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# Engaging citizens: local interactions, policy discourse and courses of protest against mobile phone cell site deployment

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## ABSTRACT


This article puts forward an interactionist discourse approach for studying the course of local political protest. We argue that how local policy-makers engage with the (anticipated) demands of citizens and mediate national policy produces distinct framing and feeling rules about potentially controversial issues. These framing and feeling rules open up or close down opportunities for citizen concerns to develop into collective action and policy change. Our contribution refines cultural approaches to social movement theory, focusing on local interactions in the formation of discourse, and allows us to better understand within-country variation in the course of contentious collective action. We develop our argument through a comparison of sixteen cases of installing mobile phone cell sites in the Netherlands. We show that the interaction between municipalities and citizens establishes a specific framing of the issue, of the role of citizens in decision-making and of the rules concerning what citizens may legitimately feel about mobile phone masts being erected in their neighbourhoods. This gives rise to four typical patterns of engagement between municipalities and citizens.

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**KEYWORDS** Protest; interaction; discursive opportunities; political process; technological risk; medicalisation

## Introduction

This article seeks to understand differences in courses of local protest from an interactionist discourse perspective by focusing on local policy. We approach policy-making and implementation as a meaning-making activity (Hajer, 1995; Schmidt, 2008) that offers citizens opportunities to

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mobilise in protest (Bröer, 2007, 2008; Bröer & Duyvendak, 2009). The extant literature often ties discursive opportunities to national (media) discourse (see e.g. Koopmans & Olzak, 2004), which leaves variation in the course of protest *within* single national discursive spaces unexplained (Garavan, 2008; Verhoeven & Bröer, 2015). Elaborating on Karapın (2007) and our earlier work, we examine here how local policy discourses mediate between national contexts and (expected) contentious action by citizens.

We argue that distinct local policy discourses develop when municipal policy-makers anticipate citizen protest or respond to citizens' claims while translating national policy and collaborating with industry and other stakeholders. Local variations in policy discourse emerge through these interactions, which then shape courses of contention and their outcomes. We particularly focus on how local discursive practices enable or hamper opposition to grow into collective action and policy change. With this approach, our intention is to assess protest outcomes (Uba, 2009). Our contribution refines cultural approaches to social movement theory, which tend to reify national discursive contexts; focusing on local interactions in the formation of discourse allows us to better understand within-country variation in the course of contentious collective action.

We develop our argument with an interpretive case comparison of sixteen histories of mobile phone cell site deployment in the Netherlands. To avoid sampling on the dependent variable (McAdam & Boudet, 2012), our case selection includes instances of contentious as well as non-contentious engagement between citizenry, municipality and industry. We show that municipal policy-makers' definitions of their responsibilities concerning citizens' (expected) objections to cell sites impact how siting issues are defined and tackled, the course of protest and, at times, the eventual location of cell sites. In short, the local discourse surrounding an issue contributes significantly to explaining within-country variation in the development of contentious actions.

### **Cell site deployment**

Cell phone technology forms a worldwide net with a marked local footprint. Barely 20 years after the introduction of the cellular phone, 803 wireless network operators rely on roughly 1.4 million masts (Huss, 2011, p. 2) to service some 5 billion subscriptions around the world.<sup>1</sup> Cell sites are contested worldwide (Borraz, 2011; Burgess, 2004; Drake,

2006; Law & McNeish, 2007; Stilgoe, 2007), with concerns often focusing on the uncertainty surrounding their effects on health (Baan et al., 2011). In Europe, 33% of the public reportedly believe that exposure to cell phone masts significantly affects their health (TNS, 2010). Elsewhere, we have shown how cell phone technology has become medicalised through the practices of risk governance (Bröer, Duyvendak, & Stuiver, 2010; see also: Burgess, 2004; de Graaff, Bröer, & Wester, 2015; van der Linden, 2010) and how scientific research, ministerial funding and para-governmental advice emerge as 'engines of medicalisation' (Conrad, 2007). While our larger research project focuses on the emergence of health worries in risk governance more broadly, here we specifically attend to different courses of mobilisation against the deployment of cell sites in the Netherlands.

### **Contention and policy discourse**

Our approach distinctively combines political and cultural theories of protest. Since the 1980s, the cultural approach to social movements has demonstrated the importance of narratives, frames and discourses (e.g. Benford & Snow, 2000; Polletta & Jasper, 2001) in group and claim formation. In political process theory, this has given rise to the concept of 'discursive opportunities' (Koopmans & Olzak, 2004), generally referring to media frames and culturally available ways of legitimising protest. Later on, the argument was expanded to suggest that all opportunities have to be perceived as such by potential protesters (Bröer & Duyvendak, 2009).

