

Research article

The discourse of “social licence to operate”: case study of the Australian wind industry

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Abstract: Social Licence to Operate is a concept from the mining industry that reflects the ongoing acceptance or approval for a development granted by local stakeholders. It is now being applied by wind farm developers. Using the Australian wind industry as a case study, this discourse analysis examined how Social Licence to Operate is perceived and operationalised, and the key themes in this conceptual and applied discourse. Discourse analysis acknowledges that language choices are not accidental and discourse reflects power relationships. The wind industry representatives interviewed considered power over the Social Licence to Operate was shared with community stakeholders. They recognised the stakeholders' power to delay or prevent projects, but rejected the notion that every stakeholder group should have veto power. Social Licence to Operate is seen by the wind industry through a business-oriented perspective, with an emphasis on business risk, and they describe the opposition to wind farms by invoking a metaphor of “battle”. The industry respondents described Social Licence to Operate as incorporating the values of trust, transparency and participation—which all contribute to creating “authentic” relationships. These findings can inform Social Licence to Operate research, engagement practices, and also encourage reflection by industry representatives on their implicit intentions for stakeholder engagement.

Keywords: social licence to operate; stakeholder engagement; wind farms; renewable energy; discourse analysis; corporate social responsibility

1. Introduction

Environmental impact and public acceptability can be key challenges to specific proposed developments in particular places [1]. The “social licence to operate” (SLO) concept has been offered as a frame through which to respond to community concerns and opposition to such

controversial developments [2]. A SLO describes a best practice engagement approach that an industry might adopt to secure acceptance from affected stakeholders within the community in which a development is proposed [3,4]. The SLO concept can incorporate considerations of physical, economic and social aspects of a development beyond the formal regulation for impact and risk assessment, with the intended goal of achieving stakeholder acceptance [5]. For clarity in this article, a SLO is defined as the ongoing acceptance or approval for a development granted by the local community and other stakeholders [2,6].

Given the media publicity of opposition to some wind farms in Australia [7,8,9], it appears that these developments may not hold a current SLO with the communities in which they are located. Research that reviewed the application of a SLO from the mining industry suggests there is potential for a SLO framework to methodically and comprehensively build greater social acceptance of wind farms [5,8].

As the SLO concept diffuses from mining to another industry, it may be assumed to have a common meaning and application. This neglects the underlying discourses that inform the application of such concepts and indeed risks “reinforcing managerialist and technocratic ways of thinking about companies’ social and environmental responsibilities...” [10], p.3. Furthermore, research examining the wind industry specifically has identified appropriation and manipulation of international community guidelines to exert more bias to the wind industry [11]. As the SLO concept is increasingly cited in media, annual reports and other industry document within and beyond the mining industry to industries such as the more recent wind industry, it was considered pertinent to investigate the concept’s diffusion and the associated meanings that a SLO may bring. In response, this research examines the recent introduction of a SLO usage by the Australian wind industry through discourse analysis. This method can be useful to reveal the underlying reasons as to why, how, and to what effect a SLO discourse is circulating in the wind industry. From this foundation of understanding, the research outcomes can inform both researchers of stakeholder engagement practices- including a SLO- as well as encourage industry representatives to reflect and better understand the consequences of their use of the SLO terminology.

1.1. The emergence of “social licence to operate” from the mining industry

The term “social licence to operate” emerged from the mining industry as a way to respond to local community expectations of consultation and engagement practices, as well as a counter-response to opposition and the ongoing “viability” of the industry [12]. Such expectations were raised in similar analyses of the new and existing resource developments, and managing such expectations were considered to be a key feature for a SLO [13,14].

Community relations in the minerals industry have become increasingly recognised as a strategic part of managing risk and opportunity [15]. Literature on the mining industry’s understanding of the need for a SLO found industry representatives citing the need to go beyond formal licensing conditions to mine, towards a SLO in their community engagement, planning, and operational activities [16].

When embedded in the broader context of corporate social responsibility, the external drivers towards adopting a SLO approach can be related to corporate reputation, stakeholder expectations, and legislation [17]. In parallel, the internal drivers for adopting such an approach can be improved corporate performance and the associated economic case [18]. As the mining industry continues to

mature in this environment, community relations at a project level are being elevated in importance within the industry [19].

The coining of the SLO concept reflects the mining industry's efforts to "reinvent" its image to one that "can facilitate social development and environmental sustainability" [10], p.2). However, in doing so, a clash of discourses—and therefore a clash of values and ideologies—can arise between mining, social responsibility and environmental conservation [10]. Despite this common motivation from the mining industry, there is no set definition of a SLO employed by the mining (or other) industries, and the depth of understanding and importance of the concept differs across companies and individual industry representatives [12,16]. This suggests that the SLO concept is at an ideal stage for discourse analysis, as there are competing ideas of a SLO and evidence of discursive struggle.

