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## Cultivating Spheres: Agriculture, Technical Communication, and the Publics

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**CULTIVATING SPHERES: AGRICULTURE, TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION, AND THE PUBLICS**

**‘...Darn Thing Just Kind of Fell Together by Itself after a While’: Exploring the Role of Official and Tactical Communication in Siting a Rural Wind Farm**

Michael Knievel

University of Wyoming, US  
[mknivel@uwyo.edu](mailto:mknivel@uwyo.edu)

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The growth of wind energy in the United States has created widespread access to renewable energy for citizens in many parts of the country. But while wind holds promise for meeting 21<sup>st</sup>-century energy demands, the question of how and where to locate wind farms poses significant technical and rhetorical challenges for wind energy companies seeking access to wind resources. Securing such access typically requires companies to work closely with municipalities and private landowners through a cluster of ‘official genres’—e.g., letters, contracts, emails, maps—that are developed and authorized by wind power companies in order to inform and persuade. However, the construction of a wind farm presents the possibility of significant disruption of local values and identities, economies, and aesthetics. Citing research from rhetorical genre studies and interviews with landowners and stakeholders in a rural Midwestern community, this article outlines a sampling of the official discourse utilized by wind energy companies to secure wind farm siting agreements and explores the pressures this rhetoric places upon local stakeholders. I then use interview data to illustrate how these official forms of documentation exist within a broader ecology of communication that includes citizen-curated sites of what Miles Kimball has called ‘tactical technical communication’. These sites—including informal meetings, citizen-initiated research, and local leadership activity—accommodate official wind energy discourse into the local rhetorical ecology, highlighting, in part, the scope of rhetorical activity needed to integrate wind into a community’s economy of values and beliefs.

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## Introduction

In recent decades, federal, state, and local policy developments have catalyzed efforts to reimagine the rural Midwest as massive demographic and economic shifts have profoundly impacted the region's longstanding agricultural identity (Carr and Kefalas, 2005). In some parts of rural America, a key feature of this economic reimagining is wind energy production. Abundant, consistent wind resources in states like Iowa, Colorado, Wyoming, Kansas, Nebraska, and Texas have made these states leaders in the nation's larger effort to reach goals for sustainable energy production.

In this article, I consider the ways in which these developments and the future that they represent come into contact with rural communities and citizens in the process of siting wind farms. The complex process of wind farm siting is regulated and incentivized through various externally-sponsored institutional genres that both shape the process and embody broader rhetorics of progress for rural America. At the same time, wind farm siting is distinctly local in its execution, as individual landowners decide whether or not to participate in the siting by leasing property to developers. Consequently, the genre ecology that coordinates the activity of wind farm siting is comprised of a blend of official and unofficial genres that local landowners must inhabit, initiate, and negotiate in order to articulate wind energy industry interests to their own.

To explore these dynamics, I examine a sampling of the genres that support the siting process in order to better understand how landowners seek to reconcile externally-sponsored rhetorics of rural futures—what Eileen Schell (2007: 80–81) has defined as problematic rhetorics of 'tragedy' and 'smart diversification,' respectively—with their own localized sense of history, identity, and destiny. Such a reconciliation of visions and values, I would argue, is fundamental to realizing the potentials of what Mark Shucksmith (2018: 7) calls 'networked rural development'. Here, I first locate siting within the broader context of wind power's emerging role in the U.S. energy portfolio before considering how rural studies and writing studies, respectively, enable inquiry into the siting process. Finally, I describe the siting of a wind farm near a small rural community in Nebraska and explore the more localized 'tactical'

forms of technical communication that complement and challenge official discourse and genres, allowing landowners to work '...outside of, between, and even counter to organizations' and official rhetorical processes (Kimball, 2017: 1). Rural landowners, I argue, engage in a complex communication process in wind farm siting as they attempt to reconcile a broad spectrum of competing demands and values with their own, including how to support 'progress' under terms that register as acceptable to the rural community.

### **Wind Energy and Rural Development**

Wind energy holds promise as both a renewable form of energy and an economic catalyst. As of 2015, wind accounts for 4.7% of all energy produced in the U.S., a figure which, according to the Department of Energy, could rise to 20% by as early as 2030 (Komor, 2009: 2). Growth and efficiency have been driven by advances in technology and continuing federal incentives. For instance, in December 2015, Congress extended the production tax credit for wind and other sustainable energy forms, and in 2016, the U.S. installed 8,203 megawatts of wind power capacity, pushing the US total to 82 gigawatts. Moreover, the U.S. wind industry now employs over 100,000 people (GWEC, 2017).

In some Midwestern states, in particular, wind has become a critical economic driver, with 9,000 wind-related jobs in Iowa (Nelsen, 2017) and 4,000 in Michigan, respectively (Nelsen, 2016). For some farmers struggling with dramatic fluctuations in the corn and soybean markets, wind energy 'is transforming low-income rural areas in ways not seen since the federal government gave land to homesteaders 150 years ago' (Epley, 2016: n.p.). Payments to individual participating landowners, whether fixed or paid out per megawatt of energy produced per turbine, typically range from \$7-10k per turbine, per year (Epley, 2016). While some landowners host a single turbine, others site several of them on their property. The revenue infusion can be meaningful. For instance, Richard Wilson, a Colorado rancher, notes the financial boost wind has provided him as an individual producer: 'We weren't making enough money to sustain ourselves. Now we're in a position where we can operate our farm for another generation at least' (Epley, 2016: n.p.).

Importantly, such benefits extend to communities, counties, and states. For instance, the American Wind Energy Association touts the fact that in 2015, roughly 70% of rural wind farms were sited in low-income counties across America, with landowners and farm families in those counties receiving \$156 million of \$222 million in total industry payouts to rural landowners ('Wind', 2016). The total payout to farmers and ranchers rose to \$267 million in lease payments in 2017 (American Wind Energy Association, 'Economic,' 2018). Moreover, counties with wind enjoy an approximately one-percent uptick in employment per 100 megawatts of installed wind capacity, 'equivalent to roughly 100 net jobs for a typical rural county' (Dahlke, 2017: n.p.). Energy taxes funneled into county and town coffers, then, can offer significant boosts to rural communities, bolstering infrastructure and schools in towns where tax bases are oftentimes diminished by shrinking populations and stagnant economies.

