

Track 2 - The smart energy system transition in cities and regions

Title of the proposed paper

Smart Grid, Social Innovation the Smart Society: The Generation, Transmission and Distribution of Discontent in Post Celtic Tiger Ireland.

Name author

Gerard Mullally

Affiliation author

Energy, Climate and Community Response Group, Department of Sociology, School of Sociology and Philosophy. UCC

E-mail address author

g.mullally@ucc.ie

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Text abstract (max. 300 words)

Anecdotally, the emphases on renewables and the optimisation of new technologies in the creation of the Smart Grid in Ireland have contributed to de-legitimising wind power and the dismissal of climate change mitigation (at local level) as a 'ruse' for a predominantly economic logic of growth at any cost. While there are definite signals in policy debates of a shift beyond 'the social acceptance of wind power' to a more nuanced socially scientific emphasis on the 'social acceptability of wind power', this has not translated in any meaningful way to more reflexive or deliberative social choice mechanisms suggested by the governance for sustainability or transition management literatures. Initial public communication aimed at mobilising support for the development of the smart grid proposed a simple equation 'like wind power, got to love pylons' without considering its corollary; 'dislike pylons got to hate wind power'. Innovation is invariably presented as a positive social value, elevated to status of 'common sense' and linked to growth. Framed primarily in terms of economic or technological innovation and embodied by the 'heroic' (economic) entrepreneur, these debates frequently occlude questions of social innovation, cultural entrepreneurship and contextual diffusion mechanisms in debates around sustainable energy.

The focus of this paper is on the cultural construction and contestation of sustainable energy (electricity) in Ireland. Using text mining techniques which have recently formed part of a growing body of analysis on the climate change issue, the paper considers the structure of the public debate in Ireland (primarily in the print media at national and regional level) and the growing role of social media which could militate against, instead of mitigating in favour of a transition to a low carbon economy. In contrast to the Energie Wende debate in Germany, the lack of attention to alternative, regional and community based approaches in Ireland and the reduction of 'community gain' to monetary compensation schemes risks mobilising Irish communities against energy transitions. Furthermore, if we conceive of smart societies either in terms of reflexive or deliberative democracy attempts to truncate or contain public debate have only served to mobilise discontent.