

Accidental Activists: Information, Subjectivity and Civic Credibility

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In 2004, a group of citizens in a suburban township organized to oppose the construction of a Wal-Mart. Within a triad of political players – activists, local bureaucrats, and corporate representatives – a struggle ensued about who had the right to speak about the township. Not originally taken as credible decision-makers in township business, the citizen activists had to produce that credibility in the process of their opposition campaign. It is argued here that in a civic setting credibility was produced using what, on the surface, seemed to be contradictory claims. On the one hand, they made claims to objectivity, using data and information to attempt to prove that the store was not in the best interest of the community. At the same time, they were clear about their own deep, personal investment in the outcome of the Wal-Mart decision, appealing to personal judgment and identity while questioning the experts' technical data and legal claims as being too narrowly understood. While it is not unusual for grassroots groups to mix subjective claims with objective arguments, I argue that in a civic setting credibility relies on both. For the activists, the production of credibility could never only be based in facts, information, expertise or authority; they also relied on personal experience, opinion and knowledge as a way to gain support, media attention, and political capital in the community.

In March 2005 Lee Scott, CEO of the largest corporation in the world, was invited to a pajama party in Pittsfield Township, Michigan. The invitation was extended by a group of local residents who had organized six months earlier to oppose the construction of a Wal-Mart in their town. Billed as a family fun night, the event was held in the gymnasium of a local elementary school, not far from the proposed site of the store. That night local parents and their kids, equipped with crayons and craft supplies, colored and made collages, played games, watched cartoons and had a cake walk.

Though neither Mr. Scott nor his representatives attended the party, the kids who were there used their crayons to sign pre-printed postcards opposing the store: “Dear Wal-Mart: I have heard that you plan on building a new store across the street from our schools. I feel that this would make it unsafe to go to school.”

These emotional pleas to children, families and safety were not the only appeals used by the activists that night. Within fifteen feet of the arts and crafts table was another table labeled “information.” Here, details about the proposed site were distributed – including its size and layout, projected traffic flow patterns, excerpts from the township’s zoning ordinances, and crime rates from neighboring Wal-Mart stores – data intended to help show the store was not in the best interest of the township. Table volunteers also handed out packets of letters which detailed the need for a road safety audit, a formal safety performance examination sanctioned by the Institute of Transportation Engineers and the Federal Highway Administration; the letters outlined the details of the intersections that should be studied.

These two tables demonstrate a larger dynamic that ran beneath the entire campaign. Throughout the course of their protest, the activists fluctuated between what otherwise might be seen as two incompatible positions as a way to gain support, media attention, and political capital in the community. First, they made claims to objectivity, providing fellow citizens with data and information to prove that the store was not appropriate for the township.¹ At the same time, the activists made claims to their subjectivity, being clear about their own deep, personal investment in the outcome of the Wal-Mart decision.

While it certainly is not unusual for grassroots groups to mix subjective claims with objective arguments as a way to campaign, I argue here that in a civic setting their *credibility* relies on both. And unlike previous work that has understood the credibility of experts as grounded in ideas of objectivity, or the removal of personal opinions and a position of self-detachment; in the case of these community activists the production of credibility appears to be further complicated. This newly-formed, ad hoc grassroots group did not lay claims to believability or authoritativeness in simply becoming a recognized authority with information, facts, and figures. They also became credible because along with these facts and figures, they used their personal experience, opinion and identities as a form of proof. While providing data and statistics about the company and its potential impact on the community, the activists appealed to their personal judgment and identity as mothers, parents and community members. Though these objective and subjective claims were sometimes paradoxical and in conflict, in the end both claims played a role in the production of believable, authoritative community spokespeople, what is termed here as *civic* credibility.

