

NIMBY in the news: Unpacking the discourses of opposition to new energy facilities in Ontario, Canada

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Introduction. This research explores how not in my backyard (NIMBY) discourses have been enrolled in newspaper coverage of disputes over siting energy generating facilities in the province of Ontario, and examines the implications of using the NIMBY label and concept as a strategy to characterize the response of opponents. While academics have largely abandoned the NIMBY concept as a legitimate explanation for opposition to unwanted developments in favour of alternative socio-structural and individual explanations, the NIMBY term is still a powerful label that is usually condemned by community and environmental groups, but adopted freely by developers, policymakers, and some opinion-makers in the media. We undertake a discourse analysis of articles in Ontario newspapers to explore the contested meanings and implications ascribed to NIMBYism, how its use as a strategy bounds and limits understandings of social opposition to energy siting, and how and why the media interpretations of NIMBY differ so dramatically from those found in the scholarly literature. Finally, we compare our findings to a similar study undertaken by Mannarini, and Roccato (2011) on NIMBYism in the Italian media.

Context. The recent development of gas plants and wind farms in Ontario has elicited more debate about NIMBYism in Ontario's newspapers than any other types of facilities over the last 30 years. Wind power in particular has met with fierce opposition in the numerous rural communities where projects have been, and are slated to be, developed (Hill & Knot 2010). The cancellation of two gas-fired power plants in two communities in the province has also been widely attributed to NIMBYism in the media. The first facility was cancelled by the government after construction had begun due to local community opposition. The following September, the government announced the

cancellation of another gas plant for similar reasons. Referred to in the media as the “gas plant scandal”, a final report by the Auditor-General found that the total cost of the two cancellations was at least \$950 million.

Popular vs. academic understandings of NIMBYism. Early writings about NIMBYism (e.g. Brion 1991) refer to NIMBYs as people who put their own private interests ahead of the interests of wider society. NIMBYism is seen as connotative of self-interested, or selfish, behavior on the part of opponents to new developments. Dear (1992, p.341) writes that NIMBY “refers to the protectionist attitudes of and oppositional tactics adopted by community groups facing an unwelcome development in their neighbourhood”.

A comprehensive body of scholarly research geared toward understanding why communities oppose a wide variety of facilities has consistently disputed the characterization of opponents as NIMBYs according to the definitions above. Rather, they have argued that it is inaccurate (Warren et al. 2005; Wolsink 2000) and a poor indicator of the root causes of opposition (Bell et al. 2005; Wolsink 2007; Jobert et al. 2007). Researchers such as Burningham (2000, p.55) have argued that NIMBY is applied as a pejorative label, providing proponents of a development a “succinct way of discrediting project opponents”. Wolsink (1994, p.853) also claims that NIMBY has a “highly negative connotation” and is used in “...a desperate effort to crush the opposition against some major projects...” (p. 851). He contends that applying the NIMBY label to opponents is meant to drastically reduce the influence of local residents, local authorities and organizations on the construction, siting and design of facilities.

Methodology. Keyword searches were conducted on ProQuest and Factiva databases for newspaper articles published in Ontario-based newspapers that included the word NIMBY* in relation to energy generation facilities. Keywords employed in the search along with NIMBY included: energy; electricity; power; “renewable energy”; wind; solar; gas; biogas; waste; hydro; nuclear; coal; and oil. Results include all newspaper articles published up until the end of 2014. The search generated 591 articles, which were reduced to 252 after checking for relevance. We coded the articles into themes and sources, with the assistance of NVivo.

Findings. The dominant discourse in the media portrayed NIMBYism in a strongly negative light. NIMBYists are selfish, express irrational, ‘kneejerk opposition’ that implies parochialism and ‘short-sighted obstructionism’. The cost of canceling the Oakville gas plants was a failure of residents to be rational rather than a failure of planning. NIMBYists are ‘anti green’ and do not recognize that Ontario needs new energy sources. They work against modernity – e.g. “Torontonians have a hard time adjusting to the 21st century, and are “preventing the reinvention of our world”. NIMBYism is a force that governments “pander to”, “cave to”, “appease”, “knuckle under”, forcing them to act against the public interest.

An alternative discourse that more closely reflects the scholarly position on NIMBYism also emerged, although less forcefully. This discourse holds that the presence of NIMBYism is beneficial. NIMBYists are not selfish but rather beacons of democracy and ‘citizen superheroes’. They fight siting proposals because those proposals are simply bad ideas. They recognize the need for new power sources but prefer alternatives, particularly conservation, which can be less expensive. NIMBYists are fighting bad planning and lack of public involvement especially during the early stages of a proposed development. NIMBYism is logical, not irrational - “who wouldn’t be a NIMBY?”.

In the remainder of our paper, we provide a more detailed and nuanced interpretation of these discourses from the perspective of different sources. We speculate on why there is a gap in interpretation of the meaning of NIMBY between that found in the media and that found in the scholarly literature and we examine why the gap appears to be somewhat different in Mannarini and Roccato’s (2011) Italian study. We conclude by discussing the implications of the gap for planning.

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