However, while economic benefits can be significant for both individual landowners and rural communities, critics point toward numerous concerns and mitigating factors. Economic benefits of wind energy, for instance, can be overstated, given that wind energy remains heavily subsidized by the government. And, at the local level, where wind farms impact the daily lived experience of citizens, some research has pointed toward potentially adverse health impacts, including sleep disruption, headaches, and other conditions arising in citizens living near wind farm installations (Mensching, 2017). These impacts are not limited to citizens, as other studies have indicated negative consequences for wildlife and biodiversity. Additionally, for some citizens, large wind farm developments compromise—sometimes radically—the aesthetic value of the surrounding landscape (Office of Energy, n.d.).

### **Siting as a rhetorical problem**

Given these concerns about wind energy impacts, wind farm siting represents a significant rhetorical challenge for the wind industry. While some objections to wind (i.e., health-related concerns) are largely universal, the specific nature of local community dispositions toward wind farm siting varies, depending on local values.

For instance, some high wind volume coastal sites are among the most contentious siting locations, as concerns over adverse impacts on fragile coastal ecologies has often led local communities to resist wind development. Similarly, inland rural areas weigh economic benefits of siting wind farms against inconveniences to farmers and changes to vistas previously unspoiled by development. Accommodating wind development, in short, is a complex process of reconciling economic potentials with ways of being. Recognizing the vast potential of wind energy as a clean energy source and a potential economic driver in rural communities, Lucas Nelsen (2016: n.p.) of the Center for Rural Affairs cautions, '[I]t is important that officials and stakeholders strike a balance, protecting local communities while also allowing them to take advantage of their renewable energy resources'.

Such considerations regarding siting and wind energy's role within rural space, in particular, emerge from broader conversations—interdisciplinary, but unfolding largely in the social sciences—about networked rural development. These conversations have emerged in an era of what Ilbery and Bowler (1998: 57, 75–77) call 'post-productivism' and 'pluriactivity', wherein rural communities are undergoing a significant shift from maxing out agricultural productivity to more varied and sustainable models of economic development activity. Such development seeks to articulate equitably local rural economic development perspectives with extra-local values and global initiatives. Building on the work of Lowe, et al. (1995), Jones (1995), and Cheshire (2006), Shucksmith (2018: 7) states, 'The idea behind networked rural development is that development processes inevitably include a mix of bottom-up and top-down forces...the key issue is the balance of internal and external control of development processes'. For Shucksmith, a more agentic stance balances rural self-determination with outside forces driving policy and economic opportunity.

Because such an approach emphasizes rural communities' active participation in development, Shucksmith (2018: 7) notes the complementary emphases on 'local capacity building' and 'those institutions, actors, and networks that have the capacity to link businesses, communities, and institutions involved in governance at a variety

of scales'. Perhaps unsurprisingly, such considerations of rural development dovetail with imperatives to build and expand digital networking capacities in rural areas that are often underserved (Salemink et al., 2017; Vicente and Gil-de-Bernabe, 2010; Warren, 2007), as well as with broader discussions about how to cultivate a more general rural 'resilience' in the face of endemic volatility in the broader networked global economy (Roberts et al., 2017; Skerratt, 2013). Without a doubt, the process of siting a wind farm engages directly and indirectly with many of these questions, such as how to upgrade critical infrastructure, including roads, energy transmission lines, and high-speed digital network needed to operate turbines and manage the large amount of data that they generate and receive as part of their operation.

How to 'strike a balance' (Nelsen, 2016) between rural community interests and energy companies' interests remains a multifaceted policy, technology, and public relations task. While the energy industry has worked to optimize wind technologies, it has also been interested in understanding the nature of wind farm 'acceptance', which might be defined, in short, as communities' openness to wind energy and willingness to site wind farms locally. For the industry, the driving question has been why some communities resist local commitment to wind energy. Aitken (2010: 1836) cites Ellis, et al.'s, point that a 'pro-wind power bias within the literature has led previous research to focus almost exclusively on objectors and, therefore, to ignore the ways in which support for wind power is constructed'. Such 'barrier-focused' research has investigated the role of place meaning and attachment (Devine-Wright, 2015; Patterson & Williams, 2005) and other competing values that might serve as barriers to acceptance or that color the nature of acceptance (Eleftheriadis & Anagnostopoulou, 2015; Fast, 2013; Firestone, Bates & Knapp, 2015). Others have begun to consider more directly the role of health and possible risks associated with wind farms (Songsore and Buzzelli, 2014; Walker, Baxter & Oullette, 2015) as reasons for resistance.

Such resistance research seems to coalesce, for the most part, around factors that drag upon what D'Souza and Yridoe (2014) call 'social acceptance'. Wustenhagen, et al. (2007) identify three types of acceptance critical to wind farm siting: socio-political

acceptance, community acceptance, and market acceptance. While socio-political acceptance involves favorable response to high-level policy and technology initiatives, community acceptance is rooted in how—and whether—local stakeholders like citizens and officials decide upon projects sited in a particular locality. Much siting-related research has focused on other countries and/or coastal sitings in the U.S. However, an uptick in wind farm sitings in the rural Midwest has created occasion for additional research to better understand the nuances of siting acceptance and resistance in this region. Mulvaney, Woodson, and Prokopy (2013), for instance, examine community acceptance and broad local support for a wind farm in Belton, Indiana.

This effort to understand the values that shape siting decisions, which animates much of the social sciences conversation on wind energy, finds its expression in writing studies research in the examination of the documents, genres, and communication events that engender a disposition toward siting among landowners and community members. Put another way, the 'local' and 'extralocal' interaction Shucksmith (2018) identifies as crucial to networked rural development is a site where writing studies—particularly genre studies—can contribute to understanding processes of rural development.

### **Writing Studies and Rural America: Indifference and the Policy/Genre Relationship**

In writing studies broadly defined, rural space has not always been seen as a site of rhetorical activity worthy of disciplinary attention. Donehower, Hogg, and Schell (2007) note that the field of rhetoric and composition, for instance, has been largely indifferent to rural areas and the literate activities that comprise rural life (xi). They claim that the overarching 'rhetoric(s) of tragedy' and 'lack' often ascribed to rural areas threaten to suffocate other competing rural rhetorics of agency that seek to both reimagine the identity of rural space and recognize the complex network of rhetorical and literate activities that characterize rural life. Later in the same volume, Schell (2007) calls for a new disciplinary emphasis on rural voices, rural agency, and empowerment, noting the need to distinguish a forward-looking, empowering 'rhetoric of sustainability' and advocacy for rural communities (80–81). More



recently, other scholars in both rhetoric and composition (Brazeau, 2014; Greer, 2015; Lachuk, 2015) and technical communication (Lamberti, 2007; Lindeman, 2013; Tebeaux, 2010) have examined rural issues through a writing studies and/or literacy studies lens, highlighting the varied literacy practices and events animating rural communities.