Expertise, Objectivity and Civic Credibility

The notion of credibility has been analyzed across a range of disciplines for several decades. Though the literature varies on how credibility is constructed and its focus of analysis, the concept is generally defined as believability. One line of work, originating first in social psychology (Hovland, 1953; Hovland & Weiss, 1951), focused on the characteristics or mechanisms that lend to a source's perceived credibility. This source credibility model contends that a message's effectiveness depends on both the "expertness" and "trustworthiness" of the source (Jackson & Darrow, 2005; McCracken, 1989; Rieh & Danielson, forthcoming; Tseng & Fogg, 1999). Though a number of scholars, particularly in mass communication, have challenged the source credibility model claiming that it does not fully account for why people either believe or are persuaded by some messages but not others (Jackson & Darrow, 2005; McCracken, 1989; McGuire, 1985), many see the concepts of trustworthiness and expertise as key components to credibility (Tseng & Fogg, 1999).

This specific operationalization of credibility as grounded in trust and expertise has been taken up in a number of fields, each focusing on different types of credibility. In policy and economics, the idea of *government* credibility has been considered a factor in policy making, with governments seen as more trustworthy having more leeway to enact tax policies than governments perceived as less credible (Strumpf, 2001). Those in the field of human-computer interaction have looked at the idea of *computer* credibility and how to design technical applications that are viewed as persuasive or believable (Fogg, 1999, 2002; Tseng & Fogg, 1999). Within library and information science, credibility is often understood in terms of *document* credibility – how people assess a document's quality or relevance (Rieh & Danielson, forthcoming; Saracevic, 1996; Schamber, 1994). For example, research conducted on web searching found that searchers tended to have greater confidence in information produced by authoritative institutions and professional experts (Rieh, 2002; Rieh & Danielson, forthcoming).

Another line of scholarship has understood credibility not as the dimensions or variables that contribute to a source's perceived believability, but as a social construction produced out of a specific social or historical context (Daston & Galison, 1992; Murray, 2003; Porter, 1995; Roth, Riecken, Pozzer-Ardenghi, McMillan, Storr et al., 2004; Schudson, 1978; Shapin, 1994). In this line of thought, scholars have theorized that traditional means of establishing credibility, especially in science and public life, have often emerged out of claims to professional expertise

and objectivity, or the removal of personal opinions and a position of self-detachment and impartiality.

In its ideal, objectivity is the belief that there is a separation between facts and personal values or opinions (Schudson, 1978). This separation is neither automatic nor wholly achievable, but is partially realized through a variety of mechanisms to control subjectivity. One such method of control is the reliance on facts, numbers, or scientifically verifiable information as a basis for decision making. Taking up this point, Theodore Porter analyzes historical case studies on the growth of quantitative methods in bureaucratic and scientific contexts (1995). He argues that social and political motives drove the rise of quantification. Quantification, he asserts, has become a “technology of distance,” a highly structured and rule-bound strategy of communication. These distancing communication methods have minimized the need for personal expertise and judgment, allowing for a public guise of impartiality, fairness, and truth in decision making. In the place of personal judgment or expertise, statistics and numbers better served the demands of objectivity because, at least in an idealized form, quantitative methods are based on transparent and explicit rules.

But claims to objectivity are not grounded solely in externalized technical or mechanistic controls. Described as an “ideology of the distrust of the self” (Schudson, 1978, p. 71), objectivity is also understood as a moral philosophy – an approach of self-control. Analyzing 18th to 20th century scientific atlases, historians of science Daston and Galison look at the emergence of mechanical objectivity as a process of self-restraint or control over subjectivity (1992). The authors assert that scientists during the 19th century became concerned not only with the accuracy of natural representations of the world, but also about their own part in the process of representation. They conclude that although, on the surface, mechanical objectivity was in service to truth, its real purpose emerged as a process of self-discipline. Subjectivity, personal judgment and imagination were seen as “inner enemies” and showed a lack of discipline that must be contained through mechanized, objective science.

Concepts of self-policing one’s own subjectivity have not been limited to scientific professions, however. Sociologist Michael Schudson has explored the emergence of an ideology of objectivity in American journalism (1978). Schudson argues that the term objectivity was not applied to journalistic work until after World War I. He contends that the rise in the belief of objectivity was in response to journalists’ own professional crisis and doubts in being able to trust facts. The rise in both war propaganda and public relations brought about a loss in faith of the truth of their own perception of events. This loss in faith, argues Schudson, led to striving for objectivity.

