

**Parallel Session 26: Interactions between science communication and science policies**

**“STRANGE BEDFELLOWS AND USUAL SUSPECTS”:  
MAPPING THE EMERGENT COMPLEXITY OF ‘SOCIAL  
MOVEMENT SOCIETY’ ENGAGEMENT WITH HUMAN GENETIC  
TECHNOLOGIES.**

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**Abstract**

Qualitative field data from year one of this three year project is used to map UK public modes of engagement, core discursive frames, in the context of human genetic technologies (genomics).

The ways “civil society” engages with genomics can be understood as the behaviour of a “social movement society” (Meyer and Tarrow 1998). Actor groups cannot be seen as completely “pro” or “anti” biotechnology; their responses are more sophisticated and context- dependant. Mobilisation is fragmented, shifting and complex; cross cutting frames emphasise the diffuseness of boundaries between actor groups (“ethno epistemic assemblage”- Irwin and Michael 2003) with implications for theories of social movements and “collective identity” (Melucci 1996).

**Key words:** genetics, public, globalisation

**Text**

**Social Movement (SM) theory as a tool for understanding emergent public engagement**

1) “Social Movement Society”

*“Social movement modes of action may be becoming part of the conventional repertoire of participation...used to represent a wider range of claims than ever before”*

( Meyer and Tarrow 1998 p4)

A predisposed population, informed by diffused cultural practises, will mobilise given the right sets of circumstances (issues, POS, existence of social networks etc).

2) latency

Melucci (1996) defines latency as a period where ‘submerged’ networks of actors are less visible, but engaged in a crucial exercise of constructing meanings. These ‘submerged networks’ are predominantly constructed as

predisposed actors well placed to see thematic links between the issues they previously mobilised over, and (in this instance) genomics:

*what we need to get to is not a new politics of... human genetics...it's the politics of new technologies...how new technologies impact on society...they're playing on the sidelines, as they have in the nuclear energy debate, in the toxic chemicals debate...*

“Mike”: activist in interview 2004

See Welsh (2000) Nelkin (1995), Plows (2004), Doherty Plows and Wall (2003). This discursive linkage is also occurring in “conservative” groups and networks such as pro- lifers, and “pro” genetics patient and advocacy groups. Latency is also relevant for the “social movement society”- who are starting to engage over issues like biobanks, screening, sex selection of embryos etc.

*I think there will be in practice a lot of resistance taking place in quiet ways... you know whether it be no I don't want that test, no I tried that drug and it didn't work I don't want any more of it, that will happen day to day*

“Katie”, activist in interview 2004

### 3) “Early Risers” (Tarrow 1998)

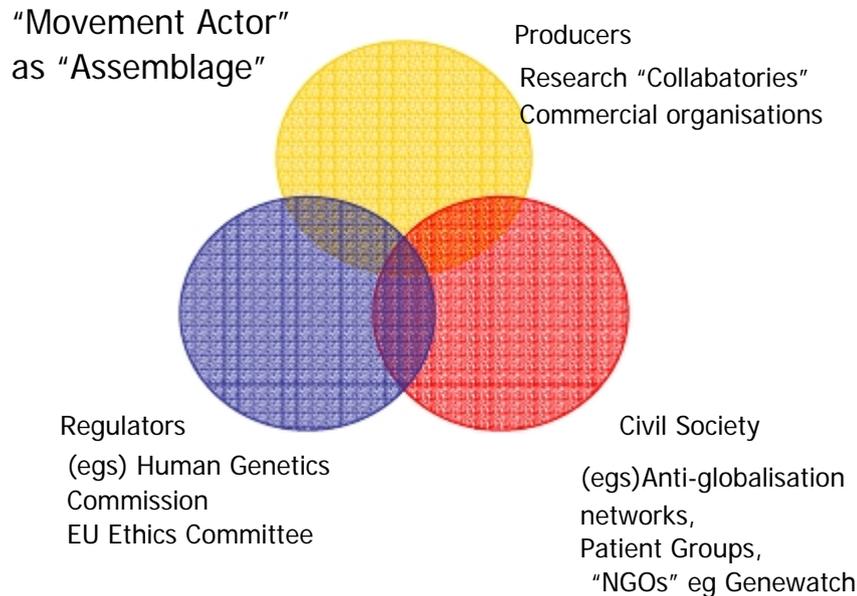
“Early risers” are core actors who spark off new waves of mobilisation. Given the diffuseness of the terrain, actor groups of all types mobilising over genomics issues will be finding it hard to identify clear lines of engagement and to attract key allies and support- again, apart from some very clearly identified ‘usual suspects’. ‘Early risers’ can fail to wake other people up. Yet there is an increasing amount of mobilisation, though it is important to recognise that this is predominantly happening in latent networks; though there are signs that critical masses are starting to form.

### 4) Frames/ Framing

Framing (Snow and Benson 1992, Steinberg 1998)- is the production of meaning by actor groups, as an ongoing part of the mobilisation process and the construction of “collective identity”. It is in the spaces where meanings are struggled over that movement starts to build, targets, allies and ‘enemies’ are identified, leading ultimately to the taking of action. Whilst ‘pro’ and ‘anti’ are generally unhelpful categories, there are of course also clear, important, lines of contention drawn in what are otherwise very shifting sands.

### 5) “Assemblage” and Collective Identity

**“ethno- epistemic assemblage” (Irwin and Michael 2003). Cross-cutting networks, the dissolution of categories and actor identities.**



Thus: Dependent on the context (frame or issue raised, existence or lack of Political Opportunities and so on), interaction (oppositional activity, alliance clusters) occurs (a) between actor groups within each ‘sphere’, and (b) between spheres.

There is a blurring of boundaries in terms of actor identities (see Jasanoff 1990)- “strange bedfellows”. A range of commentators identify the “scientific citizen” ( eg Irwin and Michael 2003); it is also possible to identify the “citizen scientist”.

Is Melucci’s (1996) definition of collective identity, and Diani’s (1992) definition of a social movement, still robust enough to account for genomic assemblage? Yes and no, and it is telling that it is in the arena of the “anti globalisation movement” that thinking about the collective identity of such a complex group of social actors has produced a similar ambivalence (McDonald 2002). It is of course important to distinguish between sets of social interactions, which can even include mobilisation, and a social movement, although in this period of latency/ emergence it is hard to tell which is potentially which.

**Conclusion**

‘The network(ed) genome’

The fluidity and interactive-ness of the genome (and the proteome) is mirroring the fluidity and interactions of the human actors concerned with it, which could be conceived as a series of network relationships. Overall, we should hardly be surprised that human engagement is as complex as the

genomic interactions themselves. For social movement theories regarding emergent mobilisation and the nature of movement collective identity, the impact, and implications, of globalisation and the status of genomics as a complex set of issues and applications, are crucial and will be kept under review by the project.

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