Meaning-making has often been approached as media framing (Hajer, 2009) or storytelling among activists (Polletta, Chen, Gardner, & Motes, 2011). Here, attention shifts to policy-making and implementation (Hajer, 1995) that is conceptualised as a public arena where different groups use and change culturally available interpretations to attract attention to their cause. Importantly, policy discourse does not equal government policy but is instead based on discourse coalitions between (potentially opposing) actors (Hajer, 1995) in governance networks. In our case, cell-site-deployment policy discourse is heavily influenced by industry practices as well as the history of earlier protest.

Discourse theory often assumes the nation to be the primary field of policy and contention, prompting the question of how to understand local variations in protest. Our answer here is straightforward: by studying interactions between local actors, in our case interactions between municipal governments, industry representatives and concerned citizens

(Verhoeven & Bröer, 2015). Our approach is thus localised in two ways. Geographically, we study specific cases; politically, we disaggregate ‘the state’ and oppositional groups by focusing on localised discursive opportunities and emerging (rather than given) actors and strategies.

A policy discourse delineates what people can legitimately do, say and feel in a given situation (cf. Flam, 2003; Grootegoed, Bröer, & Duyvendak, 2013; Verhoeven, 2009). Policy discourses offer citizens discursive opportunities to engage with issues of public concern, with concrete policy measures suggesting politically legitimate ways to cognitively and emotionally frame contentious issues. For example, radio-frequency electromagnetic field (RF EMF) exposure limits, established by international and national bodies like the ICNIRP (1996), are meant to safeguard public health during cell-site deployment and at the same time direct people’s attention to the health effects of exposure.

More specifically, we show that discourses contain *framing and feeling rules* (Hochschild, 1979) that ‘ascribe definitions or meanings to situations’ and provide guidelines on what people can appropriately feel in these situations (such as fear or anger) (Hochschild, 1979, p. 566). We find that the stance taken by municipalities towards citizen protest affects framing and feeling rules about the installation of cell sites in that particular municipality. As citizens can also contribute to what is at stake when a cell site is deployed, initial objections can grow into sustained collective action and ultimately impact supra-local policy creation. Such significant outcomes of local protest occur only when both citizens and local authorities simultaneously ‘sense and seize’ (Bröer & Duyvendak, 2012) the (discursive) opportunities to protest cell site deployment in national-level policy discourse.

### **Comparative case study**

To assess the influence of local government–citizen interactions and policy discourses on courses of contention, we compare cases of cell site deployment in the Netherlands. Data were collected through the study of policy documents, newspaper articles and websites, interviews with stakeholders and participant and non-participant observations. Cases were retrospectively reconstructed and prospectively followed from 2008 to the end of 2013. Although this article only reports on variation within contentious cases, our research project data include the full range of cases, from those without contention to cases of outright protest, in order to understand ‘the dynamics of emergent collective action’

(McAdam & Boudet, 2012). In our case selection, we also ensured balance between the most urbanised and rural areas of the Netherlands.

Interactions were reconstructed both chronologically and discursively, focusing on how different actors define the issue and its public. In these interactions, framing and feeling rules are recognisable as 'set[s] of practices' (Hajer, 2005, p. 303), in which 'cognitive schemata of interpretation [and] the emotional appeals presented by collective actors' (Verhoeven & Duyvendak, 2015, p. 5) are combined. Framing is, in line with Goffman (1974–1986, p. 21), a primary 'schema of interpretation'. We focus, in particular, on 'diagnostic framing', which means how actors identify the problem and what is attributed to that problem (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 615).

We are aware that the analysis of feeling and framing rules requires interpretation. This was established intersubjectively and in multiple rounds of grounded analysis. We assume that feeling rules are traceable in interactions and discursive practices. We also assume a researcher to be capable of reflexively recognising the tensions and ambiguities concerning the appropriateness of feelings in particular situations (Jasper, 2011, p. 14).

All of our data were analysed iteratively and concurrently. We first performed an inductive analysis of the material (Mayring, 2000; Yanow, 2000) and then aimed to delineate specific feeling and framing rules (Hochschild, 1979). Next, we identified types of interaction that differed along the following dimensions: the 'inclusion' or scope of the participation process; the 'intensity' or type of communication; and the 'authority' of the process or its policy and political effects (Fung, 2006). We used the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti to support the analysis and established interpretations in repeated team sessions.

We followed sixteen cases of cell site deployment in detail to examine interactions at the municipal level (see Table 1). Ten of these cases were researched intensively, including repeated interviews, observations and desk research; six cases were studied extensively, through desk research only. Our research was often perceived as political in that activists were eager to enrol us or criticised us for not speaking out against the deployment of masts.