In addition to externalized methods and self-restraint, Schudson argues that objectivity – particularly in the professions – is often underwritten by institutional mechanisms that separate the insider (e.g. professional expert) from outsiders (e.g. the public). One such approach is the requirement to advanced training or education as validation of professional expertise and knowledge. A second approach is to insulate professionals from the public through the use of technical language, professional accreditation and associations (Abbott, 1988; Schudson, 1978).

These institutional mechanisms are used both as a method to control subjectivity and maintain expertise as well as a way to insulate the profession from outsiders. In this sense, objectivity is not simply a claim about reliable knowledge, it is a political commitment – a way to determine what groups are relevant, trustworthy or believable (Schudson, 1978). As such, the ideal of objectivity is powerful precisely because it provides a public appearance of impartiality

and at the same time lends authority and believability to scientific and bureaucratic professions who have based their own credibility in ideas of impartiality, expertise and self-detachment.

Grounding credibility in objectivity or, more specifically, the control of subjectivity, inevitably privileges certain kinds of discourse and evidence while discrediting others. When facts, numbers, technical language, externalized control and the removal of self are the process by which knowledge is legitimized – particularly in public and bureaucratic settings – claims to personal identity, experience or opinion become less valued bases of credibility.

In a local, civic context the privileging of certain language and claims to evidence has been taken up by a range of scholars who have analyzed those questions by focusing on specific, localized cases using ethnographic and historical methods. One such case study conducted by scholars from the University of Victoria examined the conflict between scientific experts and local residents fighting for water rights (Roth et al., 2004). Understanding the conflict not simply as an issue of water access, the authors analyze how scientific expertise was placed in opposition to the knowledge and experiences of local residents – asking who in the conflict had the right to speak and be heard.

The authors argue citizens felt distanced from public decision making because of the scientific mode of discussion that was favored in public meetings. Experts presented evidence in “decontextualized” ways about issues which had profound implications for the residents, ignoring the ways in which local residents understood and talked about their own water concerns. In addition, community meetings were organized in a way to allow “experts” to present evidence and technical reports for any necessary time, while residents were asked to “air their personal opinions” during limited comment periods. Residents’ comments were deemed public opinion and contrasted to experts’ technical discussion – with the underlying assumption that technical viewpoints were more valued than the concrete examples of water problems provided by residents. The authors explain, “Thus, ‘technical reports’ lend credence but ‘opinions’ and ‘comments’ are just that; they are constructed here as having insufficient validity to be used as a basis for making decisions” (p. 172). In this case, scientific, objective expertise was seen as more respected and credible than local knowledge.

In other civic settings it has been seen that local residents take on technical or objective discourses as part of their political activism. In her historical analysis of female progressive activism in Queens, New York during the 1940s and 1950s, Sylvie Murray argues that Queens was a bastion for what she calls postwar suburban citizenship – collective action that was conducted mainly by women operating through community associations and voluntary organizations (2003). In her analysis, Murray contends that female activists’ preferred method of political advocacy was a facts-and-figures, gender-neutral, rational approach that reflected the middle-class model of informed and objective citizenship introduced during the Progressive Era. Murray argues, “Residents’ correspondence to city officials and the local newspapers’ reports on their activities reveal a fundamental assumption that policy making was a rational process, based on the objective gathering and assessment of information. Decisions, they assumed, should be made following consultation with informed citizens who, because of their familiarity with local problems, were best positioned to provide expertise on the matter” (p. 9).

Importantly for Murray’s argument is that despite the precedent of maternalist political strategies of that time period, the author claims that the Queens activists used maternalized actions and discourse, such as baby-carriage parades, as a last resort to gain media attention when other political actions had failed. In general, however, the activists emphasized rationality and demonstrable facts, revealing their own belief that local bureaucrats would more likely pay

attention to citizens that had “thoroughly documented and rationally presented arguments” (p. 115). However, as Murray notes, when the “facts-and-figures,” gender-neutral approach failed, the activists used a more maternalized strategy of the “aggrieved mother.” This, she contends, was a strategic decision of last resort – indicating that the activists understood the role of factual analysis in bureaucratic decision making and the need to engage local policy makers using that form of analysis, but they also understood the power of maternalized actions as a political strategy.