1.2. Challenges to social acceptance of wind farms

Researchers of wind farm acceptance in the UK, Europe and Australia have identified a "social gap" between publicly surveyed support for wind generated electricity and opposition to local sites, as well as an "individual gap" between general support for wind energy generation but opposition to a specific development site [1,8,20,21]. The explanations for these gaps have been identified as (in no particular order) limited stakeholder contribution to planning decisions, poor quality public consultation, selection of highly visible and "valued" landscapes, and increased legal rights for local community members to legally prevent a wind farm development.

As a proven technology with excellent potential resources in Australia, it is anticipated that wind power could be the earliest and majority contributor of new renewable energy generated for the 20 percent national Renewable Energy Target (RET) [22]. As of 2012, Australia's total operating wind capacity provides around 2.4 percent of Australia's total electricity generation at 2480 MW from 59 operating wind farms [23]. A further 90 wind farms are proposed, with a total expected generation of 14,000 MW [23,24]. However, in Australia in particular, there has been publicised opposition to some wind farms by community stakeholders high levels of societal resistance are creating the potential to slow down or halt the trajectory for achieving the RET of 20 per cent renewable power by 2020, through predominantly wind power. Opposition groups, often called "Landscape Guardians", have been visibly profiled in the media as opposing wind farms in Australia [8]. Such opposition has stimulated the wind industry to seek deeper stakeholder engagement. Given the power and pervasiveness of the mining industry in Australia and its increasing adoption of the SLO discourse, this may have identified the wind industry to adopt the SLO concept as a response (for example, see [25,26]).

1.3. The increasing adoption of "social licence to operate" by the wind industry

Beyond mining, other industries have begun to utilise the SLO concept and discourse, including the wind industry in Australia. It is likely that this adoption encompasses the same hopes invested in the mining industry's use of a SLO—that the concept can be "potentially transformative in the way that companies and communities might relate to each other" [16], p.5.

Industry developers can approach a SLO both implicitly and explicitly, and Corvellec [2] notes that an implicit SLO can develop as wind developers seek acceptance of their proposals through

open communication at local meetings, local government engagement, formal legal applications and various required assessments. Such an implicit ambition is illustrated by one wind farm developer, Union Fenosa, outlining in a policy submission that the company “believes in the concept” of a SLO, and identified the centrality of community engagement to secure a SLO [25].

In a more applied approach, the peak body representing the Australian renewable energy industry, the Clean Energy Council, has developed community engagement guidelines for the Australian wind industry as a tool aimed at explicitly gaining a SLO for wind farm sites [5]. In doing so, the CEC anticipates that each wind farm developer will more fully understand the sentiments of affected stakeholders, and then respond to these to achieve acceptance and approval [5], p.4. The CEC proposes that a SLO can assist the integration of social and economic benefits from the wind farm into the local and wider community through identification of concerns and opportunities from the affected stakeholders’ perspective. The CEC also suggest that the negotiation and successful maintenance of a SLO at a specific site can improve the reputation of both the specific wind developer and the wind industry more generally [5], p.5.

2. Materials and methods

This research examines how the wind industry has appropriated the term “Social Licence to Operate” and defined it for their purposes. It applies a social constructivist perspective on the language used by the wind developers to discuss a SLO, using processes informed by discourse analysis. As the leading discourse analysis scholar, Fairclough, described, the choice of language reflects a significant amount of power and social relations [27]. Therefore, discourse is the way in which language is used to communicate ideas and concepts, and it is assumed that it is not a neutral tool in describing an individual’s reality [28]. Discourse analysis is the study of language, and how it creates and reflects “socially constructed realities” [28,29]. It is a constructivist approach as it explores how language both reflects reality while construing a particular perspective [30].

A key strength of discourse analysis in the study of a new concept, such as the SLO concept, is that it analyses how power and agency are expressed through language. Such analysis can reveal “relationships of hierarchy, cooperation, and competition embedded in particular discourses” [31], p.193, and how discourses construct and then maintain power relationships [30]. It can also reveal the emergence of the SLO concept as a nodal discourse which may subsume and articulate previous or other discourses [32]; in this case it may be Corporate Social Responsibility. This analysis can also identify how certain groups, known as discourse coalitions, apply language in specific ways; each coalition describes a situation with a different message [33]. Finally, discourse analysis can assist to identify solutions to a given problem—but can also limit the range of solutions. The dominant “storyline” outlines the perceived history and management of an issue, thus also highlighting a certain solution [31,34].