## **The national policy discourse**

There has been opposition to hundreds of cell sites in the Netherlands over the past two decades, leading to protests in roughly half of all municipalities in the country (Hermans, 2014, p. 11). In the 1990s, a lawsuit by municipalities even brought the rollout of the Global System for Mobile

**Table 1.** Overview of cases ( $N = 16$ ).

Location	Course	Study	Type	Sustained collective action?
Alkmaar	2010–2011	Extensive	Rejecting	No
Amersfoort	2005–2013	Intensive	Tolerating	Yes
Amstelveen	2011–ongoing	Intensive	Tolerating	Yes
Amsterdam Geuzenveld-Slotermeer	2005–2007	Intensive	Mediating	Yes
Amsterdam (Jordaan)	2013–ongoing	Extensive	Mediating	Yes
Amsterdam Osdorp/Oud-Sloten	2004–2009	Intensive	Rejecting	No
Amsterdam Oud Zuid	2000–2008	Intensive	Cooperating	Yes
Assendelft	2012–ongoing	Extensive	Tolerating	Yes
Breda	2010–2011	Extensive	Rejecting	No
Egmond ad Hoef (Bergen)	2011–ongoing	Intensive	Mediating	Yes
Egmond Binnen (Bergen)	2008–ongoing	Intensive	Mediating	Yes
Gorinchem	2010	Extensive	Rejecting	No
Hengelo	2008–2012	Intensive	Tolerating	Yes
Hilversum	2009–ongoing	Intensive	Mediating	Yes
Valkenswaard	2010–2012	Intensive	Rejecting	Yes
Wageningen	2012–ongoing	Extensive	Mediating	Yes

Communications (GSM) technology to a temporary halt. Protests peaked between 2003 and 2005 when social unrest was noted in about 50 (of the then 420) municipalities in the country. When we examine these protests more closely, we see that they ranged from short-lived complaints to sustained collective action. What explains this variation?

To understand how municipalities differ in their translations of national policy and their engagements with citizens, the current section briefly sketches the discourse that informs Dutch national policy on cell phone technology. In a nutshell, the discourse centres on a technological imperative – cell phone technology in its current form is inevitable – coupled to the biomedical question of whether exposure to electromagnetic fields (EMFs) is a proven health risk, particularly for cancer. Crucially, in its aim to depoliticise the deployment of cell phone technology, national legislation has removed much of the responsibility for determining cell sites from municipal purview.

The introduction of GSM technology in the Netherlands in 1990 was preceded and accompanied by research on the potential health effects of RF EMF. While this early research (reaching back to the mid-1970s) influenced subsequent government policy, concerns were not limited to the effects of EMF on human health. The first wave of protests against cell sites (1993–1999) also involved conflicts over land use and other issues, such as the design of towers. Municipalities were crucial actors in this phase, aligning with the complaints of individual citizens and supporting protests. Many of the first GSM antennas, it turned out, had been erected without building permits. Municipalities went to court over this point and

halted new installations, thereby threatening the government and industry's aim of creating a nation-wide cellular network. During the period when the rollout was the most threatened, the auction of new frequencies for third-generation cell phone technology (Universal Mobile Telecommunications System [UMTS]) was on the horizon. The national government, in cooperation with industry representatives and the Dutch association of municipalities (VNG), responded in 2002 with a new 'antenna policy' that explicitly aimed to secure the rollout of GSM and UMTS technology. It curtailed municipal rights for land-use planning; smaller sites were completely freed from permit requirements, while larger ones were only subject to a 'light' procedure. Health concerns were explicitly ruled out as a basis for objecting and were deemed irrational and even dangerous, since they triggered stress responses among the wider population (Economische Zaken [EZ], 2010).

The antenna policy harboured contradictions: while it backed the rollout of the infrastructure needed for cell telephony and denied any adverse effects to human health (except for a well-known thermal effect), it also introduced new grounds for citizen protest. Residents had to consent to new antennas on their apartment roofs, while industry was obliged to hold annual meetings with municipalities to inform them about upcoming installations (municipalities maintained discretion over community outreach and the extent of citizen participation in the remaining permit procedures). Furthermore, while the government earmarked 16.6 million euros for research on the health effects of cell sites, public 'communication' efforts continued to proclaim their safety.

Unexpectedly, the first large Dutch study on the health effects of UMTS and GSM reported adverse effects on self-reported well-being (Zwamborn, Vossen, Van Leersum, Ouwens, & Makel, 2003). Media coverage of this report led to the creation of protest groups and websites. Although several municipalities again spoke out against the installation of cell sites, this time they had fewer legal means to do so. This second wave of protest (2003–2006) faded after new research disconfirmed the first report (Regel et al., 2006). The secretary of environmental affairs stated that there was no question of negative health effects and that the rollout could and must proceed. Still, the same government commissioned new research on the health effects of cell sites and thus further medicalised the issue of their placement. Activists were invited to 'consultation' and communication events.