The work cited above indicates that while the emergence of objectivity as the grounding for credibility has often been based in ideas of impartiality, self-discipline, and professional expertise those conceptions are complicated, particularly in civic settings. Threaded throughout each of the analyses is the tension of who is seen as authoritative, credible spokesperson and what type of evidence or discourse is acknowledged or valued as the basis for decision making. As Roth et al.’s work implies, conceptions of whose knowledge or evidence is most credible are at issue when residents’ own knowledge and experience come in conflict with technical evidence. But adopting a language of objectivity is not without problems, as Murray’s work demonstrates. Even when a “facts-and-figures” discourse is undertaken, local activists may not be seen as effective or credible by local policy makers. As a consequence, it is likely that in a civic setting the construction of credibility may not be fully understood using only conceptions of objectivity. In this paper, it is argued that in civic settings claims to objectivity are conjoined with claims to subjectivity as a basis for *civic* credibility.

Study Background: Situating the Wal-Mart Fight

Data for this article was drawn from ethnographic field work collected in Pittsfield Township, Michigan over a one-year period during a campaign against a Wal-Mart. A number of methods were employed to collect data, including observing group activities, participant fieldwork, in-depth interviews, and document analysis.² Data was coded using principles of grounded theory.³ The study concluded in February 2006 after the township’s planning commission granted approval for the site’s construction.

Like many suburbs and exurbs in the U.S., Pittsfield has undergone significant growth. Previously a rural area, the 27.5 square mile area has had an 18 percent population increase in the last five years. Here industrial complexes are built alongside cornfields and large subdivisions butt up against dilapidated barns. The township is relatively affluent and educated, with a median home value of approximately \$220,000 and half of the population having a bachelor’s degree or higher.

In June 2002, Wal-Mart first applied to develop in the area. The parcel of land it targeted – called the township’s “gateway” in the comprehensive plan – sits in the center of town. The land was first zoned for commercial use in 1977. Across the street, within 1,000 feet of the site’s property line, lies the property line for a newly constructed elementary and high school with nearly 2,500 students. Behind those schools sit two large housing subdivisions and within one mile is another elementary school. A triangular piece of land, the proposed site is bordered on three sides by two-lane roads. Following the community’s growth, there has also been an increase in traffic, but the road infrastructure has not kept up. A recent study indicated that the surrounding intersections are already considered “failing” during peak hours.

Conditional approval for the store was granted in August 2004 and grassroots opposition formed quickly after. At issue were concerns heard from many communities fighting Wal-Mart – fears of increased traffic, Wal-Mart’s threat to local businesses, a decrease in home values, an

increase in crime, and the loss of the area's small town feel. And because of the proposed store's close proximity to local schools, residents were particularly focused on children's safety – noting Wal-Mart's allegedly bad reputation for selling alcohol and tobacco to minors, worries about increased traffic and commuting school kids, and fears about a whole host of potential crimes – sex offenders, parking lot safety, truancy, and firearms.

The opposition group was primarily made up of neighbors most directly impacted by the store. It was predominately white, highly educated and middle class. Most were recent transplants to the area. And though the full membership was diverse across gender, according to members and based on leadership at events and in public, most of the work of the campaign was done by women – particularly stay-at-home moms. In general the leadership did not see its members as being particularly political. One remarked, "It's not like the person who drives up to our meeting has the bumper stickers all over with all their different issues or whatever. These are people who are kind of going about their daily lives and maybe they vote and maybe they give to a political party, maybe, but that's probably about it."

