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Towards pragmatic narratives of societal engagement in the UK energy system

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ABSTRACT

Issues of societal engagement in the energy system pervade both the study and the doing of energy policy. In both realms, narratives as persuasive 'vehicles of meaning' help us both to make sense of society's role in past and current energy systems, and shape these roles in future energy systems. However, our eagerness to simplify complex histories and unwritten futures means that the narratives we create are often reliant on assumptions. This has implications for the degree to which narratives can find pragmatism, and thus be valuable, to a wide range of stakeholders.

Drawing both on historic accounts of societal engagement in energy systems alongside emerging discourses around future energy systems, this paper offers several points of caution for the use of narratives of engagement. In terms of historic narratives, these relate to hindsight bias, predictability, and normative positioning, the combination of which depict histories of engagement as retrospectively obvious, and falsely suggest a controllability of past events. In terms of forward-looking narratives, while optimism and ambiguity play key roles in garnering interest in visions among stakeholders, they also mean that narratives vary in their relevance, and thus value to, different stakeholders. Fundamentally, narratives must find legitimacy in the actors they purport to recruit, and must thus simultaneously attend to regulative, normative and cognitive aspects of energy system engagement.

1. Introduction

The centrality of people in energy systems means that issues of societal engagement pervade both the study and the doing of energy policy. The processes and outcomes of decision-making in energy system affect, and are affected by, the nature and depth of interaction publics have with other dimensions of energy systems, such as technologies and institutions. The support of specific forms, scales and geographies of technology; the creation of markets, mechanisms and tariffs for producing and supplying energy to users; the design of domestic demand reduction measures; and the processes and institutions related to decision-making within energy systems more broadly enable, and are enabled by engagement of varying forms and degrees with societal actors. The speed of change in many energy systems with regard technological and social innovation, not least in the UK, means that the potential for both the breadth and depth of public engagement within such systems is profound.

The variety of ways in which one can engage with the energy system is vast, and while actors may disagree about which forms of engagement are most important, building a whole-system perspective on energy requires consideration of each and all forms. In the broadest sense, societal engagement in energy systems includes the combination of knowledge, decisions, and behaviours that individually and collectively affect the production and consumption of energy, both directly and indirectly. It comprises a variety of roles individuals might play, not least around making sense of, using, producing, distributing, shaping, supporting and opposing social and material elements of energy systems.

In seeking to affect the relationship between society and future energy systems, actors are continually engaged in efforts to understand, either explicitly or implicitly, historic, contemporary and future dimensions of societal engagement [1]. These are embodied within both scholarly and public discourses, for example within reflections on past energy systems [e.g. 3–5], analyses of contemporary energy systems, as well as the wide range of forecasting, visioning, and consulting exercises that seek both to describe, and shape future energy systems [e.g. 6–10]. Alongside these are efforts to explicitly link historic energy transitions to future transitions, with the intention of drawing on lessons from the former to inform the latter [5,11][e.g. 5,11].

This paper develops the concept as narratives as a lens through

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which actors seek both to make sense of historic energy systems and shape future energy systems. It is argued that narratives of societal engagement are developed both actively and passively among energy system actors, and are critical in helping us understand, in relatively simple terms, the complex role of people in past, present and future energy systems. However, in seeking to weave simplified stories of societal engagement out of complex systems, such narratives often rely on assumption and generalization, misrepresenting the role of key actors, overemphasizing the impact of events, and presuming the overarching morals in question, which limits their value among energy system actors. With this in mind, the paper calls for the reformulation of such narratives to find more impact in the study and doing of energy policy.

To this end, the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 develops the concept of pragmatic narratives of societal engagement as an analytical lens, distinguishing it from established frameworks for comprehending past, present and future energy systems. Section 3 describes the building blocks of two dominant narratives of relating to societal engagement with the energy system in the UK: The first implicating the centralization of the energy system in the creation of the passive energy consumer; and the second focusing on the redemptive, and ultimately transformative impact of distributed technologies on creating conditions for energy citizenship. Section 4 unpacks the fallibility of these narratives in terms of the assumptions embedded within and discusses how the value of reengagement narratives could be improved by enhancing the rigor and relevance of their construction.

