Activists against research: Experiences studying wind energy in Ontario

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Key Messages

- We present a unique example of research participants and others as activists in a contested area of geographical research.
- Activists used several means to discredit our studies including threats and personal attacks.
- The paper closes with some advice for those entering or within similar areas of geographic or social scientific inquiry.

Whether because instances are rare or because academics are uncomfortable writing about them, descriptions of activism against academic research cannot be easily found within the existing literature. In this paper, we share our experience of being young geographic researchers faced with impassioned opposition against our work. Studies we conducted of wind energy development in rural Ontario spurred backlash; activists used several means of opposing our research and attempted to discredit us as capable academics. We share examples of direct and indirect communication from such people and advise that there is much to be learned, especially for those who may not have the benefit of mentors intimately familiar with the type of activism we encountered. The paper closes with a practical discussion of three lessons written particularly for academics who may be entering similar areas of contested geographic research for the first time.

Keywords: activism, research strategies, wind energy, stakeholder engagement

Des activistes qui s'opposent à la recherche : expérience vécue lors d'études sur l'énergie éolienne en Ontario

Que ce soit parce que les occasions sont rares ou parce que les universitaires ne sont pas à l'aise de rédiger des textes à leur sujet, il n'est pas facile de trouver des descriptions d'activisme qui s'oppose à la recherche universitaire dans la littérature existante. Dans cet article, nous partageons notre expérience de jeunes chercheurs en géographie confrontés à une opposition passionnée contre nos travaux. Les études que nous avons effectuées sur le développement de l'énergie éolienne dans le secteur rural de l'Ontario ont provoqué des réactions défavorables ; des activistes ont utilisé divers moyens pour s'opposer à notre recherche et ont tenté de discréditer nos compétences universitaires. Nous partageons des exemples de communications directes et indirectes de telles personnes et nous émettons l'opinion qu'il y a beaucoup de leçons à en tirer, particulièrement pour les personnes qui n'ont peut-être pas la chance d'être conseillées par des mentors qui connaissent très bien le type d'activisme auquel nous avons fait face. La communication se conclut par une discussion pratique portant sur trois leçons rédigées tout particulièrement à l'intention d'universitaires qui

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pourraient être aux prises pour la première fois avec des cas similaires de recherches géographiques contestées.

Mots clés : activisme, stratégies de recherche, énergie éolienne, participation des intervenants

Introduction

Despite the bounty of discussion on researchers as activists (e.g., Cancian 1993; Blomley 1994; Lykes 1997; Maxey 1999; Croteau et al. 2005; Ward 2007), there is relatively less talk of participant activism *against* research (Mason et al. 2016). Academics commonly face resistance when viewed as outsiders (see Brayboy and Deyhle 2000; Minkler 2004), but the experience of vested interests distorting research (Martin 1981; Martin et al. 1986) or activism against research from participants are issues on which academics are relatively silent. A notable exception is from Alice Dreger (2016)—who outlines the somewhat fragmented history of activism against science and scientists.

Thus, while accounts of general pressures against research are *somewhat* common, recent research from Hoepner (2017, 74) suggests a very small minority of researchers face—let alone share—experiences of serious objection from participants, or "research silencing" which goes "beyond the expectations of 'legitimate' scholarly critique." Public objection to research is said to question the ideal of true academic freedom (Karran 2009) and stems from feelings of cognitive dissonance—the idea that conflicting views (personal views vs. research findings) will result in a rejection of one set of facts to erase feelings of discomfort (Ellerton 2016). All of these ideas are set within the current age of knowledge mobilization (Bennet et al. 2007), where there is an increasing pressure for academics to be public intellectuals (Fuller and Askins 2007; Robin 2016; Alderman 2017). Geographers across Canada have long performed this kind of relevant, impactful, and community-based research (e.g., Castleden et al. 2012; Christensen 2012). In this paper, we share our experiences of activism and backlash *against* geographic research. By performing applied and community-centred research, we opened ourselves up to critiques, personal attacks, and threats for which we were unprepared. This rare outcome may become increasingly common for geographers in the future, and we suggest approaches to mitigate the loss of academic freedom that may result from such attempts at research silencing.