A broad literature review was initially conducted to identify the trends and previous findings from research on the SLO discourse in industry, including several articles that focused on the specific relevance of a SLO in the wind industry. This literature informed the interviews that were the primary data for this research as they allow for in-depth explorations into participants’ perceptions and experiences [35]. Interviews were sought to reflect the diversity of the industry in terms of company size, established wind farms and companies trialling an approach different to the mainstream. The resulting interviews were conducted with representatives from large-scale

commercial wind farm developers, a community-owned wind farm and the wind industry's main association to provide a diversity of interpretations of the SLO discourse. Those with responsibility for stakeholder relations and/or project management from within the wind energy industry were selected because regular stakeholder engagement—and the potential for applying a SLO discourse—is conducted by these personnel. Due to the small size of the Australian wind industry, wind farm names and companies were withheld for confidentiality and to allow greater sharing of perspectives. It is noted that only representatives of wind farm developers were interviewed, and that alternative perspectives beyond this small group were absent. The scope was limited in order to initially explore the developers' perspective in depth, with the intention that later research will provide additional perspectives beyond the developer. Such later analysis will also provide participant observation of a SLO in practice from non-developer representatives. However, it is noted that discourse analysis is always a partial analysis, where the depth is sought rather than breadth.

Interviews were undertaken with the ethical approval of the CSIRO Committee under the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (reference 082/12). A written consent form was provided to interviewees prior to the interview by email, and verbal consent was secured prior to starting the interview, with approval of this approach by the Committee. The interviewees were only commenced once approval was provided, and approval was provided by all interviewees approached. Interview questions covered the participants' understanding of consultation and a SLO, their perceptions of a SLO in practice, and their experiences regarding community engagement for wind energy projects. The interviews conducted were semi-structured in their approach, and conducted by telephone. Rapport was first established with the interviewee with some introductory conversation, and questions were asked in a relaxed, conversational manner. Initial set questions guided the conversation between the interviewer and interviewees, but with the flexibility to pose more probing questions to extract more detailed and elaborate responses [35,36].

A purposive sampling technique was used until the same themes were regularly echoed by the representatives. In total, eighteen interviews were conducted in early 2013, representing ten commercial wind farm developers, five community-owned wind farm developers, and one industry body. Each interview took approximately 30 minutes. Each interview was recorded digitally and transcribed verbatim by a professional service, as per ethical clearance requirements (CSIRO 082/12). The transcripts of the interviews were analysed using methods informed by discourse analysis, described below to ensure that the SLO concept was not accepted at face value, but incorporated elements of existing and previous discourses, and with implicit intentions for managing societal acceptance of a development [32]. The analysis was conducted with a detailed understanding of the company and projects within which the interviewees were engaged, acknowledging that discourse "cannot be understood in isolation from the social practice in which it is produced" [10], p.5). The language of the interviewees was examined through textual analysis of the transcripts to consider how each respondent described the SLO concept in definition and in practice to allow an interdiscursive comparison [32].

The analysis involved close examination of the interview transcripts to create codes that define the data and the meaning within it [37]. Three stages of analysis occurred. Firstly, there was an initial broad coding of the research themes that constitute the overarching discourse. Extracted quotes within these themes were then interpreted to ascertain its underlying motivation and to identify sub-themes. The final stage involved examining the relationships between the transcripts to identify where they interacted and contrast [34]. Validation of the codes occurred through the involvement of

a second researcher, who coded five transcripts in parallel. These same transcripts were compared for similarities and differences, and the themes adjusted in response to ensure consistency.

The analysis was facilitated by the use of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, namely QSR NVivo, to efficiently organise the large data sets using simple data analysis, storage and retrieval functions [38,39]. NVivo facilitated an iterative analysis process through the assignment, sorting, and linking of codes and data segments.

3. Results and discussion

Focusing on the language of the interview transcripts, five main research themes emerged from both the actual statements and from analysis of what may have been the intention of the language and the context around these statements. This analysis of the implicit meanings occurred through close familiarity and continual re-reading of the transcripts, as well as consideration of the circumstances of the company for which the interviewee represented. The identified themes, and the sub-themes nested within these, are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Key themes.

Key theme	Sub themes
Discursive diffusion of the SLO concept	n/a
A SLO in operation	Relationships Dynamic SLO SLO = acceptance Existing SLO for wind industry
Values of a SLO	Availability Trust Transparency Participation
Power	Power relations Battle language Blaming the predecessors
Business model	Economic case Risks of a SLO Risk mitigation of a SLO

3.1. Discursive diffusion of the SLO concept

No common definition of a SLO was provided by interviewees. However, acceptance held by the majority of community and other stakeholders formed the core of most definitions of a SLO. This incorporated acceptance of the use of the land, the visual change in the view, the presence of the wind developer, and of the project in general. One interviewee defined a SLO as “the benefits of that project or operation outweigh any impacts of it ... a societal judgment on the balance of benefits versus impacts” (Interviewee 3). This core definition aligns with the finding of Owen and Kemp [12] that a SLO is the gaining of acceptance from stakeholders for the project that can be demonstrated

explicitly. By granting such a licence, the community and other stakeholders expect that certain obligations will be met and behaviours demonstrated [40].