After 2006, attention shifted from general health risks to electro-hypersensitivity (ES) and the relatively small group of citizens claiming to



directly suffer from exposure to EMFs (de Graaff & Bröer, 2012). The government's response was to take their suffering seriously while denying any causal relation with exposure to EMFs. Instead, their ill health was often claimed to be psychosomatic. At present, ES sufferers are in close contact with national policy-makers, health researchers and communication officials. A 'care policy' is being debated, which aims to care for ES sufferers without mentioning causal mechanisms. While this may effectively depoliticise the issue, it could also signal to citizens that there is a real medical problem involved.

At the same time, industry professionals have largely learned how to avoid protests against cell sites. Liaison officers and site acquisition professionals know where to find spots for masts that go unnoticed or are accepted without protest. Site acquisition professionals routinely deal with several telecom providers at the same time, thus learning which municipalities are difficult to deal with. Still, the de-politicisation of mast deployment is incomplete; repeated protests have occurred in several communities, while more masts remain to be placed.

The policy discourse has institutionalised the technological imperative. It has strengthened national government and industry, weakened the municipalities and medicalised the procedure for determining cell sites. Citizens have been alerted and endowed with a limited right to object to cell sites – that is, their worries have been both delegitimised and affirmed at the same time. In the following section, we focus on local interactions around the placement of cell sites within the context of the national policy discourse's partially successful depoliticisation of the process.

### Four courses of contentious interaction

The sixteen cases we analysed for this article reveal diverging courses of protest, which we typify through how municipalities *engage* with citizens' current or expected objections to the deployment of cell sites: by rejecting all citizen claims, by tolerating them, by mediating them and, finally, by cooperating with citizens. For each type, we show which *feeling and framing rules* are established when local governments and industry engage citizens, and how these rules influence opportunities for opposition to grow into collective action and policy change. Below, we present the four types analytically and by way of case examples. Table 2 summarises the four types of interaction, discourses and outcomes.

Before we turn to the case studies, we wish to reiterate that given our aim of understanding variation between courses of contention, we focus

**Table 2.** Four types of engagement with citizen protest, discourse formation and outcomes.

Municipal engagement	Framing rules (discourse)	Feeling rules (discourse)	Outcome: collective action?	Outcome: policy changes?
Rejecting	Affirming technological imperative	Trust government and science	No sustained collective action; individual complaints	Marginal; juridification
Tolerating	Affirming technological imperative	Tolerating fear, visual pollution and loss of property value	Outbursts, no sustained collective action	Research on alternative locations; juridification
Mediating	Acknowledging conflict; affirming technological imperative as well as health frame	Legitimising specific health worries	Sustained, diverging collective activism	Local policy-creation; change of location
Co-operating	Politicising and including any frame	Legitimising and triggering any fear or concern	Sustained, unifying collective action	Redefining (local) policy; removing masts

on cases that witnessed at least some protest. In many other cases of mast deployment, there was no protest of any kind, as network operators found ways to avoid citizen engagement or to engage them only in depoliticising ways (de Graaff et al., 2015).

### ***Rejecting: reproducing dominant feeling and framing rules***

When local governments affirm the technological imperative of national policy, by reproducing its feeling and framing rules, they reject citizens' (current or expected) concerns. Trust in science and politics is the main feeling on which legitimacy is bestowed in this way. In these cases, there is no discursive window of opportunity in the sense of participation or extended communication. When citizens' engagement is rejected, individual protest rarely becomes collective action and typically has no influence on the policy process. The local policy discourse does not change, and citizens are not able to influence feeling and framing rules. Municipalities reject citizens' claims and worries and refer them back to experts, network providers and the national government. Legal steps remain the only political opportunity available.

One of the five examples of this type of interaction in our sample is the municipality of *Midtown* (approximate population 30,000 and average per capita income). In May 2010, the network provider T-Mobile filed a request to erect a cell site in one neighbourhood. The municipality soon announced T-Mobile's request, prompting four residents to launch a

petition drive. The municipality received a formal objection letter signed by 220 residents in June 2010. These residents came mainly from the richer, northern part of the neighbourhood (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek [CBS], 2012). Their main concerns revolved around the value of real estate and the visual effect on the landscape, but the petition also mentioned the debate on health. The petitioners thus tried to discursively construct the cell site in terms that were not legitimated in national policy discourse.

The municipality stuck to the national policy discourse. The four initiators of the petition received an official letter that dismissed their concerns and announced that the municipality planned to grant T-Mobile's request. In its response, the municipality did not refer to any of the themes mentioned in the petition and stated that cell siting does not warrant either municipal or citizen involvement. This reaffirmed the national-level policy discourse. The municipality's letter ended by pointing to the opportunity for legal recourse, an opportunity the concerned citizens immediately took.