While the current study focuses mostly on decision making and genres as coordinating the development of wind power in rural America, it also responds to Donehower, Hogg, and Schell's (2007) call for attention to how we regard the rhetorical activity characterizing rural life. Moreover, the need to frame a rhetoric of empowerment and agency for rural communities evokes parallels to related research in technical communication. For instance, Simmons (2008) considers the challenge of public involvement in policymaking, as well as the need for more productive means of valuing public knowledge in environmental policy decisions. She outlines the complexities of public debate wherein knowledge disparities, coupled with structures of engagement that disenfranchise the public, combine to leave communities and citizens unable to participate directly in local decisions. Informed by the work of Habermas and others, such critique links to longstanding concerns in the field (e.g., Grabill & Simmons, 2007) about such asymmetries and the problem of 'non-congruent' discourse (Ross and Karis, 1991) that can complicate meaning making across technical/lay public lines.

In addition, rhetorical genre theory, especially as it takes an interest in assemblages of genres coordinating activity, offers a useful conceptual frame for thinking about the challenge of reconciling local and extra-local values through varied discursive acts—formal and informal, institutional and extra-institutional—that structure policy development and decision making. In doing so, rhetorical genre theory highlights an important point of contact between humanities-focused rhetorical study and the values that rural development studies and, in particular, wind siting research have emphasized, rooted as they are in the social. Carolyn Miller (1984: 153) notes that a genre 'becomes more than a formal entity; it becomes pragmatic, fully rhetorical, a point of connection between intention and effect, an aspect of social action', and draws on social knowledge and recognition of recurring situations. In this view,

genres are imbued with social and organizational values (Pare, 2002). Consequently, genre-based approaches that emphasize coordination and mediation, informed by activity theory (Russell, 1997; Spinuzzi, 2003; Spinuzzi & Zachry, 2000), foreground ways in which different discursive acts participate in complex organizational activity, with some of these acts happening in concert and others acting in complementary or even conflicting ways to shape realities (Bazerman, 1994; Devitt, 1991; Spinuzzi, 2003; Yates & Orlikowski, 1994). For instance, Spinuzzi's (2004) emphasis on genre 'ecologies' and genres as 'mediating artifacts' anticipates a kind of rhetorical, literate activity that lay citizens or employees deploy, though not always or necessarily sequentially, with official sanction, or with coordinated intention, in order to shape organizational activity.

The varied manner in which genres coordinate goal-directed action highlights how the struggle to reconcile technical and lay discourse—enacted through radically different genre types—complicates decision making and knowledge making. Spinuzzi's (2003) encompassing view of genre activity as 'ecological' invites consideration of a broad range of textual activities and behaviors that coordinate activity, from visible and official genres, to less formal and unofficial. Such work anticipates that of scholars like Miles Kimball (2017) and Hannah Bellwoar (2012), who examine the empowerment of lay citizens who employ alternative rhetorical means to convert, add to, or redirect expert technical discourse in order to pursue personal goals. Kimball calls this a kind of 'tactical technical communication', derived from de Certeau's notion of 'tactics', which enables citizens to reframe official forms of technical communication 'on their own, working outside of, between, and even counter to organizations' (2017: 1). He argues that 'user-producers' utilize tactical communication outside organizational and institutional parameters to appropriate discourse as they see fit:

These user-producers recognize this shift from institutional to extra-institutional settings, and they often trust and value the work of other amateur technical communicators over the work produced by a professional tech writer hired by a corporation. *They are not, however, necessarily*

*anti-institutional; they are willing to work within institutional strategies when it suits them, and to step outside those strategies when the occasion warrants* (Kimball, 2017: 3; emphasis mine).

Kimball notes de Certeau's distinction between institutionally-sanctioned 'strategies' and individual 'tactics' and the 'quiet tenacity of individuals as they make their way through institutional rules while trying to build their own lives and live them as they see fit' (2017: 3). In doing so, such individuals consider and accept broader aspects of institutional strategy while working alongside or outside such structures when unresolvable conflicts arise between individual goals and institutional strictures designed to achieve institutional objectives. Kimball's analysis highlights the discursive nature of these tactics, noting ways that citizens and consumers tailor and convert institutional texts and products to better suit their purposes and achieve their goals, oftentimes subtly and without direct engagement with the institution.

In the process of siting a wind farm in a rural community, citizens engage in a similar process of negotiation wherein they act, I argue, in tactical ways to reconcile local values, histories, and visions surrounding land use and community dynamics with wind power company entreaties—entreaties that seek to reorganize those values and visions even as they seek to align with those values in order to persuade. Below, I consider the rhetorical impact of selected institutionally-sanctioned genres to redefine rural space before noting less visible 'tactical' communication acts that help empower citizens as they attempt to blend extra-local strategies of wind development with community values. While it remains unclear in uncertain economic times whether farmers have authentic choice regarding their participation in the broader 'strategy' of state-subsidized wind development, citizen/landowners engage in a host of tactics to maintain what control they can in order to find value alignment and to come out whole—or as whole as they can—in the siting process.

### **Wind Farm Siting in a Small Nebraska Town**

As seen above, social science research surrounding wind farm siting has focused heavily on local stakeholders' values, which bear heavily upon the acceptance or rejection of wind energy initiatives. For rural communities whose economies, values, and social

relationships have been organized around farming for generations, the coherence of those economies, values and relationships can be considerable. It is within this system of values that wind energy companies act when siting and developing a wind project. As Shucksmith (2018: 7) says, importantly, about networked rural development, 'development processes inevitably include a mix of bottom-up and top-down forces, as the local necessarily interacts with the extralocal'. For the remainder of this article, I will consider how this 'mix' is negotiated through specific genres and discursive events that contribute to and coordinate the persuasion needed to achieve wind farm siting in one rural community.