Although the literature of a SLO clearly tracks the emergence of the SLO concept from the mining industry, an important result was that the wind industry interviewees did not reference that industry in their comments; this suggested that a normalising effect of the discourse was apparent, whereby the term was accepted and absorbed without being apparent as having transferred from another industry. It also suggests that the “frame” provided by the mining industry’s coining of the term is not explicit, and that the diffusion of this concept from one industry to another has not been direct or obvious. In research that discusses concepts that are not yet stabilised, this lack of commonality can provide a time of “innovation and creativity” and then trigger a “coming together of interests and actors around a new discourse” [1], p.13. Combined, these can contribute to a common narrative and thus common solutions; in turn, these new approaches can influence new policies for stakeholder engagement in developments.

The diffusion of the SLO discourse appeared to be interpreted differently for three groups: one held by the more traditional, large-scale and commercially-owned wind farms who consider engagement practices to be part of improving business practice; one by the developers described by current developers as seeking a SLO for the short-term only, prior to selling the development; and one by the smaller-scale, community-owned wind farms who strive for a longer-term, more embedded engagement goal where the wind developer is part of the community’s common future. Each of these discourses is mentioned in further detail in later sections.

3.2. *A SLO in operation*

Despite a lack of common definition for a SLO in the wind industry, interviewees expressed common phrases and terms in their discourse when describing the features, definition and existence of an applied SLO. Most interviewees expressed their core aim was to achieve an engaged relationship with the community. Table 2 presents the most commonly-cited words that were used to describe a SLO. The six most frequently used words (in order from most cited) were “change”, “community”, “relation”, “judging” and “social”. When these words are considered together, they suggest an image of community interaction, expectations and judgment, and consideration of a new development that will affect a community.

One interviewee provides further illustration of the way a SLO is defined:

Social license to operate—yes, it is a buzz-word. It doesn’t change the importance of ... having a relationship with a community, and making sure that there is honest engagement ongoing with a developer (Interviewee 31).

The importance of a relationship was further emphasised by another interviewee who felt that the project details are insignificant compared to the engagement process:

and if you mess [engagement] up from the start it can be very difficult to reclaim that ground ... and then people get left out, issues will be ignored, views will not be considered (Interviewee 10).

Table 2. Frequency of words used by wind developers to define a SLO*.

Word	Count
change	173
community	156
relation	134
judging	111
operate	103
acceptance	102
reasonable	76
measured	75
clear	66
planning	64
managed	63
allows	60
agreement	59
support	59
expectations	55
good	53
information	52
process	52
understand	52

*Note that similes were combined and counted as one word automatically within NVivo 10 software. For example: Change = build, develop, difference, exchange, impact, increase, outcome, realise, start; Community = consideration, deliver, group, organisation, stake; Relation = agreement, balance, place, position, trust.

This emphasis on relationships reflects similar findings from research on the SLO concept in the mining industry. Parsons and Moffat [10] identified that SLO discussions focused predominantly on relationships between communities and the local mining projects, while Prno [41], p.587) found that “relationship-building and engagement” is a key element of a SLO. This common focus on relationships being inherent to a SLO suggests the importance bestowed upon these by wind farm developers, described by one as:

At the end of the day you have to reach some happy medium with the community (Interviewee 10).

All interviewees described a SLO as dynamic, and that its status is affected by the different stages of the project life cycle, different stakeholder groups, as well as “how issues are managed or not managed” (Interviewee 10). Interviewees considered that a SLO could exist at both the project and industry level, but that their status could differ at any one time. Many interviewees expressed both the “fragile” nature of the SLO concept in its ability to change or be lost, and acknowledged that a SLO was a “snapshot of a moment in time” (Interviewee 12). All independently contributed that a SLO was something to be “constantly adjusted” (Interviewee 1).

With some of the above features in mind, nearly half of the interviewees considered that the industry did indeed hold a current SLO with the Australian public, and that specific projects (but not all) may also hold a SLO. Several interviewees based their claim of a SLO on various surveys that

reflected widespread public support for wind farms and the political support for increased renewable energy generation, such as wind power.