In addition to the group's concerns about the specific site, residents expressed frustration with planning commission officials and Wal-Mart. Citing that the land had been zoned for commercial use since the 1970s, local policy makers consistently stated that they could not deny the building based on the community's position toward Wal-Mart. For its part, Wal-Mart did not engage directly in a debate with residents about the site. Throughout the course of the campaign, the company's land use attorneys, developers and technical consultants communicated with local residents through public commission meetings. The company's stance was unwavering and nonnegotiable: it had played by all the zoning rules that had been presented and had a right to build. At the final site approval meeting, Wal-Mart's attorney made a plea that Wal-Mart had done what was right:

We have met all of the requirements of the township. All of the requirements of the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality. All of the requirements of the County Road Commission, of the Michigan Department of Transportation, of the County Drain Commissioner's Office. Each requirement we are supposed to meet. . . . And that in and of itself ought to be enough. Wal-Mart has done everything that each of these agencies asked it to do. . . . Treat us as you would treat anybody else. We have conformed to your process. We have done the things we are supposed to do. Some of the debate was heated. Some of the things we definitely didn't want to do. But when you cut through all of it, we did them all. We did our job. The commission has done its job. Each of the county agencies has done its job. There is no, there is no justification and there is no justice in a delay. Wal-Mart asks that you approve this site plan because it is what you ought to do, because we have met all the requirements of all your ordinances and of every other agency having jurisdiction and finally because it is the right way. The correct way. The proper way to do it.

But missing from this list of approvals that Wal-Mart had earned was that of local citizens. Residents were neither satisfied with local policy makers' legal arguments nor Wal-Mart's insistence that they should be treated like any other builder. Citizens argued that the store would become a burden to the township, to themselves and to their children. They staged what they called "pro-child safety" events and public rallies. They organized letter and email writing campaigns to local newspapers, policy makers and Wal-Mart. And they conducted extensive

research on Wal-Mart – collecting information on how other towns had fought the company; data about crime; and specific traffic flow and safety statistics. Their public events and communication emphasized both what they argued were the facts about the site as well as their own opinions and concerns about the site’s location.

Though this grassroots group did not start out as being perceived as a trusted or expert local political organization, they were able to produce that civic credibility throughout the course of the campaign. By the end of the fight, the group had won a number of successes. They had 450 members on their email list, had raised thousands in donations, had earned extensive coverage in the local press and editorial pages, and had received support from local and state elected officials. The organization had been successful at getting the county’s road commission to invest in more extensive traffic studies, an effort which resulted in one of the single largest contributions made by a private company for road improvements in the history of the county. And even Wal-Mart started to see the group as a force to be acknowledged, having conversations with group leaders almost twice a month.

Not only seen as effective, the activists became viewed as experts. Leaders were contacted by other towns who were initiating anti-Wal-Mart campaigns. And within their own community, group leaders were looked to as the authorities on the battle. Reflecting on her role, one leader told me: “As far as the community sees us I think they see us as the ones who are going to take care of it all and the experts on it and a lot of people just defer to us. When I talk to people they’re like so okay what do I need to be doing this week? What’s the update? We’re just sort of the experts on this whole thing and they are just riding along in a way which is a big burden, I think, and a big responsibility. Not a burden as much as a big responsibility because I feel like a lot of people are just relying on us to take care of it.”

Production of Civic Credibility

These successes indicate that the group came to be seen as a community organization with authority and believability. That status was not automatically granted, however. The group had to produce it throughout the course of their campaign. Though the grassroots organization’s credibility was never completely recognized by local bureaucrats or Wal-Mart – entities that were perceived as credible from the onset of the fight – the group was able to produce their own civic credibility in two main ways. The first was through a stance of objectivity and expertise – using data, statistics, or information that indicated that the group believed it was presenting factual, well-analyzed and rational arguments against the site. The second way was through claims to their own subjectivity – particularly to their roles as mothers, community members, or taxpayers and their insistence of the validity of their own local knowledge and experience. Though these objective and subjective claims were sometimes paradoxical and in conflict, in the end both claims played a role in the production of believable, authoritative community spokespeople, what is termed here as *civic* credibility.