### ***Study Context***

Wind's growth in Nebraska parallels the aforementioned growth in the region, with nearly 7% of the state's energy production coming from wind (Nebraska Energy Office, 2018). In addition to offering many of the green advantages associated with renewables, wind also promises various forms of economic relief in a rural state relying on an agriculture-based economy subject to the enduring volatility of commodity markets.

Such benefits extend beyond the shot in the arm they provide individual landowners, as wind farms have infused local economies with needed tax dollars, bolstering schools and community development while lowering local tax burdens. As Adam Herink, vice president of Bluestem, an Omaha-based wind energy company, notes, 'Infrastructure opportunities for rural Nebraska are few and far between. This [wind development] brings income and property tax relief, which everybody needs' (Epley, 2016: n.p.). With that said, the aforementioned caveats remain, as wind development in the state remains contentious at times due to its impacts on aesthetics, land use and value, health, and quality of life. Siting, thus, requires an appraisal of costs and benefits for affected communities.

Crow City, Nebraska (names of town, wind energy company, and interview subjects have been changed to preserve anonymity), is a small, rural town with a population of fewer than 2,000 residents. Like many smaller towns in the state of Nebraska and in the rural Midwest, Crow City, with a median resident age of 47,

has experienced steady population decline in recent decades, losing over 25% of its residents over the past forty years. In spite of these challenges, the town retains a strong sense of community pride and fellowship, with social activities largely organized around church, school, and family life. Agricultural activity—primarily the raising of livestock and crops like soybeans and corn—suffuses everything and has organized the landscape surrounding the town for generations.

Preliminary wind development work spearheaded by EnergyCorp, a multibillion-dollar, multinational energy corporation, began near Crow City late in the first decade of the 2000s and has expanded to additional local developments within a thirty-mile radius of the town. It is also worth noting that a nearby town welcomed a wind farm a few years earlier than did Crow City, providing a local precedent for wind development.

For this study (approved by University of Wyoming Institutional Review Board, Protocol #20161004MK01319), I primarily interviewed local landowners who agreed to participate in the wind farm siting by allowing EnergyCorp to place a wind turbine and/or run transmission lines underground on their respective properties. A list of landowners was generated from an interview with a local resident who had witnessed the development of the wind project and had knowledge of many of the landowners involved in its layout. I contacted and subsequently interviewed five landowners who chose to site wind turbines on their land. While initial interview requests and contacts were directed at the landowners themselves, three of these landowners' spouses were also present during the interviews and occasionally helped to prompt memories during the conversations; the other two landowners' spouses were not present during interviews. In addition, I interviewed a local community member who was uninvolved with the wind project but followed the siting process closely. This community member's spouse was present for the interview and participated in a manner similar to that of the aforementioned landowners' spouses. Finally, I also interviewed two landowners from the aforementioned adjacent wind project to gain further perspective—one who was chosen to participate in the project and another (and his spouse) who was willing to site a turbine but was not ultimately chosen for siting. Following Aitken (2010), I wanted to consider affirmative cases and move

beyond values shaping decisions in order to consider, as well, the communication activity that yielded the affirmative decision. Naturally, this activity could not help but intersect regularly with local values.

In these interviews, subjects described the process that the wind energy company followed as it moved from preliminary stages of recruiting landowners and securing their involvement to completing and maintaining the wind farm. Subjects then answered a series of questions in a semi-structured interview setting. These questions focused on the documents and communications that were part of the siting selection process and, for involved landowners, which of those documents and communications featured most prominently in their decision making.

Based on interview results, the stages of local wind development might be named and sequenced as follows:

1. Initial contact and enrollment in a wind test study
2. Contract negotiation and public inquiry
3. Construction
4. Operation and maintenance

I offer now a brief overview of each stage's central discursive activities and an abridged overview of the complex of official genres—here, those initiated by EnergyCorp—used to coordinate the activities central to each stage.

### ***Initial Contact and Enrollment***

According to those interviewed, the first step in the siting process involved an attorney for EnergyCorp approaching individual landowners to 1) gauge interest in participating in a wind study wherein a meteorological (MET) tower would be placed on their respective properties to measure wind flow and 2) enroll them in a kind of preliminary contract, complete with advance payment—in the \$1,200–1,500 range, per one landowner—to secure an exclusive easement on their property (Interview Subject B, 2017). This contractual agreement permitted EnergyCorp to study wind patterns and the feasibility of siting a wind turbine(s) and/or transmission lines on the property while also protecting the property from potential competitors. Rhetorically,

these enrollment measures established leverage and control for the wind company, as landowners who signed on for the study and the attendant remuneration were legally bound to EnergyCorp and unable to negotiate with another wind energy company if they were approached. Landowners, on the other hand, retained the right to choose whether or not to participate in the study, as well as the right to participate in the siting if their property was judged viable.

Key documents and sites of communication during this stage included an information sheet about EnergyCorp, the 'cooperation agreement' enrolling landowners in the study, in-home face-to-face meetings, phone calls and informational letters from EnergyCorp, and good faith payments to landowners. Much of this communication work centered on informing landowners of the study and plan, establishing company ethos, and securing access to land/participation in the study.

### ***Contract Negotiation and Public Inquiry***

During this stage, EnergyCorp convened a number of meetings with local landowners to talk through the siting and development process and negotiate contract terms. Armed with data generated through the preliminary study, EnergyCorp mapped the area and determined which land offered optimal wind conditions. Working closely with the county zoning board and county supervisors to secure needed permissions and easements, EnergyCorp then negotiated contracts with individual landowners and opened an office in town, which was staffed by one or two members of EnergyCorp's project team. This office became the information hub for the community where landowners could go during the process of negotiating contract terms and evaluating the project. The site project manager also visited many landowners at their homes during this time, making both places sites of negotiation.

Key documents and other sites of communication during this stage included the MET map highlighting optimal wind sites, contracts, zoning meetings, county supervisor meetings, landowner committee/leadership meetings, and direct deposit forms. During the stage, EnergyCorp worked to secure needed permissions, gather and maintain support, and gain contractual participation.

