Social Licence to Operate as Intergroup Communication: A Comment on the Special Issue Edited by Rooney, Leach, and Ashworth
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In this brief comment to the special issue, my goal is to ask some questions, and perhaps to provoke some discussion of new topics, as well as the many aspects of this complex area that were raised by the authors. My intention is not to criticise, because in my opinion, Rooney, Leach, and Ashworth have done a great service in putting together this issue. The authors consider the concept of social licence to operate (SLO) in innovative ways and in new contexts. Overall, as the Editors note in the introduction and Miller argues in the concluding paper, the special issue points up the paradoxes and contradictions at the heart of this concept and its application in practice. In my opinion, the special issue should be read and discussed by everyone who is interested in community and social engagement around science and technology, and in addressing the most complex social problems of our times.

In their introduction, the Editors state three aims. The first is to develop a multi-disciplinary working definition of social licence to operate. Secondly, they want to explore the connections between SLO and business practice, regulation and compliance, governance, and power relations. Finally, they aim to continue the conversation about the paradoxes in SLO – particularly that between developing a contract on the one hand, while one side (the community) is able subsequently to revoke the contract.

The authors in the special issue discuss all these issues and more. Some papers concentrate on the meaning of the concept of SLO (Moffat and Parsons; Miller). Others examine SLO empirically (usually via interviews with stakeholders) in traditional contexts. For example, Syn looks at the exploitation of communities by mining companies in the developing world. Dowd and James explore the perspectives of engineers about carbon capture and storage. Other papers focus on contexts which provide seemingly natural but interesting extensions of traditional ones: Hall looks at perceptions of wind farms, and fears about them, by members of communities where they are proposed. Leith, Ogier, and Haward explore the potential of SLO in the salmon industry in Australia. In an innovative look at local versus global interests about the environment, Edwards and Lacey point to value and perceptual differences about forest management in Sweden. Finally, some papers examine the potential of SLO in contexts where it has never been considered, and where it might seem unnecessary or even contradictory. Jijelava and Vanclay argue that SLO is important to underpin humanitarian projects in developing countries. Raman and Mohr extend the concept to scientific research itself, and the conflicts between scientists and parts of the lay community around scientific advances and new technology.

One aim that the Editors do not state – perhaps because it is so obvious – is that SLO is about communication. One could argue that SLO is nothing but communication, among groups of stakeholders whose interests may be in conflict, and who identify to a greater

or lesser extent with their groups. These groups traditionally include industry members (e.g., mining company officials) and community members, but increasingly also include professional groups (e.g., farmers), government officers, advocacy groups (e.g., environmentalists), and the mass media. Thus, the identities involved may be professional, generational (e.g., farming families), place (e.g., longstanding communities), or value-based. Only one paper (Moffat and Parsons) considers language in detail; in their case the communication provided by company reports. They argue that companies advance their interests by using obfuscatory and vague language, and that the idea of "licence" helps them to exploit their power. On the other hand, Miller expresses uneasiness about the "us and them" notion at the heart of SLO, and argues for greater integration of outside bodies like mining companies into the communities where they operate, and thus for a larger common identity. I would argue that the intergroup relations that necessitate SLO are inevitable, and that many of the paradoxes of SLO are the consequences of intergroup relations and communication. It may be that some conflicts may be resolved by more cooperation and negotiation of larger (or different) identities, but the intergroup situation must be addressed squarely to do this.

Several authors highlight the history of the term social licence to operate, and the domains in which it has been invoked. This concept and term came from the mining industry, and SLO was a way in which mining companies could secure the cooperation of communities where they wished to work. SLO has always gone beyond compliance with existing regulations, as most authors in this issue note; it is based on the notion of communities getting something back for allowing the extraction of their minerals from their land. SLO has also always contained the proviso that the community can withdraw the licence to operate. Thus, SLO must involve two-way negotiation, and acknowledge that communities pay a price for allowing companies or other bodies to draw benefit from their land, so that they deserve compensation. They deserve this benefit simply because this is their land (and, arguably, their resources); place identity is central to the negotiation. There is also acknowledgement of their loss for a national (or multi-national) or global good – mineral wealth, environmental protection, scientific advancement.

When the benefit to outsiders is profit and wealth, as it is in the case of mining and energy development, the necessity for this kind of contract seems clear. Many of the papers in this issue, however, develop the same idea in contexts of clear public good. Thus, they point to conflicts between local loss for the greater good (Dowd and James, Hall, Edwards and Lacey, and particularly Jijelava and Vanclay, Ramen and Mohr). It is easy to forget that advances like renewable energy, humanitarian projects, and science itself can involve local costs, but in fact these papers show that they require the same two-way engagement, appropriate alliances, and contracts. Some authors present step-by-step ways of achieving effective SLOs (e.g., Hall, Jijelava and Vanclay), which are grounded in field contexts and should be of great use to those negotiating SLOs.

On the other hand, when the concept of SLO is broadened this far, it becomes difficult to see how SLO is different from community or social engagement – which, of course, is difficult enough in its own right. Indeed, the suggestion made by several authors in this issue for effective SLOs sound like the same kinds of suggestions made for all forms of social engagement. The Editors and all the authors in this special issue attempt to distinguish SLO from good business practice and from cooperation between communities and outsiders. SLO does contain a strong contractual element, as the term "licence" implies. Miller's research agenda addresses this issue explicitly, and focuses on SLO as an emerging form of governance. This focus potentially gives SLO a specificity and explicitness that most engagement processes lack. On the dark side, Moffat and Parsons point to the ways in which companies obfuscate and abuse their power in negotiations, and they argue that the very idea of licence may make this easier. To me, it is important that the concept of SLO should add value, and exploring its potential to improve governance seems like a good way to do this.

I will finish with a few questions that involve intergroup relations and communication explicitly. First, what does SLO mean on the ground, in practice? Can the conflicts between communities and outsiders actually be resolved, or is a clear SLO the best that can be done to address inherent differences in interests and values? The papers in this special issue address this question admirably, but there is more to be done. Secondly, what role does identity play in this process? How do individuals come into conflict with their own groups over SLO – for example, a farmer who is happy to allow coal seam gas extraction on his land, in a community where farmers oppose this process? How do groups come into conflict with other groups in their own community – farmers with shopkeepers, for example? Several of the papers in this issue describe such conflicts. Edwards and Lacey note the conflicts between individuals and the larger community about value of trees and the way a place has been in the past, and Ramen and Mohr point to conflicts between community members who value the products of science and those who fear them. I think it is important to understand the social identities involved, the ways in which these identities are communicated (and change) in negotiations, the consequent need to outsiders to make partners of people with various identities, and the impact on the resultant SLOs.

Thirdly, what is the impact of the mass media on negotiations of SLOs, and on the subsequent agreements? The authors do not deal with this issue, yet it looms large in many negotiations. For example, the fraught negotiations around fracking in coal seam gas extraction, and similar ones about irrigation in environmentally threatened river systems, have been played out largely in the media, with identities being constructed and polarised by the media. In my opinion, it is essential to add this dimension to our understanding of SLO. Finally, to take up Miller's and Moffat and Parsons' points, do the inherently intergroup and contractual features of SLO help or hinder these intergroup negotiations? It is important to explore this empirically, and to understand SLO, as a practice, a negotiation, and a form of governance, as it works on the ground. The papers

in this special issue provide an excellent basis for engaging this central task. I look forward to the next instalment.

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