Research context: Wind energy

Canadian provinces have increased wind energy capacity in recent years, and the growth has been especially swift in rural Ontario where almost 4800 MW (~2500 turbines) represents 40% of Canada's total capacity (Canadian Wind Energy Association 2017). Yet despite success in terms of procurement, there are multiple well-organized anti-wind citizen groups (e.g., Ontario Wind Resistance 2017; Wind Concerns Ontario 2017) and Canadian geographers have provided evidence of local opposition and community conflict (see Christidis et al. 2014; Songsore and Buzzelli 2015; Walker et al. 2015; Fast et al. 2016; McRobert et al. 2016). While much less studied, there is thought to be less objection and fewer anti-wind organizations across the rest of Canada (Walker and Baxter 2017b). As social scientists interested in renewable energy and sustainability transitions, we were intrigued by the varied public responses in this contested area of geographic research.

As part of our research-based graduate programs, we conducted qualitative interviews (n = 104) and survey research (n = 725) centred in rural communities with wind turbines. Though we performed research projects at different universities, we found the commonalities of our experiences and the pervasiveness of activism striking. Chad's research took place in Ontario (where activism was more prevalent) and Nova Scotia (2010–2017). Of special import were questions around planning processes and local support. Tanya performed her research in Ontario from 2010 to 2016, where the focus was an exploration of the impact of wind turbines on quality of life. Additional detail regarding Chad's and Tanya's research can be found in their recent publications (Christidis et al. 2014; Walker and Baxter 2017a; Walker et al. 2014). Across the following pages, we share some of the experiences and interactions we had with participants and

the broader public who became activists against our work.

An environment of mistrust

One of the most pervasive elements common to our experiences was the idea that participants did not trust research and the people (ourselves) completing it. In one of Chad's interviews, the participant did not allow the audio recorder to begin until his concerns about the research were addressed—some 25 minutes into the meeting. Even then, and after being given permission to begin the formal interview, there was a lingering suspicion Chad was working for industry:

"Brent"[1]: Are you affiliated with [the developer] at all?

Chad: No, no I've just I've read …

"Brent": Related to any of them, or?

Chad: No, I'm not related …

Chad was taken back by the suggestion he was somehow funded by a developer or that the impetus for research was shaped by family relations.

After Tanya's survey was delivered to communities, an email protesting the survey was sent to, among others, the Prime Minister and the Governor General of Canada. An email from "Alex" stated that Tanya was also working with industry and implied that her research did not meet ethical standards:

"Alex": The survey's failure to question trust in industry is a suspicious omission. For these reasons and others, this research is unethical. I ask the University to retract the survey and apologize to Ontarians for these offenses … It is important that each researcher understands the consequences of their complicity in this unethical research. The Nuremberg Code provides guidance here …

To have her research be labelled unethical was deeply embarrassing and professionally unnerving. In Tanya's case, one other online commenter went so far as to imply that there was a chance of a conspiratorial initiative to retrieve incomplete surveys:

"Beth": Do not throw away or return the survey. Keep the envelope too. Returned unanswered surveys could be filled out by someone else.

It appeared that some were suspicious of the ability of university researchers to perform ethical research. There was no distinction made between researchers who may have opposing views and researchers who are unethical.

The dismissal of academic research

The way that research was dismissed by activists was also of interest. It seemed as though our research projects were often dismissed outright—simply given their nature as academic studies. In the case of Tanya, this began after surveys were delivered to homes and may have caused the very low survey response rates that followed. The distrust of and disdain for academia is clear in this comment posted online:

"Ryan": Looks like an attitude/opinion survey designed to get the answer the Government wants. It's not even "thinly-disguised"; it's blatantly obvious … The University of Waterloo appears to have sold it's [sic] soul and it's [sic] reputation for a few $. Complete lack of intellectual integrity and technical competence. Nobody should complete the survey. Just return it with an explanatory note, in ink.

Though Chad could find no mention of a formal boycott of his research online, he also faced criticisms of his study design from concerned citizen groups in Ontario. During an email exchange, we see how academic mistrust may be manifest in the minds of some research participants:

"William": As the study is currently structured, it will not provide much in the way of truthful answers. Once residents understand that the purpose is to: muffle dissent … You'll be lucky if they don't throw you out the door.

Later in the same email, he disparaged Chad's research team when he characterized them as being "[the] POINTY HEADS WHO WRITE THESE STUDIES…." In 2017, Chad also received backlash nearing the end of his degree program—mostly from the

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[1] Participant names are in quote marks to indicate that they were made up to preserve anonymity.

publication of policy suggestions in online forums (e.g., media reports). One response in particular showed distrust in academic research, while at the same time suggesting elite academics are producing fake news:

> **"Stan":** Fake news: let's make wind power popular … real news: elites trying to prop up a green energy idea that drains taxpayers [sic] dollars #drain the swamp.