### **Construction**

By far the most visible phase of the process, the construction stage remade the local community landscape, starting with a lengthy preliminary build-out of necessary infrastructure to support the project. Given that the great majority of roads in the area are comprised of dirt and gravel (including numerous minimum maintenance roads that are not a part of scheduled county maintenance), this work was significant in places, requiring fortification of corners to accommodate the long trailers needed to transport turbine blades measuring over 100 feet in length. The construction stage also included, among other tasks, the build-up and tear-down of a temporary concrete plant to support construction, the building of a substation, the development of access roads, the laying of transmission lines, erection of wind turbines, and final work to restore roads damaged during construction. In addition to all of the equipment, the project involved hundreds of workers who flooded Crow City and the surrounding area. As one interview subject noted in bemused awe as he recalled the community-consuming construction process, 'It was actually a show every morning'—one that lasted for months on end (Interview Subject D, 2017).

Key documents and sites of communication in this stage included direct deposits for involved landowners, letters updating landowners about project construction progress, and wind company representatives meeting face-to-face with landowners on private land/construction sites to ensure compliance with landowner wishes and contractual obligations. Most notable, though, again, was the overwhelming visibility of the trucks, trailers, and turbines driving through town; housing-hungry EnergyCorp employees renting every available local house and apartment; and the same employees frequenting local restaurants, gas stations, and taverns. All were signs of a broader temporary transformation to the community that extended well beyond individual landowners outside of town agreeing to site turbines on their farm property. The aforementioned landowner's quote—'it was actually a show'—seems to best capture the feeling that while landowners and the community had been told what was coming, it was still shocking to see so much industry in the quiet little town.



### ***Operation and Maintenance***

During this still-ongoing period, turbines were brought online and began producing electricity, which was sold to a state power company. A small staff of technicians still remain in the community, maintaining a permanent office. These technicians perform routine maintenance of the turbines while also addressing acute issues that arise. Importantly, EnergyCorp continues to maintain a presence in the community beyond the ongoing service needs of the mechanical apparatus that comprises the wind farm. For instance, the company occasionally funds activities and initiatives at local schools (e.g., funding a STEM project) and, in 2015, presented an oversized check for over \$500,000 to county supervisors, reflecting EnergyCorps' total contribution via energy taxes to county coffers to date.

Key documents and sites of communication in this stage included—and include—public ceremonials (e.g., a grand opening ceremony), direct deposits, and occasional informational letters.

### **'Official' Genres: Negotiating Terms, Defining Space**

It warrants mention that lease payments to individual owners were universally regarded as critical to securing support for the wind project. Indeed, readers might register the enduring presence and noted significance of direct deposits throughout the stages enumerated above. As one landowner noted, 'For me, it [the deciding factor in choosing to site] was money in my pocket. That is my key factor right there' (Interview Subject B, 2017). However, other genres played a crucial role in shaping the thinking of local landowners who were persuaded to site wind turbines on their land. The 'key documents' in the previous section are those that might be categorized as institutional or official communication acts, those typically sponsored by either EnergyCorp or, in some cases, the county government. I focus here on two that landowners consistently noted when describing key persuasive documents in the siting process:

1. The cooperation agreement
2. The MET map

Of special note is the manner in which these documents engage with local values, placing these values into dialogue with the persuasive goals of EnergyCorp as the 'extra-local' element, while negotiating the interests and future of Crow City.

### ***Cooperation Agreement***

In this print document, landowners agree to participate in what is framed by the wind energy company as a 'study'. As noted above, by signing the agreement, landowners agree not to allow other wind energy entities to site on their land for several years and, further, allow for the siting and presence of a MET on their property for testing purposes. The agreement also allows the wind energy company to conduct other tests and property inspections (e.g., environmental, soil, property title inspections) with an eye toward determining the feasibility of siting a wind turbine and/or transmission lines on the property. More, it enables EnergyCorp to assemble a large and contiguous footprint for the purpose of siting as they piece together properties and sites that maximize wind resources.

While the document is a contract and asserts clear control and rights for the company, it does more, inviting landowner participation and piquing curiosity and conversation in the community. As one landowner said of the early days of the project, 'Well, I think early on [when EnergyCorp began approaching landowners], there's probably something new, so there was probably a little excitement. Then, as you get into it, you start asking questions and questioning things' (Interview Subject A, 2017). The agreement, then, cultivates a sense of solidarity as landowners are approached and invited to participate, in addition to creating interest, spurring shared inquiry, and offering a financial incentive for landowners willing to be involved. Another landowner noted, 'That [the initial study] was enticing right there. Hey, I'm getting 1,200–1,500 bucks for not doing a darn thing' (Interview Subject B, 2017).

Most landowners in the area were willing to participate, though some wondered if anything would come of these early overtures; EnergyCorp's naming this phase of development a 'study', while technically accurate, reinforces the notion that participation at this stage is low stakes, a chance at easy compensation without real strings attached. The 'excitement' and financial benefits are shared among

participating neighbors, who are undifferentiated at the front end of the testing and preliminary commitment stage coordinated by this document. In a sense, then, the agreement affirms a sense of community by highlighting commonality and togetherness among a large number of neighbors and landowners who, together, enjoy remuneration while experiencing intrigue over the possibilities—what one landowner, again, called quite simply, 'something new'.

### ***MET Maps***

The MET map, part of the subsequent Contract and Negotiation phase, effectively redraws the land and its identity through digital mapping and data aggregation, which highlight wind concentrations that guide siting decisions. It is worth noting that for the past decade or so, farmers in the area have utilized various kinds of digital tools and data-gathering techniques, such as soil moisture probes, irrigation controls, and planting monitors to enhance agricultural practice and efficiency. Such work is oftentimes controlled or accessed through mobile communication devices, like smartphones. But while these digital tools and applications enhance landowner engagement with the land as an *agricultural* space, MET maps harness digital technologies to reconceive the land in terms of wind potentials. Bearing some similarity to the county plat map, a familiar genre antecedent in rural areas that plots different sections of property to show ownership demarcations, the MET map plots ideal sitings for landowners and establishes potential placements for turbines, transmission lines, and access roads by using test data to render a re-imagination of the land by making visible the invisible—wind currents, high aloft—in the cartographical representation of the area.