3.3. Values of a SLO

A significant contribution to the SLO literature from this discourse analysis is the value set articulated by interviewees as key to a SLO at their respective wind farms. These values were availability, trust, transparency and participation—which all contributed to creating “authentic” relationships. These are each detailed below.

As a first stage to any engagement process, interviewees identified the importance of “being available”. For wind developers that own and operate their wind farms, such availability is offered with the intention of establishing the wind developer as a long-term community member. Availability can extend to site visits to enable stakeholders to physically experience the scale and sound of wind turbines:

It makes such a huge difference if you have a journalist or a council planner or one of your landholders out to the site where they can stand under a turbine, see what it looks like and really get an impression of what we're on about (Interviewee 1).

Another developer described being available to a voluntary community liaison group for all interested parties was a:

Two-way forum for the negotiables: we've taken a lot of information out of that and adjusted our operational approach and our engagement approach' (Interviewee 1).

Availability was also described in terms of allowing media access and responses. One interviewee outlined their media approach:

The media loves a juicy story, and they will focus on the negative. We really focus on the facts and try to get the real message out there (Interviewee 4).

Trust was expressed by interviewees as leading to a higher likelihood of wind farm acceptance, and made communication much easier and more effective. However, trust was also noted as hard to secure and easy to lose. The literature has suggested that, if trust is established and maintained, affected stakeholders may be more likely to trust the data and the interpretations that are presented to them by the wind developer [42]. Similarly, McDowell [43] argued that data and logical arguments may be less likely to be absorbed or supported without trust. For wind farms, developing trust has been linked to the industry's growth and development in Australia [5]. One interviewee outlined three stages of trust required by wind developers from the project stakeholders:

The first element is “I trust what you say”. The second element is “I trust that you are genuinely listening to me”. And the third element for me is about delivery ... if I undertake to do something, then you can trust me to actually do it (Interviewee 3).

All interviewees made recommendations on how they had (or could) secure such trust. Many noted that the company and industry's preceding reputation influenced this. For one developer, they had built this trust by requiring the project manager to respond to community consultation tasks, which had been well-received by local stakeholders as they could receive a direct and accurate response, described as:

People do like to speak to people that know their area, that are familiar with the area (Interviewee 4).

Most wind developers described the value of being transparent by sharing information and

allowing broad participation to assist wind farm acceptance and to contribute to an authentic engagement-based relationship. Many developers hold public information meetings at the initiation of a proposal. For one developer, such a meeting was to ask the community whether they would support a wind farm in their local area, and to explore their views for or against the proposal. Another developer described the purpose of such meetings as providing local and other stakeholders with:

objectives, statistics, background data, and diagrams about the wind farm, so hopefully it reduces the “don’t know” and the anxiety and it means that they can make a decision about ... the wind farm project based on that information, rather than go on some of the misinformation that might be out there (Interviewee 1).

Several interviewees forecast that the participatory nature of engagement seemingly inherent to a SLO will come to be expected in future wind developments, and will be considered as an effective approach for wind farm development:

We’re moving into an era ... where we need to have far more participatory orientated processes that are much more inclusive as well as participatory, [with] stakeholders or affected parties involved in delivering processes for decision making (Interviewee 21).

3.4. Power

Power is an essential component of discourse analysis approaches. Discourse analysis examines the use of language to illustrate how the equality (and inequality) of power relations are maintained and change in society. As Fairclough [27], p.1, described, there is a “widespread underestimation of the significance of language in the production, maintenance and change of social relations of power”.

In this research, the descriptions of relations between the wind developers and stakeholders appeared to reflect a shifting power balance between them. The industry commonly introduces and leads the stakeholder engagement process, with the aim of achieving a SLO. This is commonly the case in the Australian wind industry, and appears to have influenced the power relations inherent in steps towards a SLO, as described in the references to the oppositional voices, the approach to consultation, and the legacy of previous developers.

Power relations were vividly described by interviewees in the context of opposition to wind farms. Interviewees considered that such opposition had increased significantly in recent years, resulting in rejected wind farm proposals, delays, and increased costs that have a “snowball effect” on to other wind farm developments. Interviewees described how well-publicised opposition has contributed to policies that enable single individuals to veto a wind farm development:

This bizarre situation we have in Victoria: ... just one individual concerned [can] stop it dead, even though they might not see it, might not hear it, might not even know it’s there, but they’ve still got that authority (Interviewee 21).

