons) and, where they are, to discern what these models (or imaginings) are.

Method

The data set for this analysis consists of 19 interviews with key actors in the renewable energy industry from England, Scotland and Wales undertaken in between October 2006 and March 2007. They were involved with the process of producing and siting RETs as developers, manufacturers, consultants and marketing and PR people and are thus commercially committed to the success of such ventures. They were involved with at least one of the technologies of wind power, biomass energy, marine energy (tidal and wave) and solar energy. These 19 were drawn from a larger corpus of 42 interviews (see Walker, Cass, Burningham and Barnett, *in press*) and were chosen as they exemplify roles that are integral to the practical implementation of RET.

A semi structured interview schedule explored 4 areas: the likely growth trajectories of different renewable energy technologies; the influence of the public on RET development; public responses to, and understanding of, RET; and public engagement processes. The latter area, most relevant to the current study, explored the following questions:

1. What is the value, if any, for your company interacting with the public?

2. What is the experience of your company in this area?

3. What do you think are the best ways of interacting with the public?

4. Do you think there are any better ways of involving the public than you currently do?

Interviews lasted between 60-90 minutes.

Where quotes are used to illustrate the analytic points, interviewees are identified in relation to their primary and, where applicable, secondary role category.

- Table 1 about here -

The transcribed material provided a rich, detailed source of information for analysis. The interview transcripts were coded by two members of the research team using Max QDA2 software. A combination of manual and computerised analysis was used by the authors to develop the analysis in more detail. Established techniques of thematic coding (Braun and Clarke, 2006) were used to capture the key points, positions and opinions that were expressed. Interpretations were developed looking at both converging and diverging views within the themes.

Results:

The data were analysed with a view to examining when and how, if at all, the imagination of lay persons is related to the ways that engagement is viewed and practised. The analysis identified three main themes: the necessity of engagement; the essence of engagement; and, the mechanisms of engagement.

The necessity of engagement

There was a clear consensus across interviewees that engagement with the public was necessary if not essential. Engaging with the public was considered as a core part of being a responsible developer; as normal, reasonable and as making commercial sense. None of the interviewees took the position that engagement should not be done or that it was a waste of time.

> I think the main impact on developers is the potential negative impact of not doing it rather than a positive impact of doing it. So doing it is kind of expected and its part of due process I think for the planning system. (Interview 19 Consultant)

> Well I think engagement with the public is absolutely vital and you do that from an earliest stage as possible. (Interview 22 Manufacturer)

Of course highlighting the theme that engagement is seen as normal and necessary begs the question of what activities are seen to constitute engagement and the purposes it serves. For now we can simply note the implicit clues to this in the quotes provided and we will consider it more systematically below.

Importantly responsive publics were not seen as a necessary precondition of engagement. Unresponsive publics were experienced and anticipated but this model of the public did not impinge on willingness to pursue engagement practices. Interviewees provided a range of examples of the continuation of engagement practices in the face of disinterested or apathetic public reactions. Although the necessity of engagement *per se* was warranted without reference to the public, in contrast, the *limitations* of engagement were often attributed to a lack of reciprocity on the part of the public. In the following quote this is seen to be the lot of a responsible developer.

> Well you can consult in the sense you can put yourself out there, but people have got to turn up and so on, so there are limits to what you can actually achieve that way. But that's what we try and do and I think other responsible developers do the same. (Interview 4 Developer)

The engagement efforts of developers were rarely seen as being met half way by the public, although one advantage of persisting in the face of apparent disinterest is that it can provide

evidence of accountability. In the following quote the developer was reflecting on the lack of response from the public.

> But that shouldn't stop you doing it. Because then if someone turns round and says but you didn't do this and you didn't do that, then probably I say well here is our record.
> (Interview 7, Developer & Marketing/PR)

Claims about the possible *impacts* of not engaging were also warranted in relation to the nature of publics and their likely responses. In the following quote the first speaker claims the negative consequences of not engaging and the second speaker rather wistfully contrasts this with the more unusual situation of an absence of engagement resulting in satisfactory outcomes.

> Interviewee 1: As well as the fact that if you go in cold and you try and squirrel something through quietly, then you are likely to get a backlash of opposition because they think you've got something to hide.
>
> Interviewee 2: Well yes that's true but we do know of some companies that have done it and got away with it and the project's consented with, virtually nobody known about it until it's got built, so we do constantly review this, what is its value to the organization. (Interview 40, Marketing and PR & Developer)

Although not engaging was not an option, *when* to engage then becomes a dilemma. In the following quote a strong image of a capricious public heightens this.