2. Narratives of engagement in energy systems

2.1. Distinguishing features of the narrative

A range of concepts have emerged over the last few decades out of the desire to make sense of, and to shape future energy systems. Of central relevance to this discussion is Jasanoff and Kim's work on 'sociotechnical imaginaries', which they define as "collectively imagined forms of social life and social order reflected in the design and fulfilment of nation-specific scientific and/or technological projects" [12]. In articulating specific visions of desirable and attainable futures, imaginaries can be considered as powerful cultural resource, which alongside material and organisational resources, can help shape social responses to innovation [13]. In parallel to this, Sovacool and Brossman add to the sociological literature on innovation expectations by exploring the notion of 'fantasy' within energy futures, whose formulation serves psychological and cultural needs through the development of optimistic, pervasive, but sometimes irrational visions of technological progress and its prospects [14,15].

Focusing more practically on the role of discourse within energy policymaking, several authors have explored the notion of 'narratives' or 'storylines', as shared terms and concepts, through which complex problems are restructured and given meaning [16–21]. The emergence of multiple, incompatible storylines, it has been argued, can create opportunities for policy change [16]. For example, Lovell et al. identify four interrelated storylines concerning energy and climate change, used variously by actor coalitions to affect discourse around technological innovation [22].

While the concepts discussed here are clearly of value, this paper argues that the 'narrative' concept offers rather more scope for understanding issues of societal engagement in energy systems. In common with these other concepts, narratives can be understood as 'vehicles of meaning', which help us to make sense of the world, or in this case, the energy system. However, through the articulation of settings, characters, plots and morals, narratives can be especially useful in organising discourses and events into coherent and consistent timelines, and highlighting the role of actors within these events [23–27]. Narratives are thus well aligned with efforts to understanding and communicating processes of change, such as those within energy systems [28,29]. In parallel to sociotechnical imaginaries and fantasies, the creation of narratives thus fulfil psychological, cultural and political needs by helping to organise and communicate thoughts such as around cause and effect, actor and agency.For these reasons the use of narrative as a descriptive as well as prescriptive tool has therefore found currency within the study of policymaking in which understandings of key agendas and issues shape discourse and politics, constraining both methods of analysis and the development of viable solutions [30–38].

Another key distinction between narrative and other tools is the wide temporal frame within which narratives can be articulated. Narrative accounts can be related to past events as well as future-oriented visions and indeed, sense-making in any one direction can be difficult to isolate from the other. Rather than limiting their usefulness, it is this dualistic orientation that offers the concept of the narrative real value. Lessons from the past can enhance our understanding of what is possible in the future [e.g. see 39,40], just as thinking about the future can encourage reflection and reassessment of our established understandings of the present [e.g. 41]. Similarly, efforts to understand the dynamics of contemporary energy systems can be simultaneously instructive for both history- and future looking.

2.2. Normativity and constructivism in narratives of engagement

Normativity plays a dominant role in both past and future energy narratives. The stories we tell each other about future energy systems involve judgements about the roles various actors *should* play, the technologies and behaviours they *should* employ, and the costs and benefits they *should* incur and receive. In making these judgements, the adoption of a specific set of philosophical and moral values associated with the processes and outcomes of societal engagement are invoked, such as those concerning equity, legitimacy, or justice [42,43]. Such normativity means that narratives of engagement are inherently contestable, and can thus be expected to play significant roles within both policy and scholarly discourse.

Narratives also seek to blend positivist (referring to the pursuit of scientifically-derived objective knowledge) versus constructivist (referring to subjective interpretations of the world) understandings of the role of people in energy systems [1,44]. Events, storylines, and endpoints within both historic and future narratives (and connected visions) must all be plausible, that is, they must characterise accurate representations of how actors might behave, reasonable expectations of how events might unfold, and practical prospects for how endgames can develop. Energy policymaking and scholarship both have traditionally been reliant on positivist lines of enquiry, a vestige of supply-oriented technocracy dominated by engineering and economic thinking [45]. However, the realisation of the importance of the social, rather than just the physical dimensions of energy systems supports, and is supported by, the growth of constructivism − and social science more generally − within energy scholarship [46–48]. Even in those areas where positivist approaches appear to remain dominant, for example in the projection of future technology costs, robustness of analyses is limited by inherent subjectivities of analysts around the shape and speed of deployment [49–53]. A cornerstone of this paper is that all narratives, whether consciously or unconsciously constructed, are mere interpretations of historic or future realities.

2.3. The search for narrative in energy policymaking

As we increase our efforts to understand the circumstances of past energy systems, as well as the challenges and opportunities of future energy systems, we are increasingly depending on the power of narrative to give meaning to otherwise complex, unpredictable systems to help shape discourses of engagement within energy system governance. In the last few decades, narratives of societal engagement can be seen embedded across a range of these efforts, including among othe examples, scholarly and public energy system modelling exercises,