In response, interviewees described their company’s willingness to negotiate—but ideally with clear limitations around the scope for negotiation and for this to be clearly controlled by the developer. As one interviewee explained, the risk of negotiating options can “undermine the viability of the whole project” (Interviewee 21), suggesting that sufficient opposition can lead to a community-oriented outcome. Some interviewees described how decision-making power rested with the developer (and not the community). They emphasised that they clearly articulated their expectations to the community, and always mentioned that oppositional feedback might not prevent

the wind farm from being approved and constructed. One stated:

We need to make very clear that just because [a stakeholder] thinks or feels that this is the worst thing that's ever happened, and are totally opposed to it, doesn't mean we're going to stop (Interviewee 21).

This approach supports that of Seeger [3] who recommended that, when entering negotiation aspects of engagement, the developer should explain their “sphere of influence” regarding the issues for which they have responsibility. Interviewees emphasised that the concept phase is where the developer can allow stakeholders to “have any true influence over the project” (Interviewee 24). For example, negotiations were possible at many wind farms for the number and positioning of turbines, the route of easements for powerlines, and locations of access roads. It may be valuable to later explore the developer's 'scope of intentions' to seek to understand, from a community perspective, how this fits with the broader approvals and development process.

A number of interviewees emphasised the importance of following through with stated commitments to avoid undermining a SLO. They noted that once a promise had been broken and concerns created that “it's very hard to come back from that position” (Interviewee 23), that the “relationship will be shut down immediately” (Interviewee 8), and that subsequent wind developers in that area would have their SLO negatively affected as a consequence. The acknowledged importance of delivering on agreed expectations formed the core definition of a SLO for one interviewee:

If I asked people what social licence was in [this town], they'd have no idea ... essentially they're after someone that can become engaged within their local community, that they do what they say they're going to do (Interviewee 11).

Vocal opposition was noted by an interviewee as inhibiting their intentions for “genuine community consultation” (Interviewee 16). There were a number of interviewees who invoked language suited to a metaphorical battle to illustrate their experience in confrontational situations of engagement with hostile community stakeholders and the media, as displayed in the Table 3.

Table 3. Language describing the metaphorical battle of stakeholder engagement.

Statement	Interviewee ID
'It's a double-edged sword ... we've stuck our head up above the parapet and started communicating and asking for opinions ... [and] we got it with both barrels'	1
'opponents take over and it just defeats the whole purpose of having a consultation process. It's not a consultation, it's a shouting match'	6
'the project ruffled an awful amount of feathers'	15
'a real antagonistic engagement'	21
'I'd say 70% of [media stories are] pretty aggressively against developers'	24
'the wind industry has to combat [the media portrayal] to some extent'	25

The statements in the above table suggest that the wind developers using the battle metaphor consider themselves to have a mission to establish wind farms despite the opposition that may exist, which may have developed as the experience in engagement developed. In doing so within this metaphor, they are entering into the next engagement with a specific mentality of opposition, allies, victor, losers, acceptable collateral damage and losses. This perspective was extended by several

interviewees who noted the importance of engaging more comprehensively with—or at times even mobilising—the allied stakeholders who support the wind farm. Some interviewees described the credibility that contributes to a SLO from such local ‘champions’ who already have the respect and reputation in the community, and minimises suspicion of the developer. They cited a local petition in support of the wind farm that was featured in the local newspaper, individuals who publish web-based “blogs” about the value of wind farms, and a local organisation that promotes wind farms as they believe it is “good” for their own community. Through these champions, interviewees also saw the possibility to “mobilize” support from:

The middle ground—those people who perhaps are agnostic about wind or sort of supported it, but didn't feel that they knew enough (Interviewee 1).

Another strategy applied was to position their status as more progressive developers. Many interviewees sought to differentiate the company from the activities of the wind developers that had preceded them in a given region or had initially owned and then sold the approval to develop. They stated how previous wind developers had conducted poor or shallow consultation, and that this had negatively affected the reputation of the whole industry. One developer described their predecessors' approaches at some projects as:

Confrontational ... [stakeholders were told], “this thing's happening, so jump on board or you're an idiot”... (Interviewee 15).

Two interviewees were adamant that the industry did not currently hold a SLO and that this was due to:

The sins of the early developers ... not really having any genuine consultation about whether the communities want this sort of industry there or not at all (Interviewee 24).

This suggests that there may be three “discourse coalitions” of a SLO within the wind industry—from those that hold short term ownership to develop then sell the approved site, through to those who intend to build, own and operate the farm long-term. This location of power and associated power relations suggest that robust challenges by stakeholders within the discourse coalitions could be helpful in reassigning the location of power.