> You know () if you put your head above the parapet too soon it's going to get blown off and you'll never recover. If you leave it too late then you know, you'll find a swell of misunderstanding and misconception out there which is terribly difficult to

break down again so it, it becomes an art and I think it depends very much on the circumstances.

(Interview 5 Developer & NGO/Trade Association)

Good outcomes (largely relating to the diffusion of public objections and getting planning permission) were linked to "huge amount of public engagement at the right time" (Interview 2 Developer & Consultant). Interestingly, suboptimal engagement processes were rarely held to be responsible for less satisfactory outcomes, the reasons rather being located around such contextual constraints as the development itself being ill conceived or under resourced, the presence of active pressure groups or unreasonable and emotional councillors on planning committees (Cass and Walker, 2009); the nature of the site or the actual location of the problem being elsewhere (e.g. increased weight of traffic on local roads).

The essence of engagement

Thus far we have noted that claims about the necessity of engagement beg the question as to what it is envisaged to be. Here we address this question directly and consider how, if at all, the way in which engagement is conceptualised relates to the imagined characteristics of lay publics.

Two sub themes were identified that exemplify the essence of engagement: the provision of information and the reduction of concern. Our use of the word 'essence' here is intended to convey that these twin foci could be distilled from a broad range of claims made by the interviewees, and were not simply evident in explicit claims about the aims of engagement.

Information provision is almost invariably depicted as the essenceof engagement and often seen as key to acceptance of RET. The imagined lay public were primarily envisaged as

requiring, and sometimes as requesting, information. Similarly, negative reactions of lay publics were sometimes attributed to the unsatisfactory provision of information, either in terms of its content or its timing. The communication of information was central even where ostensibly the focus was on consultation or other more two-way engagement processes.

> I started the public consultation process on that in November 2005 and it went into planning in May 2006 so we've had about a six month lead-in time. And so that means a process really of trying to inform the local community on what the proposals are for the site and we do that in a variety of different ways so that we can give them an opportunity to feed into the planning process, to understand what their concerns and issues might be, to see if we can address them in the site design if possible although the reality of that is it can be difficult if you have constraints that you've identified but we do try to sort of take on board people's comments. If there are improvements that we can make we try to make them.
>
> (Interview 1 Developer)

The focus on information provision was largely justified in pragmatic terms. It provided a focus for day to day activity. It enabled publicity and enabled assessments of public understanding and of the nature of concerns. Information provision provided a focus for exchange of views and for framing the questions of those to whom the information was being provided.

> We go to the site, mainly the roads that back on to the wind farm, and we basically go door to door and provide all the information to them.
>
> (Interview 7 Developer & Marketing)

Information provision was linked to a model of lay publics where opposition is explicable in terms of knowledge deficiency. There were a range of explicit claims about the nature and

extent of low levels of public knowledge attributable to 'myth, media and misinformation' (Burningham, Barnett and Walker, 2008). The quote below provides an example of links between information provision and shortcomings in lay publics.

> I think all we'd really want is people at large to understand the issues and the choices and then hopefully make an informed decision....And if they had all that information available, then they might come to similar decisions, choices that we've come to.
>
> (Interview 6 Developer)

Although heterogeneity of preferences and abilities of the lay publics was acknowledged, there was a single pragmatic focus on information provision albeit manifest in different media or mechanisms.

> Unfortunately it's all those things because people are all different and they learn in different ways. So some people learn best through the written word. Some people learn best through audio. Some people learn best by touching so it is a mixture and it's always a case of what can you afford and compromising between what's the most effective and what you can afford to do because I would say the most effective is to do every single possible kind of information and perhaps the most effective is face to face, one to one but I haven't got time to go round and see six million people.
>
> (Interview 19 Consultant)

It seems that having information provision as the focus of engagement (with the implicit if not explicit model of limited public understanding that this implied) constrained the willingness to undertake engagement early on in the siting process. Interviewees provided examples of when this was likely to be unwise or counterproductive. For example it was claimed that there was no point in telling people something very early in the (pre) planning

process when it might all have to change later or may never come about. The focus on information provision thus seems to preclude consideration of a model of engagement that involved an early exchange of views.

