

# Finding and producing 'the public'

## *Reflections from a project on street lighting*



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Local authorities in England and Wales removing, turning off at night, or reducing, street lights to reduce costs, and meet environmental targets

Context: private sector involvement in street light management; complex contracting arrangements

Uncertainty about impact on road injury, crime and other outcomes

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## Street lights on major roads to be turned off at midnight to save money despite safety fears

By DAILY MAIL REPORTER  
UPDATED: 14:20, 14 October 2008

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Street lights on major roads could be turned off between midnight and 5am in an attempt to cut carbon emissions and save money.

Officials at the Highway Agency are researching the safest areas to implement the black-out which will be launched next year as part of an energy efficiency strategy.

Local authorities including West Sussex, Gloucestershire, Hampshire, Essex and Powys are also bringing in similar initiatives.

However motoring groups are alarmed that the move may cause an increase in road accidents.

Edmund King, the president of the AA, told The Daily Telegraph: 'Turning off street lights to save money or reduce CO2 may backfire in terms of increased accidents.'



# **Studying the public, engaging the public**

- **Reviewers concerns: getting at the ‘real’ public, not those with vested interests....**
- **Research objective (2): “To use a rapid appraisal to identify: articulated public views about street lighting reduction schemes and their unforeseen consequences or benefits; the role these views have played in local decision making; and less explicit concerns evidenced in accounts of the impact of reduced street lighting”.**
- **PPI: ‘public participation’ in research**

# Rapid appraisal: data sources

## Purposive sample of 8 Local Authorities

- Survey of web and public sources
  - Formal consultations
  - Local media
- Key informant interviews
- Household survey in one LA comparing affected and unaffected streets (N=1000)
- Ethnographic interviews and observations
- Focus groups and in depth interviews

# **Local papers: still a forum for public views**

I pay my tax, I now have to walk home in the pitch black [...] I expect a basic service (The Comet. 24/05/12)

This [...] is great for the criminal fraternity (Letter, The Comet 6/08/12)

I am over the moon [...] to look up at the night sky and be able to see the stars on a clear night (The Comet, 06/09/12)

I am very concerned about the street lighting turn off... There is a very serious health and safety issue (The Comet, 26/04/12)

The great switch-off has begun [...] Never have I felt so frightened to walk back to my house after a night out (The Comet 17/05/12)

# Legitimacy: experience, but also research

Am I alone in thinking it's a fantastic idea? ... the money saved ... can be ploughed back into schools and lollipop ladies.... Sleeping in the pitch black will have amazing health benefits for the people of this town. Not to mention the impact on the environment (letter to Comet, May 10<sup>th</sup> 2012)

[there has been] nothing said **about the studies referred to on the ROSPA web site that** shows a link between poor and no street lighting and road accidents (letter to Comet June 7<sup>th</sup> 2012)

Over the years it has been recorded that **eminent Criminologists have studied** the relationship between crime and fear of crime and street lighting. All agreed that good lighting has a positive effect. (Letter to Comet Aug 9<sup>th</sup> 2012)

# **Interactive spaces and public views**

However, in interactive domains, such as focus groups or residents' meetings, views are malleable and more tentative:

- People change their views
- They exchange management strategies
- They explicitly point to the 'pros and cons'

# Exchanging strategies

F1 I gave two of my apprentices torches [...] Because they were complaining about coming home drunk from [town] and couldn't walk and find their way. So I gave them torches [brief laugh] [...] Because I have, I have some in the office as a give away, and I gave them a torch and was like "put that in your handbag because it's, they're really light"

F2 It's a really good idea.

F1 I mean they thought it was quite funny because they're about 18 and 19, but at the same time they were like we really can't see

F3 Useful!



# Considering arguments

You wouldn't want them to just totally switch things off. I guess if they did it at a certain time, you know, when the majority of people are on the roads I don't know, because it's, on estates, because I know what Carrie was saying, since she got burgled, because it's so well lit where she is. She says, the, the policeman said if, if it hadn't had been as well lit and they hadn't been able to see into your house, into your garden, your garage

Mmm.