3.5. Economic case

Interviewees provided descriptions of how they secured a SLO. A strong business-oriented perspective infused the descriptions of a SLO by the interviewees. The descriptions included the importance of the economic case (to both company and the stakeholders), the perceived business risks posed by seeking a SLO, as well as how a SLO can mitigate business risks. The importance of achieving corporate expectations and business outcomes is dually emphasised in the literature of the related concept of corporate social responsibility (Lozano, 2013). Such a focus was both implicit and explicit in comments from interviewees in this research. Indeed, the economic case of the wind farm was linked to the importance of securing a SLO, as expressed by interviewees:

We are there to progress a big project ... relative to other things in the community: big financially, big in scale, big in timeframe, big change in some landscapes. We have got an agenda to push and we do need to get through a process with the community and often that's at our pace (Interviewee 10).

[We negotiate] always bearing in mind that our objective is obviously to build the project, but recognising that certain community input can optimise both the design and the delivery (Interviewee

5).

The discourse for an economic case economic case also influenced the main benefits for the community, as perceived by the wind farm developers. Financial and physical aspects were most commonly cited as possible areas for negotiations of benefits during the design phase, with interviewees regularly stating that large-scale investment can be significant in the history of small towns, and the wind farm can co-exist with traditional agriculture. Providing obvious local benefits and ensuring public participation in achieving these benefits were also key concepts identified by recent research on the SLO concept in the mining industry [41].

The most common area of financial negotiation was around community funds, which are set up beyond compliance by most wind farm developers. One interviewee described the motivation for this as making a positive contribution to the region beyond lease payments to several landowners. Most often, these funds are distributed by community representatives with criteria that seek maximum community benefits. The perceived individual and community economic gains were described by one interviewee:

It comes down to money for some people. It brings more jobs. It brings an industry into an area that probably has only had agriculture, so it's a little bit of diversification. The extra income for host families ... might allow them to keep one of their sons at home on the properties because of the extra income that's coming in (Interviewee 24).

Several wind farms offered alternative financial negotiation points. This included the opportunity for turbine hosts to share their lease payments with other non-host farms, as described by one interviewee:

[By] spreading that [money] a little more widely, people aren't looking over the fence saying 'Oh, he's getting more money (Interviewee 22).

The possibility of ownership by the community—either of the whole, small scale wind farm, or of shares in a wind farm—was also considered a stakeholder benefit through this business-focused discourse. The interviewees representing community-owned (and small-scale) wind farms considered that a SLO was most likely not only due to the economic case of ownership, but more altruistic aspects such as concerns regarding climate change whereby wind provides a clean alternative to greenhouse gas-emitting energy sources.

Interestingly, the interviewees from community-owned wind farms described an engagement process with a longer time frame and more complexities than their commercial counterparts. This may have been due to these representatives living within the community in which the wind farm was planned, or the ownership structure of the wind farm that was managed by community members. These interviewees considered that a SLO was achievable and was a central focus of their stakeholder engagement, indicating that the discourse of community-owned wind developers may be a separate discourse coalition which incorporates “notions of community led, controlled and owned renewable energy installation development” [1], p.2).

Central to the economic case “lens” through which a SLO was sought was the theme of risk aversion to maintain the viability of the project. For some interviewees, a SLO was expressed as a risk to the wind farm’s economic case as it may create an expectation to which the developer cannot deliver, raise issues that cannot be answered in the expected timeframe, or—most critical to the economic case—be used against the wind developer. These hesitations to seek a SLO reflect a precautionary view captured in the discourse literature regarding how stakeholder engagement could present a risk to project development, and thus an obstacle to achieving business aims [44].

The risks cited by interviewees had three dimensions. Firstly, the lack of a broadly-understood and common definition of a SLO raised concerns for using the term for several interviewees. In general, they stated that this raised stakeholder expectations and created a risk for the wind developer who may not achieve such expectations, such as:

In the [wind] industry, we need to be realistic about what a commercial business is able to do and not do. By asking the community to give consent, that would actually frighten off some developers rather than actually encouraging them to adopt this model of involving the community in the decision-making (Interviewee 8).

This echoes a finding in the literature that a business seeking a licence from society implies that “external stakeholders may determine whether a business should operate” [10], and thus is challenging to the dominant discourse and traditional locus of power. The wind industry representatives interviewed considered power over the Social Licence to Operate was shared with community stakeholders. They recognised these stakeholders' power to delay or prevent projects, but rejected the notion that every single stakeholder group should have a veto. This finding highlights a range of questions for future investigation, regarding the circumstances of stakeholder power to be acknowledged, and the perception of power by community stakeholders.

Tension was perceived to exist between the stakeholders' expectations of transparency and the wind developer's inability to share unknown or confidential information. One interviewee described this as:

One of the features of engaging so early in the process with the community is of course we don't have all the answers. We haven't worked out exactly where the wind farm could be built, because that's part of the actual dialogue with the community (Interviewee 3).