> We need to be very prepared for a lot of different questions and some of which in the normal course of events you wouldn't address (until) much further down the line. This is why planning applications in particular are so expensive because you've got to invest in a whole lot of stuff up front which isn't really, it's neither here nor there in terms of decisions on the economics of a project or, or actual real differences to whether a project should go ahead or shouldn't. .... You get involved with things like monoculture. Well that's not really anything to do with a power plant and it's almost inevitable that actually what will happen will be something different from that plan anyway because it's only a plan.
>
> (Interview 5 Developer & NGO/Trade Association)

Alongside the framing of engagement as a response to 'not knowing enough', the construction of the imagined publics as concerned and the framing of engagement (or more specifically of information provision) as a response to concern, was similarly clear.

> Well it is a two-way thing, because you've got to discover what are their concerns and their fears. And they do start to repeat themselves. And you've got to basically be able to answer questions. What they want is an answer, and you've got to be able to give them an answer. Now some people don't necessarily like having an answer to everything because then they don't have an argument anymore. But other people are obviously reassured by having... an answer to the question that they want to ask.
>
> (Interview 9 Developer)

I'm always trying to sort of like extract out of what people are opposing as being sort

of what is the issue. What's the thing that is concerning them? Because if we expose the thing that is concerning them we can do something about it. So they maybe say I don't want them there. Well they don't want them there because, well why? Because of what? Is it because you think they're noisy? You can present information and you can understand you can do something about it.

(Interview 20 Consultant)

Although the public with whom they were interacting could readily be constructed as a concerned public, it was also clear that this concept was further differentiated in terms of the validity of the concern and how readily (or indeed whether) it could be addressed. Concerns that could be addressed were often seen as understandable concerns. This was contrasted with situations where people were blinkered or would not change their mind or where it was evident that they simply wished the facility could be sited elsewhere. In the quote below 'misconceptions' were contrasted with 'rational' concerns yet both of them were seen as being addressed, either interpersonally or more formally, in the engagement processes around siting.

It's basically people may have misconceptions which it's very useful to deal with them on a one-on-one basis and it's people who may sort of say well have you thought about this and we think right, that's not a question to address in Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA).... If we can't explain it rationally or we can't deal with it then it means we will take it away and actually deal with it properly and most of the, all the concerns which are rational concerns and can't be, can't just on a one-on-one basis, we do actually log and do address those in the EIA process.

(Interview 23 Manufacturer)

The landscape of public concerns was considered familiar territory. Concerns were mainly characterised as being about visual or noise issues or relating to traffic. In part the expression of such concerns was responded to directly by providing information, installing particular types of monitoring equipment or adjusting design issues.

> We're very sensitive as I mentioned before about trying to keep separation distances, I mean we normally specify separation distance as about eight hundred metres between the nearest house and the nearest turbine which is a fair old distance actually when you see it on the ground and reasons for that are we don't want to place turbines too near to dwellings for concerns of noise. I think we could go much closer than eight hundred metres and still not have a noise issue with most of our sites but also concerns over the issues of dog owners and things like that...we don't want them too close to houses. It's not going to be good practice really.

> (Interview 1 Developer)

It was also clear that these concerns were sometimes taken into account ahead of any expression of them in a way that actually informed the initial layout and position of the planned site (Walker *et al*., *in press).*

Mechanisms of engagement

In this final section we turn the focus to consider the ways in which preferences for particular mechanisms for engagement – 'technologies of elicitation' (Lezaun and Soneryd, 2007) – relate to the characteristics of imagined lay publics.

The key debate here was around the virtues of engaging people through exhibitions rather than public meetings. The juxtaposition of these two processes was routinely used as the

frame for articulating preferences for engagement practices and as we shall see, this framing

served to reinforce both the aims of engagement and the characteristics of publics.

Exhibitions were considered vastly preferable and this reasoning was generally anchored

either to the likely actions of people in public meetings (e.g. immature debate, haranguing,

shouting) or to the fact that the format of exhibitions lent themselves more successfully to the

provision of information, a measured exchange of views and the attenuation of concern and

conflict.

The contention that public meetings were problematic was warranted in several ways. They

were seen as inviting or encouraging unmanageable confrontation and as often degenerating

into personal attacks. Public meetings were considered to set an "agenda based on being

against" (Interview 41 Marketing/PR & Consultant) and to invite negative (and thus biased)

views.