Objective Claims: “Facts-and-Figures”

From its inception, the group had a two-prong strategy. Its first goal was to convince the planning commission to say no to the development. The second and equally important goal was to pressure Wal-Mart to withdraw its site plan. A third, but unstated goal was to mobilize a large community base and generate local and national media attention. This unstated goal was in

service to the first two – the more attention and support for the cause, the more politically viable the group would be.

Both Wal-Mart and township officials made their own claims to why the site should be approved. Wal-Mart argued that they had a solid legal basis to build. The company had a range of professional experts who developed and defended its site plan. They had traffic, civil and environmental engineers at each commission meeting and their attorney was trained in land use litigation and had extensive knowledge of zoning ordinances. Furthermore, as the property owner and building applicant they were given higher status than community members in township meetings. At one hearing, Wal-Mart developers provided an extensive Power Point presentation on their plans – lasting almost 40 minutes. On the other hand residents in this community, like those described in Roth's study (2004), were asked to limit their comments to six minutes and only during public hearing portions of the meetings.

Though activists complained about this privileging – calling Wal-Mart's presentations "infomercials" – they fought back with data and statistics about what they perceived as the real facts about the development: its real size, the true number of cars it would attract, and the real details of expansion. They urged their members to not be fooled by Wal-Mart: "Wal-Mart's presentation included some "smoke and mirrors" numbers that were misleading about the size of the store and the traffic study they paid for. The site plans submitted to the township on 12/30/04 show a store footprint of over 166,000 sq. feet and references phase II expansion." The group then followed up with its own research about traffic impacts, citing statistics on the daily car trips that a nearby Wal-Mart had generated; the results of a wetlands study which the group had hired an environmental consultant to conduct; and its own analysis of the site plan history and details.

For their part, township commissioners insisted that their decision-making process was based on technical evidence, facts, and professional expertise. Technical experts, who often emphasized their own credentials during meetings, provided evidence regarding the site using technical language. This legal and statistical evidence was viewed as more valuable than citizen's own concerns and experiences about the store – those concerns were dismissed as personal opinion. One commissioner told the local newspaper that the approval of the Wal-Mart is "not contingent upon residents' personal opinions," suggesting that the activists concerns about the site were merely that – personal issues about the company or unfounded fears about the store's impact.

Against this backdrop, activists made their own appeals to objectivity. The activists told me, "We have given the planning commission very legitimate reasons why it can't be located there. We are not arguing it based on, it's just a Wal-Mart. So no Wal-Mart anywhere." Similar to Murray's study of Queens activists (2003), this group also took a facts-and-figures, expert tactic with the planning commission. The group distributed documents which detailed the "facts" about the company and the site.⁴ They spent a significant amount of time providing examples of what other communities had done to either deny a Wal-Mart or limit its operations. And they scoured township archives looking for further technical details about zoning codes, the comprehensive plan and traffic and environmental impact studies. A leader told me, "We are trying to arm people with information. I think people really respond to data. It definitely helps with the planning commission."

Early on activists believed that in order to influence local policy makers they would have to present information and arguments that were well-reasoned, factual, non-emotional, and backed by data. Members often talked about "doing their homework" and their desire to be seen

as informed and educated. They explained that they did not want to come across as being a bunch of “whiny women,” “crackpots,” or “desperate housewives.” Describing why the group felt they needed to have factual arguments, one leader explained: “I mean having factual information, researched information, knowing zoning ordinances people could use, knowing what other towns have done, those kinds of things like you did your homework. I don’t think in general, and this probably gives women a disadvantage in the process, government officials even a female, do not respond well to emotional arguments, they are easily dismissed, even if they are true.”