The interviewees did note that the level of outrage and the level of fear expressed by opposition groups reduce once the project is built, suggesting that the development phase poses the greatest risk to gaining a SLO. Further examination could identify whether this difference is based on the development being less impactful than anticipated, or perhaps because channels of influence and change have closed.

Finally, some interviewees expressed a risk to the economic case that disaffected community stakeholders may publicise their opposition to the wind farm through the frame of the SLO terminology by detailing the reasons by which a development has not secured or has lost a SLO. As Owen and Kemp [12], p.33) found in their analysis of applications of a SLO, “dominant and dissenting voices” are potentially magnified from a small sample. A related scenario is that the measurement of community attitudes may identify the lack of a SLO, triggering the developer to “walk away from the development” (Interviewee 24). However, for other interviewees, the benefits of seeking a SLO through consultative and ongoing communication practices were recognised as:

a good risk mitigation strategy ... [that could potentially become] more embedded in corporate culture ... something that the business does as part of every project (Interviewee 1).

Another interviewee promoted the need for the wind industry to collectively seek a SLO, as this approach was perceived to “keep the [industry] in line” (Interviewee 6). Such an industry-wide approach could allow the wind industry to adopt joint positions on emerging concerns such as perceived health impacts, and to proactively respond. It was predicted that such a stance would ‘trickle down’ to enhance wind farm acceptance at a project level. Indeed, the interviewee proposed that a SLO for the whole wind industry should be:

a more prescribed and comprehensive ... checklist of things [that will] raise the bar for

everyone (Interviewee 6).

The above benefits support earlier research from the mining industry where representatives consider a SLO is appropriate within the context of “increasing scrutiny” on the performance of many industries and by the “changing demands and expectations of communities”, due to the increasing influence of various digital, print and social media sources, as well as information from these sources [16], p.19). Increased scrutiny may occur through new legislation that, due to globalisation and rapid changes to the business context, is “putting new expectations on business and altering how the social, environmental and economic impacts should be optimally balanced in decision making” [40], p.6).

4. Conclusions

This research sought to investigate the diffusion of the Social Licence to operate (SLO) concept and the associated meanings that a SLO may bring. Through discourse analysis, four oft-repeated values of a SLO were elicited—that availability, trust, transparency and participation all contribute to creating ‘authentic’ stakeholder relationships. One crucial finding was that the wind industry interviewees did not reference other industries, such as mining, in their comments—suggesting that a normalising effect of the discourse has occurred. Another finding was that wind industry representatives considered power over the Social Licence to Operate was shared with community stakeholders, but rejected the notion that every single stakeholder group should have veto power. In interacting with existing and prominent opposition voices, wind developer representatives expressed an ‘us and them’ perspective, at times describing their tactics using a ‘battle’ metaphor and apportioning blame to their industry predecessors, to the media and to the public they consider to be misinformed. This has parallels to the same metaphor used in Australian political election campaigns [45].

A theme identified in the discourse was that a SLO is considered through a business-oriented perspective, whereby a SLO follows an economic case for both company and the stakeholders. A SLO was interpreted as either a business risk that raises unachievable expectations, or as a mitigation of risk by embedding improved communication practices into corporate culture. In this way, discourse analysis has revealed how the discourse can be approached as either a solution or a risk to the current publicised opposition to wind farms.

These research findings have described how the relatively new concept of a SLO is still in a malleable stage- providing the opportunity for active investigation and interrogation of the concept by a range of parties prior to it being settled within the wind and other industries. The research outcomes can inform both researchers and industry practitioners about stakeholder engagement practices, including a SLO. It also encourages industry representatives to reflect and better understand the potentially implicit consequences of their terminology when engaging with stakeholders.

The findings indicate that a business seeking a licence from society implies a challenge by community stakeholder to the dominant discourse and traditional locus of power. This finding highlights questions for future investigation, such as in what circumstances does a company's acknowledgment of stakeholder power embolden the stakeholders to demand more than they would have demanded without that acknowledgment? Does the acknowledgment legitimize more demands in the eyes of stakeholders, government, and others? Do stakeholders have to be in a state of

marginalisation in order to experience the acknowledgment of their power as legitimisation? Beyond these questions, future research could extend this discourse analysis to texts and interviews with a wider range of alternative and additional sources. This could enable further exploration of the ‘who, where, and in what context’ statements are made regarding a SLO, and examine the existence of the three or more possible discourse coalitions. Such research could also identify whether the perceptions of a SLO continue to be diversely interpreted, and who influences the common understanding of a SLO. At an operational level within industry, this extended understanding of a SLO could lead to the development of criteria and conditions for assessing the status of such a social licence to operate for wind farms.

Conflict of Interest

All authors declare no conflicts of interest in this paper.

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