> The "Oh my God, I'm going to stoop to anything I can to stop that" brigade are the
>
> ones who turn out at meetings. So by definition those meetings are biased. () We
>
> almost always try to avoid them. () We do displays, where we will hire the village
>
> hall and we'll put up a display and then we hope a group of people turn up who can
>
> then talk one to one, or one to a small group of people. That seems to work
>
> reasonably well. It defuses antagonism – people are, literally and physically, on the
>
> same level.
>
> (Interview 4 Developer)
>
> We go out and we turn up at the meeting and there's generally forty or fifty people
>
> there ready to shout at you and that's unfortunately how it goes...It doesn't seem that
>
> we can enter into some sort of mature debate perhaps, it tends to degenerate into a bit

of a, well here you are, you're the developer looking to make money and we're not

happy about it.

(Interview 1 Developer)

There was a clear consensus, not only that public meetings were unhelpful and unpleasant,

but also that exhibitions ensured effective engagement and were more likely to lead to a

"sensible conclusion" (Interview 20 Consultant).

Where we would normally get involved is where there are public exhibitions and most

developers will undertake public exhibitions as part of the EIA process to sort of

make sure there is () effective public engagement with it.

(Interview 20 Consultant)

Exhibitions were considered to facilitate the provision of information through the distribution

of exhibition materials, leaflets and handouts. For some, one way communication of the

developer perspective was the clear focus of exhibitions.

(Exhibitions) where the local residents or whoever are welcome to come along () and

so the marketing even gets involved in that as well and where we set out what our

proposals are, what the benefits to the local economy are etcetera, but it's an

opportunity for people to understand what we're trying to achieve really.

(Interview 6 Developer)

For others, exhibitions enabled a focus on one to one contact with the public that facilitated

the provision of explanations and answers to questions and the opportunity to take on board

suggestions. There were mixed views about the extent of substantive change that was

possible via exhibitions. For some they were simply the public face of the renewable

industry and not necessarily useful. Others were sensitive to the space that exhibitions may (or may not) afford for lay publics to make a difference.

> Sometimes, if it's a small project and there's very little opportunity for changing, we will () either do it just before the application goes in or just after because we know there's not really any real opportunities to consult people and to do it and tell people we're consulting with them to change the project when we know we're not you know, is just not morally correct so where there is () very little opportunity to change the overall design, it's more an informing exhibition than a consultation exhibition.
>
> (Interview 40 Marketing/PR & Developer)

Other engagement modes mentioned by two interviewees were focus groups and the internet. The themes noted above were also evident here. One of the benefits of focus groups was that they enabled access to the views of the broader community: "the mildly interested but not vociferous either for or against" (Interview 40 Marketing/PR & Developer). The internet was also considered as an interface with the public and it was noted that this could filter out some unwanted contact and phone calls.

Interviewees thus claimed that the choice of engagement mechanism afforded opportunities to affect who was being engaged with or the nature of the engagement itself. It could enable less extreme views to be voiced and could facilitate more reasoned one to one interactions. Antagonism or conflict could be diffused and rendered less visible.

Discussion and Conclusions

We have highlighted three analytic themes that are relevant to the proposition that expert constructions of engagement are contingent upon their models of the public. On the basis of a series of interviews with industry actors with commercial interests in the siting of RETs we

have argued that it is important to identify the ways in which these 'experts' act as 'lay person makers' (Maranta *et al.,* 2003: 152) as these imagined publics shape motives for, and preferred mechanisms of, engagement.

We have suggested that the relationship between constructions of engagement and constructions of the public was implicated in how engagement objectives and mechanisms were viewed, but did not determine whether or not engagement should take place at all. Engagement was considered to be a reasonable expectation of normal business conduct and was anchored to notions of good practice, responsibility, accountability and good commercial sense. Underlying this position was a precautionary view reflecting the expectation that the public could always become a 'real and present danger' to project development and a potential obstacle to achieving business aims (Walker *et al., in press)*. Constructions of the public as unresponsive were also used to buttress normative rationales for engagement, i.e. participants expressed the view that engagement with the public will be carried out because it ought to, regardless of patterns of public indifference or opposition. To some extent this is in line with evidence that commercial actors are most likely to have a positive attitude to engagement where it resonates with more familiar business practices around corporate social responsibility and public relations (Gregory, Agar, Lock and Harris, 2007). The claim that engagement was essential was therefore justified through recourse to both normative and instrumental rationales (Stirling, 2005); it was simply the way that things were and ought to be done, but it was also a means to valued organisational ends.