There then transpired another opportunity that in principle could have circumvented the dominant framing and feeling rules concerning cell site deployment. Based on the frame of transparency and good communication between citizens and local government, one of the active citizens persuaded an acquaintance in the local council to officially address the issue. The council decided that there should be an information meeting, something the alderman responsible had decided against. Under pressure from the council, the alderman agreed to the information meeting. This could have potentially been a moment where feeling and framing rules were reformed.

The meeting was held in January 2011, with the explicit aim of upholding the national policy discourse: citizens had to be informed in order to remove their concerns. At the meeting, the complainants did not get time to speak; their questions were only answered afterwards, by mail. Other citizens who did speak up were mostly concerned about the value of their homes; health issues were only brought up strategically. Since the meeting was framed as a chance to obtain information, citizens displayed anger when the information they sought was not provided. Since the alderman could not answer citizens' questions about the declining value of their real estate, the complainants portrayed him as incompetent and kept pushing for compensation. Citizens' claims to change both the framing (as a real-estate issue) and the feeling rules (legitimate anger about a lack of information) were in vain. The municipality refused to

take any responsibility for property devaluation and offered no opportunity for engagement. The only remaining option for the complainants was to block the instalment of the cell site in court, but a hearing in October 2011 rejected their objections. After the hearing, the tower was permitted to be legally constructed, but in June 2012 the network provider changed its plans, citing budgetary reasons.

### ***Tolerating: feeling rule changes to include fear***

In the case of tolerating, feeling rules start to shift: citizens' worries are acknowledged temporarily, while the framing of cell sites as a necessity (a technological imperative) remains intact. When local authorities tolerate citizens' concerns, they open up space for short-lived outbursts of fear and indignation but not for sustained collective action. Local politicians do not deviate from the feeling and framing rules of national policy. Opposition thus has no long-term window of opportunity, and legal steps again remain the only option for activist groups.

Feeling rules change in the sense that fear and indignation are treated as legitimate as long as citizens have not been informed properly. This means that no participatory process emerges, and communication is intended to inform citizens without involving them in decision- or policy-making. Typically, municipalities 'communicate' with concerned citizens if and when deemed necessary by the municipality, which provides limited room for the expression of citizens' concerns and the formation of activist groups.

One of the five cases where we identified tolerating interactions in our dataset is in the municipality of *East-town* (population 81,000 and below average per capita income). In June 2008, the network provider KPN filed a request to the municipality to construct a mast in one residential neighbourhood. Three months later, the municipality informally turned down KPN's request, stating that a mast at this location – next to an experimental housing project designed by a famous architect – would have a detrimental visual impact. However, the municipality informed KPN that it would not formally refuse the location until another was agreed upon through deliberation. Note that the municipality of *East-town* already took a more active stance towards the network provider than the municipality of *Midtown*, above. The siting of a mast was framed as relevant to local politics, which in itself might create an opportunity for local protesters.

In December 2009, KPN filed a request for an alternative location, which was informally approved by the municipality. Following the

formal announcement of this request, a single citizen objected, citing the visual impact of the tower and the lack of citizen participation in decision-making. The citizen was thus able to use the frame of ‘visual impact’ unintentionally offered by the municipality. As in the case of Midtown, the citizen was also appealing to the general right to participation, regardless of the cell-siting policy.

After submitting the objection, this citizen launched a petition drive and started a social-movement organisation called ADS ‘Actiecomité Driener Stadsrand’ (Action Committee ‘Driener’ City Edge). The municipality immediately rejected ADS’ objection, stating that it had been submitted after the deadline. ADS, the municipality and the network provider nonetheless informally discussed alternative locations for a mast in 2010, opening up to the citizens’ concerns. The ‘informality’ of these negotiations re-affirms the dominant framing of network-rollout as necessity and beyond municipal control – and at the same time undercuts this framing. The same holds for the feeling rules: citizens’ concerns, framed in line with municipal concerns about visual impact and participation, are legitimated informally.

While both ADS and the municipality at the time framed the planned installation as an issue for citizen participation, in contrast to national-level policy, they disagreed on what this meant in practice. ADS wanted to influence the location of the site, while the municipality was content to allow the network provider to operate the search, affirming the technological imperative. When no alternatives were found, the municipality decided to grant the original request for the contested location in November 2010.

At this point, the social movement began to grow. Another resident (a government official from a neighbouring municipality) took the lead in ADS and began another petition drive. This individual sent a letter of protest to all politicians on the local council and filed a lawsuit against the municipality and KPN, adding health risks to children to the argument. In January 2011, ADS organised a protest in front of the town hall; the municipality responded by organising formal meetings with its members, without the presence of the network provider. What began as an informal reordering of framing and feeling rules became formalised and open.