In facilitating this reimagining, the MET map reshapes the economic dimensions and fundamental understanding of the land while setting the terms for subsequent negotiations between landowners and the wind power company, redefining viability and stipulating participation. Thus, in a sense, the new map defines who will 'win' and who will 'lose' by representing whose land the company prefers for siting and how and where the land will change in purpose and appearance in order to accommodate the wind farm apparatus. As one landowner said:

If you decide to participate, you know, seeing that map of 'ok, are there going to be any wind facilities on our property or not?' that was a big hurdle. And then once you see that there was or was not, then I guess that's what kind of pushed us over the edge. But seeing that map and knowing that there was going to be something, that...helped us... [decide to participate] (Interview Subject A, 2017).

Put another way, the map depicts a new economy and who is eligible to participate in it, lending a sense of material reality to the whole project and a clear signal 'that there was going to be something', which serves, then, to invite participation as landowners shift from the practical footing of the 'study' described above to committed involvement in the material wind project.

However, the map also reveals the individual stakes beyond participating with neighbors. Whereas the county plat map, a fixture of the agricultural economy, makes no distinction between one quarter or section of land and another in terms of crops produced or measured productivity, the MET data reinforce landowners' identities as private, individual landowners with land of varying quality versus the community ethos that the cooperation agreement engenders, highlighting a tension between individual landowner rights and a role in the community of landowners. As the same landowner noted, 'You've got to be respectful of your neighbors, but the landowners have rights to utilize the property as they see fit' (Interview Subject A, 2017). Indeed, multiple landowners noted ongoing resistance to the wind farm from a fellow landowner who did not participate in the development. While this acknowledgment of resistance was tactful, it seemed clear that the remapping of the land had driven at least a minor wedge between this landowner and those who had been chosen for the wind farm that did not exist in the previous agriculturally-defined economy and sociology (Interview Subjects A, B, D, E, 2017).

In summary, the cooperation agreement and MET map, 'official' genres taken up to do the work of siting, coordinate key rhetorical moments in the process, putting pressure on land definition and on neighborly relationships that had stabilized over generations in an agricultural economy. As the landowner cited in the previous

paragraph noted, 'the bottom line is if you own the ground, you own land, you have the opportunity to participate. If you didn't, you're out in the cold' (Interview Subject A, 2017). By virtue of owning land, landowners had choice—if they were chosen.

### **'Tactical' Technical Communication and Reclaiming the Siting Process**

Beyond these official genres, extra-institutional rhetorical work done via unofficial genres and forms of 'tactical' technical communication also plays a role in the broader genre assemblage that coordinates change to the landscape and community during wind farm siting. For Kimball (2017: 3), again, tactical technical communication is used by citizen/users who 'are not, however, necessarily anti-institutional; they are willing to work within institutional strategies when it suits them, and to step outside those strategies when the occasion warrants', but the way they are enacted is negotiated and situational. Here, I talk briefly about a couple of 'tactical' rhetorical forms that are sponsored by community members and landowners, rather than EnergyCorp, which help these citizens navigate the process of siting. In doing so, involved citizens work, in a way, to reconcile official, external overtures with the values and interests that characterize the local culture. It is important to note again that these tactical forms exist alongside official genres and are not necessarily in adversarial relationship with them. While 'homely', as Miller might say, these less conspicuous genres and communication sites work with and alongside official genres to coordinate the larger siting process (1984: 155). Similar to the above discussion of official genres, I will note here the importance of two of these local, tactical communication spaces:

1. Landowner representative group negotiations
2. Informal neighbor meetings

#### ***Landowner Representative Group Negotiations***

One interview subject noted:

There was a small bunch of landowners around here who kind of formed a committee because this ... EnergyCorp, if I remember right ... when they wrote

up the contract and said, you know, 'if you got wind towers, you're going to get X amount of dollars a year or if you got underground [transmission lines] you're going to get X amount of dollars a year', that was all put in a contract. So they suggested some of the locals here put a little committee together, and there was three or four guys that went ahead and hired our own lawyer to proofread that same contract and go over it because...lot of small print in there and a lot of us didn't know what the hell we was reading anyway (Interview Subject D, 2017).

Per this interview subject, the landowner committee as a rhetorical entity might occupy a vexed subject position, seeing how EnergyCorp apparently suggested developing such a committee. No doubt, the committee and the other landowners' faith in and familiarity with the committees' members eased the communication burden for EnergyCorp and, in some ways, offered them a rhetorically expedient concentration or vehicle otherwise unavailable to them: 'Those three, four guys from around here was [sic] kind of the spokesmen for all of us' (Interview Subject D, 2017).

But while working with a representative group of landowners facilitated communication for EnergyCorp, it also provided a more agile rhetorical agent advocating on behalf of the landowner group. This proved particularly important during the lease agreement contract negotiation phase. During this time, the leader of the landowner representatives group noted, 'that's all I did was be on the goddamn phone', serving as the go-between, talking to fellow landowners, to the landowners' lawyer, and to EnergyCorp's lawyers at corporate headquarters (Interview Subject C, 2017). By his own estimate, he spent around 200 hours in related cellphone conversations, often while working in the field during the day and deep into the evenings. In the process, the landowner representative group monitored the contract development process and worked to secure new legal representation with local ties after uncovering inconsistencies in their first attorney's billing practices while working with landowners on another wind project in the area.

### ***Informal Neighbor Meetings***

A second key site of tactical technical communication was located in what might be called 'neighborly conversation'. One landowner recalled a fact-finding Sunday drive that neighbors took to gather information from a nearby community and its wind farm: 'My neighbors went up there (to a nearby community with a wind farm) and they visited with a few of the neighbors and...being a small town like here, we all kind of visit, so we all kind of shared a few things with what that was like...' (Interview Subject D, 2017). For this landowner, the informal conversations common to small town life would provide spaces to deliberate and examine possibilities:

But whether we'd meet each other on the road or if we pulled into somebody's yard and asked about something else, we'd get visiting about these wind tower deals. Lot of it was just in common talk. We didn't really ever set up special meetings unless it was EnergyCorp put one together here. But over time ... you know, we'd have different conversations ... a cluster of 10–12 people would get together while we were having coffee and donuts afterwards or something (Interview Subject D, 2017).

Another landowner highlighted the importance of perspective and taking the temperature of the community. He mentioned talking to other landowners involved in the project during the study phase, 'just seeing what people were thinking. Whether they were in favor or not in favor...you want to be good neighbors, so just trying to see where everybody was' (Interview Subject A). Knowing 'where everybody was' enabled him to gather perspectives and clarify his own views by learning from others, comprehend risks and benefits, and consider obligations to different stakeholders. These meetings helped, it seems, to create a sense of fellow-feeling, of socialized or shared risk, reinforcing aspects of the official genres discussed above; just as the same landowner noted of the MET map, it showed 'that there was going to be something'. Neighbor talk helped cement that sentiment—that there was 'going to be something' involving others.