It is relevant here to note the point made by Hoffman and High-Pippert (2005) that the public do not necessarily *want* to be involved. Building on the notion of 'stealth democracy' (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2002) they suggest that rather it is important for citizens to "know that they will have the opportunity to participate if they should ever be motivated to

do so, and ..that the power of their elected representatives could be checked by their own political power" (p.3). Lay publics may value a belief in public efficacy (Barnett, Cooper and Senior, 2007; Knight and Barnett, *in press*) without wishing to actively engage.

Two facets of the essence of engagement were identified - information provision and addressing concerns - which closely mirrored two key dimensions of imagined publics: lack of knowledge and presence of concern. To some extent the way in which these characteristics of the public are constructed has the effect of circumscribing the likely value of engagement initiatives – there is only so much that engagement can achieve in the face of what is often seen to be a thoroughgoing ignorance about the working of RETs, and a range of concerns, variously ranging from understandable to irrational, that publics are seen to attach to the imagined presence of the installation. Burningham, Barnett, Carr and Clift *et al.,* (2007) previously noted the way in which industrial actors primarily constructed the public as having concerns which should be allayed. We might speculate that it is much more acceptable for those developing RETs to characterise the public as concerned, than as deficient in knowledge: the construction and expert control of public concern invites interactions framed in terms of expert reassurance rather than mutual exchange and engagement. (Stilgoe 2007;,Lezaun and Soneryd 2007)

It is worth noting the absence of a discourse around engagement being required to build public trust. One can only speculate as to the reasons for the absence of what is a strong theme in relation to instrumental motivations for engagement (Petts, 2008). It may be for example, that for commercial actors building such trust is considered unattainable.

One key dilemma of engagement - its timing – was also clearly related to characteristics of imagined publics. Timing was seen as critical because of the negative nature of public reactions that were anticipated if the timing was wrong: early engagement was wasteful

because of the likelihood that the accuracy of information would change as plans developed (thus also implying that imagined publics would invariably consider changed information as unacceptable).

As a way of explaining preferred mechanisms of engagement, interviewees juxtaposed public meetings and exhibitions. These explanations were strongly grounded in the nature of the imagined publics and the way in which different fora were likely to elicit particular public characteristics and responses. Public meetings were accorded less legitimacy than exhibitions in the engagement enterprise by virtue of the imagined attending public: views expressed in public meetings would be more likely to be biased due to the negative motivation of attendees while exhibitions allowed the imagined opposing public to be managed more effectively and enabled more acceptable views to be voiced. To return to the typology of Rowe and Frewer (2005), we note that the focus upon exhibitions and public meetings are exemplars of the communication and consultation variants of engagement – they are both what McComas terms, 'a minimalist approach to public participation (2001: p.39). Indeed there was no evidence that interviewees knew of participative methods (NRC, 2008) or saw them as credible or useful processes. This may be an example of Wynne's (2008) point that seemingly radical agendas may be appropriated and instrumentalised by commercial and governmental actors[1].

Imagined lay publics are most clearly visible in consideration of the mechanisms for engagement. These mechanisms are primarily structured around managing anticipated opposition. To some extent this seems anchored to early experiences of opposition around siting on-shore wind turbines which suggests it may be counterproductive to structure engagement and potential public reactions using early wind siting experiences as the blue

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[1] We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for drawing our attention to this point.

print. In the light of the recent planning bill which further strengthens the imperative around the development of nationally significant infrastructure (HM Government, 2007) industry actors may feel justified in deciding it is neither feasible, nor part of their remit, to engage with lay publics, despite Owens (2004) advice that "restricting the scope of local inquiries risks closing one of the most important apertures through which dominant paradigms have been exposed to critical scrutiny, and by implication is likely to diminish the potential for policy learning and change".

We would make two final reflections. First, we note that both Davies (2008a) and Blok (2008) raise the issue as to whether we are dealing with imagined publics or experienced publics. The nature of the imagined public for those that do have experience may differ from the imagined public of those that do not so trying to distinguish between them is certainly a valid enterprise. It is equally important to understand the 'reach' of these imagined publics; the way in which they implicate (and are implicated by) other issues. For example, exposure to thus far unseen dimensions of imagined lay persons – to a greater range of competences for example – may be instrumental in developing a greater appreciation of lay public contributions to engagement processes.

Second, we would concur with Davies (2008a: 429) when she suggests that the models that are implicitly expressed as assumptions within talk "could be more important in shaping behaviour than more explicit and self conscious claims". It may be the case that the circulation of imagined publics constrains the desire and ability of publics themselves – either to engage within the formal mechanisms that are presently provided or to actively seek other, perhaps more meaningful ways of engaging around the development of renewable energy.

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