This time ADS was able to suggest alternative locations. The municipality thus changed its stance on citizen participation by giving the social-movement organisation an active role, now fundamentally challenging the national-level discourse. However, it became clear during these

meetings that the municipality did not accept possible health risks as an issue warranting discussion, pointing to national policy on EMFs and health instead, refraining from legitimising citizens' main concern.

In the following months, both the municipality and KPN conducted yet another study on alternative locations. In August 2011, ADS was informed that no suitable alternative locations had been found. The municipality thus stuck to its original plan, which ADS continued to challenge in court. The first hearing was held in January 2012. In February 2012, the court declared all objections by the citizens' group to be unfounded. The reframing of mast siting had thus created an opportunity for citizens to engage. While their framing and feeling rules were tolerated, the municipality's initial discourse changed only slightly throughout this encounter.

### ***Mediating: a conflict frame emerges***

In mediating interactions, local politicians approach the placement of cell sites as a conflict between citizens and industry and try to negotiate between them. The technological imperative is affirmed alongside the framing of cell sites as a health issue. Mediation reorders the feeling rules and legitimises a broad range of concerns: fear of health risks, declining real-estate values and the visual impact of antennas. In the process of mediating, the municipality challenges national policy and regains political power over the placement of masts. Citizens are included in the decision-making process but only up to a point; while communication is extensive, the voice of citizens has little authority. Mediating interactions are intensive and tied to decision-making. However, local politicians do not seek to broaden citizen participation beyond those who are already mobilised. While local policy tries to balance these different interests, it does so within the terms of the national policy discourse. Although the precise locations of masts can be negotiated, the technology as such is not questioned. The approach has led to sustained activism by several different local groups and to a moderate degree of influence on mast-siting policy.

In our sample, we find three cases of municipalities mediating interactions. We take *Richtown*, an affluent municipality in North Holland province with a population of 85,000 (CBS, 2012), as our example. At the end of 2008, about 250 residents of a residential neighbourhood petitioned their local government for better wireless connectivity and extra antennas. In response, the network provider KPN filed a request to the

municipality for the construction of a UMTS site. A member of the neighbourhood committee relayed this news to an acquaintance who claims to suffer physically from exposure to EMFs. Following the official announcement of KPN's request in the local weekly, this person began a petition drive against the plans. Her main arguments concerned the possible health risks of EMF to children (a number of primary schools were near the proposed site) and the visual impact of the mast. To back up the petition, signed by about 100 people, she founded the social-movement organisation 'Rijkestad Stralingsvrij' (Radiation Free Richtown (RFR)). The municipality thus faced two demands from the citizenry: asking for a cell site and opposing it. This figuration both affirms and questions the technological imperative but also assigns more power to the local government than does the national discourse.

Alongside the above petition, the municipality received six further objections. Together with the network provider, it decided to organise an information meeting for residents at which RFR was given time to speak. At the meeting, the alderman departed from the previous policy and acknowledged the conflict by promising to examine alternative locations. The municipality thereby shifted from its procedural stance to one that legitimises citizens' framing of the mast site as a possible risk to children's health and a visual degradation of the environment. This position clearly moves away from the national discourse framing and feeling rules, which situated municipalities passively and did not acknowledge citizens' health worries as justification for halting mast siting. The views of both RFR and the neighbourhood committee on alternative locations were heard in May 2010, after which the municipality conducted the proposed study of locations.

In this case, the change of feeling rules was also an explicit issue of debate. During a meeting between the municipality and RFR, it became evident that not all concerned citizens agreed with the way in which the founder and current leader of RFR framed the issue. Many did not support her call to halt all mast deployments and thought her style to be overly emotional. She herself claimed a 'right to be emotional'. Following this meeting, she was replaced by a new leader who narrowed the organisation's goal to the search for an acceptable alternative location. This move once more altered framing and feeling rules: the demands became more modest and more in line with national policy, and the appeal to emotion was tuned down.

On 23 November 2010, the local council announced that all alternative locations had been rejected due to their 'detrimental influence on the

landscape'. RFR continued its campaign, sending another objection letter to the newly elected alderman. After consulting the local council, the alderman rescinded the earlier statement on alternative locations and decided to use a second information meeting – originally intended to present the findings on alternative locations – to again provide all concerned parties the opportunity to speak and be heard. At this meeting, the alderman announced the need for a clear local policy on cell sites, in contrast to national policy, which limits local policies. Throughout the meeting, municipal representatives tried to mediate between citizens and the network provider KPN, while RFR presented its findings on alternative locations. Following this second meeting, another consultation meeting between KPN and RFR was organised, while the municipality tabled local policy on the deployment of cell sites in consultation with citizens. In August 2011, KPN filed a request for the site preferred by RFR, located at the edge of the residential area, away from primary schools. This request, however, was denied in November 2011 on aesthetic grounds. KPN objected, but its objection was declared unfounded by the city council. In July 2012, a new local policy was adopted in which the height and aesthetics of a cell site are deemed legitimate reasons for refusing a building permit. Although aesthetics was not an initial point of protest for local activists, the local government privileged this issue as a means to successfully mediate between protesting local activists, the industry and national policy.