Interestingly, most interview subjects indicated that they themselves did minimal formal research on wind energy or the company proposing to site in Crow City. Instead, they relied on the local landowner group that came to represent them; this group, as noted above, gathered information from nearby communities, engaged with attorneys to examine contracts, negotiated setbacks (distance between turbines and other properties), and more. Additionally, these tactical sites helped local landowners retain agency, as they or their representative group took the official discourse offered via official genres by EnergyCorp and reframed it, negotiated it, and articulated it with local values in alternative discursive sites, much of this happening through informal community talk.

### ***The Integrated Rhetorical Work of Siting a Wind Farm***

It is not easy to comprehend the enormity of a wind development project without seeing it in person. Turbines often rise 250–400 feet above the ground. Each turbine requires the landowner to relinquish about a third of an acre of farmable land for siting. Tons and tons of concrete and rebar—reinforcing steel—are used to secure each turbine, and miles of transmission lines link them, carrying generated electricity to substations. Developing the project means building up roads and then carrying heavy machinery, huge rotors, and blades by flatbed, into fields filled with crops in various stages of development and over narrow maintenance trails. Hundreds of workers descend upon the town to build. And then, almost all of them leave, with dozens and dozens of these massive turbines spinning in their wake, their blinking lights, low hum, and towering profiles dotting the rolling hills and flat plains for miles.

To initiate such a project, a wind energy company must sell a vision, and it must do so in a particular manner that acknowledges and responds to local values regarding land. Not all aspects of the broader wind energy vision are rhetorically available. One landowner noted how little purchase, for instance, the allure of green energy had in persuading him and others: 'They (EnergyCorp) would get nowhere out here with that' (Interview Subject A, 2017).

One aspect of the vision that mattered in Crow City, however, was how wind might integrate with land as locally understood—what it is for, how it is cared for,



what it means, how it locates its stewards and their families. Landowners, connected to quarters of farmland that have been in families for roughly one hundred years, are fiercely protective of that ground. As one landowner's wife noted of the negotiations with EnergyCorp and the stakes involved:

We were trying to protect our land. You have to understand, this group of landowners all grew up here, so this farm ground isn't just something they bought in the last couple of years. They grew up in this area. They're very protective of [it]... If something this big is going on your land, you want to protect yourself, make sure that you're protected, that you have rights, and that you're not going to lose any rights to your land (Interview Subject F, 2017).

Every acre, then, is valued, part of both legacy and livelihood, and defined by agricultural production. Siting a turbine—or turbines—threatens a disruption of the land and this *version* of the land. Service roads to turbines, while at grade to enable easy farming, leave a mark. One landowner, describing the contractually-stipulated decommissioning process that EnergyCorp must follow to remove turbines if the project goes under, lamented, 'that spot (where the turbine sits) will always be there' in his field (Interview Subject A). Of the service roads built through fields, he noted, 'If you ever reclaim that soil (for farming), it will never be the same'. Potential impacts to farmland matter: land is valued—every acre and fraction of an acre—especially in a part of the country that produces corn and soybeans, two commodities whose respective values have fallen 40–50% since reaching unprecedented highs between 2012–2013 (USDA, 2018, Prices received for corn) (USDA, 2018, Prices received for soybeans).

Within this context, the official genres driving wind siting affirm the importance of the land while shifting its value, in part, from an agricultural paradigm to a wind energy paradigm. As chief rhetorical actions geared toward persuasion and action, these genres, then, I would argue, put pressure on community foundations through the re-imagination of the land as something other than agricultural. Doing

so necessarily impacts a second, highly important local value for harmony and 'neighborliness'. Understood and accepted relationships, solidified over generations and defined by and through a way of seeing the land for its agricultural value, are challenged through the wind farm siting process. One observer noted, for instance, that some landowners left out of the project 'want a bigger piece of the pie or, now... [they] see neighbors getting paid and wish they could get some of that' (Interview Subject E, 2017).

The same observer also mentioned other landowners whose property is adjacent to land with turbines and who are now bothered by the noise or visual obstruction turbines create—largely non-issues in the agriculturally-defined topography of the recent past. Working among other official genres, the MET map, in particular, redefines the land that serves as the anchor for a rural agricultural identity, land that has served as a common thread binding neighbors, as well as a bridge across generations. The map offers a profound reimagining in a different dimension, defamiliarizing the landscape and imposing an entirely novel economic template atop it. Such a template exposes not the land-as-seen and farmed but, instead, the land's invisible capacities—wind aloft, space for transmission lines below, and, consequently, a new value model of inclusion and participation. Doing so integrates the wind farm into the landscape and, more importantly, inserts wind into and, sometimes, into competition with the pre-existing, long-standing narratives of individual/family relations and neighborliness that are crucial to the community's identity, potentially reorganizing or unsettling those relations.

Even as this mapping redefined the land and the conditions for community by creating a new in/out group boundary rooted in project participation, EnergyCorp's own ability to perform 'neighborliness' well seemed crucial in forging an agreement for landowner participation, as well as for the general longer-term community acceptance the company has enjoyed. Among those landowners interviewed here—all of whom, again, were chosen to site—there was little complaint about EnergyCorp's comportment during the process nor its ongoing role in the community. Landowners seemed largely pleased with the wind energy company's performance of neighborliness throughout the process, which was enacted primarily

through remuneration, information, negotiation, construction, consideration, and maintenance. One landowner remarked, 'they've [EnergyCorp] been real good for the most part as far as working with people and staying on the good side of everybody', adding, 'They [EnergyCorp] run a clean show' (Interview Subject D, 2017). Another landowner noted the role that financial incentives played in nurturing an accepting community environment. 'They [EnergyCorp] were easy with the money' early on, citing EnergyCorp's early community donations and ample refreshments at landowner meetings (Interview Subject B, 2017). More, importantly, the company largely succeeded in demonstrating itself to be a careful steward of the land. One landowner cringed at his memory of an EnergyCorp truck driving around in his field while corn grew, but quickly acknowledged that while that was painful to watch, EnergyCorp had an easement allowing them to do so and would, by contract, pay any crop damages. More, he noted:

They [EnergyCorp] were very sensitive in trying to be good neighbors during the construction process to the people out here. So they did... and they actually drove the roads before they started, with a camera, and photographed them. Because in the contract, it says the roads have to be 'as good or better' than when they started—when they're done with the project. And they are. I would say they're better (Interview Subject A, 2017).