After spending more than seven years studying these issues, Chad felt disheartened to read this public response which characterized a graduate student as an elite who was creating fake news through academic research and the dissemination of findings. These quotes reveal the mistrust that exists toward academics who are perceived by some to act against the best interests of rural communities.

Personal attacks

Criticisms of research sometimes evolved into personal attacks of Chad and Tanya in online forums. During and shortly following Chad's graduate research, he was labelled many things including "smug," "highly disrespectful," "dumb," and "childish." Upon the publication of an accessible, publicly available toolkit document which summarized much of his PhD research, "Bert" spread a false rumour that Chad and his supervisor were involved with an energy company:

> **"Bert":** If you Google "Chad Walker Invenergy" and "Jamie Baxter Invenergy" it shows they both are involved with this wind company.… They are clearly not objective. How can Western University allow this kind of unscientific, biased publications?

In terms of ridicule and attacks on her character, Tanya had similar experiences. A study participant ("Laura") was unhappy with the study results because the research was not validating her views, and was upset with Tanya for not being an activist on her behalf:

> **"Laura":** Perhaps the students [sic] advisors have their heads in the sand and/or haven't stepped outside their Ivory Towers … A successful defense of this thesis will only be possible with faulty examiners. Careless, casual thinking on the part of advisors does not serve students well.

Even more disturbing for Tanya was the fact that a citizen-activist contacted her by phone and stated she would never be able to understand this topic because she is not Canadian—NB: she is, in fact, Canadian. It was troubling to hear that, in this person's opinion, only true Canadians can perform good social science work on this topic. However, the more poignant message received was the dismissal of her capabilities and efforts because she has a foreign-sounding name. These interactions, and others, highlight the ease with which cruel words can be shared when not interacting in-person and the environment of mistrust that can develop in certain contexts.

Discussion: The way forward

Activism or research silencing creates difficulties for researchers in contested topic areas, but more importantly, this activism threatens academic freedom—the cornerstone of teaching and research (Hoepner 2017). Ultimately, we were fortunate enough to finish our research and the activism against our work encouraged us to reflect on power imbalances inherent in the research process. Below, we present three pieces of advice for those who may be entering similar fields of contested geographic research.

First, our cases showed that some residents near wind energy projects have been lied to, treated poorly, and generally disrespected. Under these kinds of conditions, feelings of mistrust may naturally extend to those conducting university research. Because of this, researchers cannot underestimate the importance of community outreach and engagement in the early stages of research—both for increasing participation and to ensure that the research is suitable to the needs of the community. Though some backlash and activism against our work may have been inevitable, taking the time to enter and learn about the communities we were working in, before starting the data collection, was crucial and likely limited such negative experiences. The use of community-based participatory research (see Castleden et al. 2012) may be especially useful in this regard.

Second, if you receive a critique of your work, do not dismiss it outright. As we mention, because

most researchers have not had these experiences, it may be maddening the first time you are (personally) critiqued in public. These should be learning experiences. If people in a community are offended by your work, reflect on the larger context within which your research is occurring and think about why the research may be interpreted that way. Try to meet with people face-to-face and hear what they have to say. It will likely prove more respectful than online interactions, and will help you emotionally. It may also be helpful to reflect on the biases you have as a researcher and to share these with research participants (e.g., through an auto-biography). This is essential for those studying contested topics—being forthright about your own position(s) may help participants better understand your research program.

Third, know that in efforts to engage with the public and focus on knowledge mobilization, there is the inherent risk that the public will actively oppose your research. Media and scientific literacy are cornerstones of an informed, democratic society. In our current sociopolitical climate, it is difficult to conceive of how researchers can address the information illiteracy that prevents meaningful dialogue with certain research activists. A full understanding of the academic literature surrounding your topic is a good start, while effective communication of the uncertainties and gaps in knowledge will no doubt help as well.

Conclusion

We hope that this paper inspires a more meaningful dialogue—both within academia and between researchers and participants—especially in contested areas of geographic research where we can expect activist populations. Although our experiences are disconcerting in retrospect, there are lessons to be learned for geographers performing work in similar circumstances. Academics are often untrained and ill-equipped to deal with personal attacks on their integrity and this is a particularly important issue as geographers brace for a more committed role in the public domain. Future research should include the study of activism against research in contested domains such as renewable energy development, but implementation of any tactics to engage with critics of research should be done cautiously in ways that do not aim to silence dissenting opinions.

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