In sum, Richtown politicians and policy-makers, faced with opposing demands, tried to mediate and thereby created discursive opportunities for all parties. Framing and feeling rules repeatedly changed, which sustained collective action and influenced siting.

### ***Cooperating: inclusive framing and feeling rules***

When a local government cooperates with concerned citizens, the municipality challenges national antenna policy in all respects. The siting is politicised, and any framing or feeling is legitimised. In these circumstances, municipal politics spark citizen activism. Local politicians engage with a broad range of citizens and tie their participation to decision-making; the resulting process is characterised by its broad participatory scope, intense communications, shared decision-making and authority. Citizen worries about the health effects of new technologies are legitimised; the issue being contested is broadened, and the technology itself becomes politicised. Activism is sustained, coherent and generally



effective. Antennas are replaced or removed, and the municipality regains a say in mast-siting procedures. In this sample of sixteen, we came across cooperation once. Next to these cases, we were able to identify two more situations in which local authorities cooperated with concerned citizens, one in the Netherlands and one in California.<sup>2</sup>

In the late 1990s, telecom providers installed several masts in *Capitalborough*, a gentrified area in the city of Amsterdam with about 25,000 inhabitants. Starting in 2000, the local oppositional political party CI (Capitalborough Interests) began questioning local mast site policy on two grounds: its lack of attention to possible health risks and, following successful lawsuits by other municipalities, the lack of building permits. From the start, the framing was oppositional and fundamental in the sense that the rollout was attacked directly.

The debate intensified in 2003 when research found adverse health effects emanating from antenna towers. CI received significant support on this issue from other political parties and focused attention on one location: a nursing home with an antenna on its roof. It took until 2006 for civil action to materialise, with neighbours of the nursing home founding the local social-movement organisation 'UMTS-out' (of the neighbourhood). UMTS-out organised petitions and information meetings for citizens, which attracted the attention of local politicians. In turn, UMTS-out started to focus on the opportunities in local politics. In the ensuing dialogue, UMTS-out and local politicians broadened the framing of the siting issue even further: at first the issue concerned illegally installed antennas and their potential health risks, but then participants began questioning the technological imperative, focusing on scientific uncertainty and actively participating in research. Rather than implementing national policy one way or another, the political motive became the creation of local policy together with citizens. This legitimised citizens' worries about the technology in general and fear of its possible health effects.

A majority of the local political parties changed their stance on the deployment of masts and came to challenge the dominant technological imperative during this period. In February 2007, the local council accepted the proposal that all neighbours (rather than only tenants of a building where a site is planned) must participate in the decision-making process. The council further agreed to make all siting plans public and to reduce the number of antennas on the nursing home. A number of 'illegal' antennas were removed; other cases were taken to court. This change in local policy influenced developments at the national level as

well: the national Labour Party (PvdA) now has the same position on antenna policy as its chapter in CapitalBorough. The broadening, initiated by oppositional political parties, of the framing and feeling rules gradually allowed for more sustained and effective social movement action.

### **Local discursive opportunities and courses of protest**

In this article, we have further developed cultural approaches to political processes of mobilisation. We have treated policy-making and implementation as meaning-making activities (Hajer, 1995; Schmidt, 2008) that create opportunities for citizens to protest (Bröer, 2007, 2008; Bröer & Duyvendak, 2009). This article has focused on variation in the courses of local contention. We interpreted these as a response to the emerging local policy discourses. We have shown how local policy discourses mediate between national contexts and local contentious action by citizens. Within one national context, local interactions between municipal officials, concerned citizens and industry professionals can change local discourses and framing and feeling rules in particular. This creates opportunities for protest and mobilisation.

The way local municipalities engage with initial concerns of citizens is decisive for the process. We typified these as: rejecting all citizen claims, tolerating them, mediating them and finally, cooperating with citizens. The ensuing interaction establishes a specific framing of the problem, the role of citizens in decision-making and the rules concerning what citizens can legitimately feel (such as fear or anger). The emerging discourse shapes opportunities for citizens' action (for instance short-lived outbursts or continued deliberation) and influences outcomes in terms of concrete policy measures (such as searching for alternative sites or extensive community outreach). In the long run, these micro-contestations may even affect national and industry policy.