This facts-and-figures tactic was understandable, considering that the planning commission’s credibility was based in more traditional conceptions of objectivity and expertise. Commissioners served as either elected or appointed decision-makers and interpreters of local laws. Township officials had the power to create local regulations and deny construction. They were backed by a legal history of planning ordinances and could draw upon a whole pool of other local bureaucrats – urban planners, land use attorneys, township attorneys, drainage engineers, traffic engineers, environmental impact engineers, police and fire officials, wetlands specialists, and construction engineers. And each of these specialists was supported by professional codes of conduct, national organizations, and how-to manuals. Each used specific evidentiary claims and technical language. Each defined a building project within a very specific scope – the drainage commissioners do not approve the stop lights. The traffic engineers do not study an entire community’s road system for each development, just the area most immediately impacted. And the attorneys do not allow a site to be denied based on “generalized” issues about safety, but only on very specific evidence that safety will be threatened.

These various technical experts were granted a good deal of deference and power by local decision makers. At one planning meeting, engineers from the county and state were asked to answer questions about the possible traffic impact of the site. The meeting, which started at 7:30 on a Thursday evening, was filled with nearly 150 residents. One hour into the hearing a group leader urged the commissioners to start the public comment period, concerned that many residents who had taken the time to show up were beginning to leave. The chair responded that the traffic engineers had been invited and that the audience should hear them out because they had taken time out of *their* schedules to be there.

Commissioners also indicated that they were relying on their own in-house, professional experts as a basis for decision making. They claimed that there were no technical or legal reasons to deny the site and that they could not do so based on purely “subjective” standards. They defended their decisions by insisting that they were backed by professionals – attorneys, engineers and accredited urban planners. At the final site approval meeting one commissioner stated: “We have a professional planning department that has been dealing with this for four years. So I am relying on their opinion.” To further emphasize the credibility and objectivity of their planners and the evidence on which he was making his decision, he asked the head planner a series of questions:

Commissioner: What’s your background, what are you professional credentials?

Planner: Well I am a certified planner.

Commissioner: What does that mean?

Planner: It is a certification by the American Planning Association, it requires a certain amount of education and experience before you can take the certification exam.

Commissioner: If I understand it, you have a college degree in the field.

Planner: I have a bachelor’s and masters.

Commissioner: In addition to that, you then take a certification from a professional organization in the field of planning? So you have both the college credentials and the professional certification. . . . What about the engineers we hire? What kind of credentials do they have?

Planner: They are civil engineers and they review the plans in extensive detail as you can probably tell from the extensive reports that they come out with and we have a staff of engineers.

Commissioner: Isn't it also true that you have to follow a code of ethics?

Planner: Yes.

Commissioner: Included in the code of ethics is things along the line that you wouldn't direct or coerce anybody to come to any analysis or conclusions unless it was based on sufficient facts.

Planner: That is correct.

Commissioner: Ok, to make it more clear, you wouldn't just come up with recommendations to us just because somebody put political pressure on you, would you?

Planner: Absolutely not.

Commissioner: The recommendations and reports that we have gotten from our planning department have come to us because you believe there is sufficient evidence for those.

Planner: That is correct.

In this environment of professional expertise, credentialing and technical bases for evidence, the activists employed their own experts in order to "level the playing field." The group hired a land use attorney, environmental consultant, and recruited civil and traffic engineers from its membership base. They cited the township's zoning ordinances which stated that stressed traffic safety and that the development is compatible with existing and future uses in the area. They, along with their attorney, argued that there were legal bases on which to deny the construction. A leader explained:

It is all in how you interpret the zoning laws. Zoning is a little bit of science and a little bit of art. And there are legitimate zoning issues, what somebody can do on their property. Their right to do what they want on their property is limited once what they do on their property impacts the person on the next parcel. So I think the issues with Wal-Mart per say are how is what they are doing in conducting their business, how does that spill over and impact the surrounding residents and schools. So that is where the zoning board can play a much more proactive role in saying a business of this size, that generates this many cars or this much traffic will have a negative impact on the neighboring businesses. So far our zoning commission, the planning commission has said that a Wal-Mart would have no adverse impact on traffic, safety, would create no hazards. That just seems really implausible.