Attending to road conditions—always important in budget-strapped rural townships—signified EnergyCorp's self-awareness toward its impact, as well as an understanding of practical, local concerns. This type of awareness and neighborly behavior beyond contractual obligations clearly spoke to those interviewed in the study. For instance, one landowner noted that wind employees in an adjacent development would typically pull over their service vehicles when local farmers met them on the road in their tractors or were quick to compensate if they were responsible for any property damage (Interview Subject F, 2017). Such behavior resonated with a broader ethic communicated in interviews that recognized the importance of responsibility toward others in the community. One landowner

noted, 'You've got to be respectful of your neighbors' (Interview Subject A, 2017). Another, thumbing through old notes during our interview, remembered, 'I just made different marks [in his notes] about being good neighbors, getting along' (Interview Subject B, 2017). Being 'good neighbors' to one another remained important to landowners throughout the process, and EnergyCorp's reception among landowners interviewed here indicates that the company, too, was able to enact neighborliness in acceptable fashion to local stakeholders. Indeed, it is a bit ironic that EnergyCorp was able to make such a 'neighborly' impression, even as its larger initiative and official communication practices unsettled existing local neighbor relations among community members.

One interview subject expressed concern about how landowners approached by EnergyCorp were initially, perhaps, 'naïve' about the wind farm siting process, which he found entirely understandable due to the novelty of the process (Interview Subject E, 2017). Naiveté can create conditions for exploitation and loss wherein official discourse controls, overwhelms, and pushes citizen concerns aside, as in Simmons' study noted above. But the 'tactical technical communication' examples here played an important role in affirming and articulating local values to externally-driven processes—to reconciling the local and extra-local as Shucksmith describes. Landowners here talked with neighbors and friends to verify, educate and be educated, and interpret actions and terms in order to build consensus about EnergyCorp's overtures. This rhetorical activity was converted into advocacy work on the part of the landowners' group. While individual landowners ultimately made decisions about individually-owned land, conversation among neighbors helped maintain community through the process of land redefinition and the assumptions that come with it. As one landowner said with a smile and a wink when reflecting on conversations with other landowners, 'It just made you feel better knowing you weren't going into this alone, you know, beings we're all kind of in the same boat... you felt more secure about it beings if you were going to get rolled under the rug, 'least you was going to take your neighbor with you' (Interview Subject D, 2017). Such a comment reflects the constant dialogue between individual choice and community that characterized the interviews in this study. And while participation

and non-participation ultimately bore upon community dynamics, community and neighborliness remained central concerns throughout the process.

As noted above, this study was limited to affirmative cases—cases where a landowner agreed to site a turbine on his or her property and negotiated conditions with the wind company to do so. Some, though, chose not to site or were not chosen to site and quietly—or vocally—resisted the project. On one hand, these landowners' stances appear relatively straightforward, the risks and concerns about wind energy enumerated above offering reasonable explanation—noise, obstruction of cherished vistas, disruption. But even in this study of affirmative cases and the genres that coordinate affirmative decision making, it is clear that wind power companies' rhetorical approach leverages the impact of remapping mentioned above to reconfigure the community to an extent, casting those who participate in the project as insiders, those who do not as outsiders. As a landowner in an adjacent wind development project noted:

There's always, you know ... they [the wind energy company] got 90% of the ground signed up and there's ten, five percent—fighting. You know, then, so the project goes anyways because they [the wind energy company] got what they need. And if the wind tower people are following the rules, you know, there's nothing you can do to stop 'em, either. You know, it's just like anything else. If they're following the rules, that's just the way it is (Interview Subject F, 2017).

While such a quote suggests faith and belief in statutes and due process, there is also a hint of resignation or, at least, recognition that negotiation is challenging within such a context. One observer from the community noted that he had recently spoken with a farmer who had contrasted wind development with ethanol production, noting that the tax subsidies used to develop wind disproportionately benefited some landowners and communities, whereas 'everybody in the country that raised corn somewhat benefited from that [ethanol]' (Interview Subject E). While deeper discussion of those left out of the project and their reservations about development are beyond the scope

of this paper, it is clear that while EnergyCorp's rhetorical overtures demonstrated a welcome neighborliness, they also stirred the relatively stable ecology of relationship and community that existed prior to their arrival. One might say by way of tentative conclusion that the official genres employed here coordinate an incursion of sorts, persuading by articulating with local values, yet testing the contextual conditions that give rise to them.

### **Conclusion**

Siting a wind farm involves a blizzard of rhetorical actions, which parallel the profound upheaval that the hosting community and landscape undergo during a period of time when dozens of wind turbines are erected and connected, piece by piece, hundreds of tons of concrete by hundreds of tons of concrete, over months and months. The upheaval can be seen, optimistically, as part of economic development and potential rebirth for rural communities suffering population loss and diminishing economic prospects in an unpredictable agricultural climate. Wind farms position themselves as a solution.

At the same time, such progress is complicated. The volatility of commodity markets and scope of the economic challenges facing rural communities make it difficult to describe the blend of genres—official and unofficial, tactical—as coordinating an authentic *choice*, per se, regarding wind energy development. As sources above note, for some farmers, contracting with a wind energy company can mean the difference between continuing to farm and calling it quits. In the current study, financial impacts were not described in such existential terms, but there is little doubt that the financial incentives included here were instrumental in securing landowner participation.

However complicated, as Shucksmith (2018), Schell (2007), and others above note, reconciling local cultures, values, and sensibilities toward innovation with external forces that are positioned to enact development is crucial to successful rural development initiatives. Key communication acts and genres in the siting process described here put this tension on display and point toward a kind of 'reconciliation' of motives and values, or, perhaps, an ongoing effort to seek alignment between

wind energy practices and local values. The broader ecology of genres and variety of communication acts and spaces—some visible and official, some tactical and in the margins—coordinate an assimilation of new interests, an accommodation of the new into the old that spotlights key elements of rural deliberation and future-building.

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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