Most Dutch municipalities closely follow current national antenna policy, affirm the technological imperative, call for trust in politics and science and shy away from any significant involvement in mast siting. They largely reproduce the national policy discourse, which stifles opposition. In our case studies, this translates into a *rejecting* stance towards active citizens. In these cases, citizens' fears are individualised, rendering legal steps the only remaining option – the result of local governments aligning with the national policy discourse and depoliticising cell-site deployment. In the *tolerating* type of interaction, dominant feeling and framing rules are reproduced too. Municipalities do not speak out on

substantive issues, although citizens' claims to participation in decision-making are taken seriously and are thus legitimised. Opening up to participation is not based on the issue-specific feeling and framing rules, and instead draws on a more general political discourse. It depends on the stance of the municipality if this claim to participation is legitimated. If it is, incidental citizen participation triggers outbursts of discontent rather than sustained collective action. The feeling and framing rules concerning cell sites do not change. When municipalities play a *mediating* role, they use openings in national policy to legitimise citizens' concerns and spur further action, which has the potential to influence decision-making on the placement of cell sites. At least temporarily, framing and feeling rules can be addressed and modified. Finally, a process of *cooperating* between policy-makers and concerned citizens politicises cell-site deployment and fundamentally questions cell-site rollout. Feeling and framing rules are questioned and changed in the cooperation between different political parties and (organised) citizens. Health concerns do not remain individualised but are addressed as a political question; scientific uncertainty is exploited to create room for action and research. This type of interaction encourages sustained activism and leads to measurable outcomes at the municipal level and beyond. A large proportion of the municipalities we have examined closely follow national policy, which attests to the structuring power of the national policy discourse. However, cooperating and – to some extent – mediating and tolerating cases show that there is also marked and relevant variation. The national policy discourse does not determine local interactions outright. Municipalities have some room to translate national policy and sometimes even create more room and shift national policy itself.

We did not analyse why specific municipalities engaged with citizens in a certain way. Nonetheless, an overall pattern can be perceived. Most municipalities reject citizens' claims and do not make policy for mast siting. Other municipalities legitimise their involvement in cell-site deployment (rejecting, tolerating, mediating or cooperating) with reference to local participation as a right in itself. This is gradually countered by national and provider policy in favour of rejecting such participation: the height of the conflict about cell sites was between 1999 and 2005. In that period, most protests emerged, and so did the more challenging stance of municipalities (cooperating and to some extent mediating). During this period, both national government and providers learned how to depoliticise cell siting. Municipalities' opportunities to control cell site deployment were explicitly curtailed, an extensive communication

apparatus was set up and providers found ways to erect cell sites unnoticed by citizens. The depoliticisation of cell-site deployment (de Graaff et al., 2015) increasingly constrained opposition and delegitimised alternative framing and feeling rules, further legitimising municipalities' 'rejecting' stance to active citizens' concerns. But again, this development in the opportunity structure at the national level is not all-embracing. There are still concerned citizens who protest locally, but municipalities engage with them in cooperating or mediating ways less often.

In sum, we find that the specific framing of the problem that becomes the focus of protest depends on the dynamics of local interaction, which allow us to better understand within-country variation in the course of contentious collective action. Risks to health, conflicts over land use, the design of facilities, real-estate property values, information and participation policies can all emerge as issues of contention in the installation of new cell sites if local processes make these issues legitimate. Although all of these issues are potentially important to both citizens and municipal policy, the focus of protest depends on the course of municipal-citizen engagement. While local residents initially voiced concerns in all of the cases we studied, citizen activism by itself does not change policy. Only when dominant assumptions – in our case, the feeling and framing rules of the national policy discourse – are challenged can collective action against health risks lead to durable changes in policy.

Our study further contributes to social movement theory by making local variation intelligible through the modification and diversification of discursive opportunities at the municipal level. Municipalities are taken up in a power struggle between local citizens, national governments and transnational corporations. Still, municipal policy affects the course of contentious collective action, particularly where uncertainty about risks to health exists. National policy discourse – built on the imperative that mobile phone technology must be introduced – has curbed the field of contention, often despite promises of citizen participation. Still, local participation has affected the global telecom network itself: specific location, height and network structure of antennas are partly the result of the contention we have analysed here. Over time, industry and parts of government have learned how to avoid political conflict which leaves little space for meaningful citizen participation in local decision-making on potential risky technological innovation, or for local protest to evolve into durable, national-level social-movement organisations.

## Notes

1. See: <http://www.telecomsnetworks.com/mno-directory>, and: [http://www.itu.int/net/pressoffice/press\\_releases/2010/06.aspx](http://www.itu.int/net/pressoffice/press_releases/2010/06.aspx). We exclude here the Mobile Virtual Network Operators (MVNO).
2. The Dutch case dates back to the early 1990s and is therefore excluded here.

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