Whatever, then maybe they wouldn't have, I don't know, you're always going to get crime, but

Yeah.

There's a, isn't there somewhere that's already done this, reduced street lighting and the crime's come down? (Wakefield, group interview)

# **The research process generates views**

Well definitely, I'm not going to lie, when you first, um, suggested it to me I was like, eh, street lights, that's a random topic. But as I'm speaking about it, it makes a lot of sense. Do you know what I mean? (Hackney resident)

# Or not:

Intercept interviews (pubs, shopping centres, buses):

- I don't notice really, as I don't go out after dark.  
(Swansea)
- To be honest, I haven't got an opinion (Swansea).
- We haven't noticed really (Shropshire)
- Doesn't bother me, I'm driving (Shropshire)
- I'm never really out at night (Herts)

# Private views: fear and ‘going backwards’

- “I do remember the gaslight man coming round. ... I mean maybe, you know, you take it for granted but the whole streetlight thing seemed to me to be a big step forwards in the quality of life 150 years ago now probably or whatever. But the thought of actually going backwards seems to me to be quite appalling (Bucks resident, interview)
- “I won’t wait for a bus, because I don’t like not being seen. In winter, it does stop me going out – I struggle even to put the bins out” (Herts resident, interview)



**As it stands, 40% of Detroit's street lights are broken. It takes, on average, an hour for the police or ambulance services to respond... Gang murders are carried out in vacant buildings... (Observer, 20<sup>th</sup> July 2013)**

# Good governance: well lit, and unnoticed

- Light changes everything ... it illuminates our way and makes places inviting to enter ... artificial lighting has become an essential part of modern life (*ILP Guide to Best Practice*)

“So we did a letter drop to say we’re coming to this lighting scheme, which went down like a lead balloon, we letter dropped all of them with stamped address returns – we never got any back!” (LA officer)



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## Street lights are switched off in HALF of Britain as town halls try to cut energy bills

By DAVID DERBYSHIRE and LAURIE WHITWELL  
UPDATED: 07:34, 9 July 2011



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At least half the county councils across the UK are plunging tens of thousands of streets into darkness to save money.

Despite fears of increased accidents and crime, blackouts are being imposed after midnight in residential and rural areas by at least half the county councils across the UK.

Cash-strapped town halls are either switching off street lamps or fitting dimmer switches as they try to cut energy bills and meet climate change targets.

The Mail first warned about the blackouts as local authorities began trialling the move to cut soaring electricity bills.

Of the 20 county councils contacted yesterday, 16 confirmed they were either switching off or dimming street lights.



© Alamy

**Dim lit:** Half of Britain's street lights are being turned off to save money

# Managing the public

“the coroner condemned them [council who turned off lights], and it got into the papers and all this sort of thing...” (Lighting professional)

“And they had marches on the local council offices, it was really amazing! [...] And there were a few anecdotes about vigilante electricians going around and switching the lights back on again!”

“but when it’s handled well, then there’s an acceptance of it [reductions]”



# **The local authority: managing local voice**

Lighting professional in local authorities concerned about:

- Loss of expertise, as LA functions shrink
- Pressure on (short term) costs, which override all else
- Lighting 'the public realm'
- Balancing different interests

# **Formal research turns knowledge into ‘views’**

[Chair] asks about my role, and about the study design: how are we going to take account of fact crime is going down everywhere?

He is “now something of a self-proclaimed expert on the technology.” [chair’s description Blog organiser)

[blog organiser] passes on his email: “Please see me as a source of knowledge, not of opinion”.

(Fieldnotes, Residents’ Meeting)

# Conclusion

- Different data generation practices produce different 'publics'
- There is still a vibrant public sphere: local media, democratic local government, neighbourhood associations, pubs, public transport
- There are also (legitimate) practices of disengagement and disinterest
- The practices of 'public involvement' and research on public views help maintain the boundaries of research expertise

# References

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Full NIHR Report:

<https://www.journalslibrary.nihr.ac.uk/projects/11300402/#/>



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