Group leaders also lobbied for, and won, a new traffic study which resulted in nearly \$3 million worth of traffic concessions from Wal-Mart. They argued that the data in previous studies was inadequate or inaccurate – not accounting for recent growth or providing wrong numbers. Describing her confusion about the traffic data, a leader told me: "I went to the township office and asked for a copy of the traffic study. And I so vividly remember standing

there with it and I open it up, I am reading about it, and the planner was there, the commission was involved in the study, and I said to him, you know I said it looks like a lot of this data was collected in September 2001. . . . And I said, well, that is a pretty big month. And I couldn't, I started making phone calls and no one could find out what the date was. I just found out last week what date it was, it was collected on one day, September 18, 2001. We were still in a state of national emergency, there were still airports closed. And that's the date they collected traffic stats."

And though the "non-expert" members often did the bulk of the research and found the data to back up their technical arguments, they felt they needed experts in order to be heard. "We felt like we needed expert advice. And more than that; like a rubber stamp. Because I think, I think one of the conversations I had with one of the planning commissioners after I got this study back about the wetlands, because I called him, he called me back and he said, you know unless this guy has these credentials and these credentials I don't even want to look at this report. . . . So I realized that, what we realized early on is that just being citizens wasn't enough. And our hope is that we will continue to uncover things that have some kind of expert stamp of approval."

Within the community, the group also gained credibility by serving as more traditional information brokers. Group leaders disseminated information about the campaign, local meetings, and progress reports to members. They summarized the results of complicated technical hearings and distributed highlights. They worked to access information that was otherwise difficult for members to find on their own – issuing almost twenty Freedom of Information Act requests over the course of the fight. Leaders filtered information, only providing what was considered most important or actionable – a task appreciated by many members. One informant told me, "I think that they have...they haven't inundated them [emails] every day like daily updates that would just get too much. That's too much information. I think they've been very good on how much they've communicated, when there's an issue to communicate."

The group validated information by cross checking, vetting data, and providing links to original source materials such as traffic studies, court cases and newspaper articles. This position of having validated information bled into the group's opposition strategies. At one point the group urged Wal-Mart to move to an alternate location in another part of the township – advertising to the community that Wal-Mart had identified a more appropriate location two miles away. Though the company never claimed that it had an option on an alternate piece of land, the group leaders spent weeks trying to verify that they had. "It's hard to say there's a piece of land that Wal-Mart's looking into because that's hard to back up. When you think that they have an option on a piece of land and we think we have sources that are saying that but then there are also sources going you can't reveal me because this is actually private information. So that's kind of hard. So when we finally heard it through five other people we're going okay let's send this out."

A sizeable effort was committed to original research both on the details of the site and on other communities who had successfully fought Wal-Mart – finding ordinances and court cases that could be used in their own situation. One of the group's main arguments was that the township had the legal right to deny or at least severely restrict the development. The group insisted that there were alternative ways to understand the zoning regulations, referencing other communities who had successfully denied construction based on similar zoning laws.

Oftentimes in this information broker role, the group employed a public discourse of being apolitical – insisting that they were not anti-growth, anti-Wal-Mart, anti-sprawl or even

political. Instead, they claimed that they were providing credible, neutral information to help educate the community, township bureaucrats and Wal-Mart. Early pamphlets described, “We are not a political group - just concerned citizens who support responsible development in our community.” They urged members to take a similar stance in public hearings – focusing on the facts such as traffic, environmental impacts and safety, but not on the concerns that citizens might have around Wal-Mart’s business practices.

Subjective Claims: “Rag-Tag Team of Housewives”

Though the group employed an approach that emphasized facts, statistics and technical arguments – particularly in their dealings with the township – this was not their only claim to credibility. Grounding their civic credibility *solely* in objectivity was not possible. Objectivity, technical expertise, and professional status were not territories where the activists found their strongest claims. And, because the group was newly formed, it did not have a set of traditional resources it could call upon. The activists were not backed by national organizations, local political parties, or funding agencies.

From the beginning, activists maintained that the validity of their cause was grounded in their own identity as mothers, fathers and community residents. The group reasoned that their concerns were in part credible precisely because they had a stake in the community – it was their children, their streets, and their community that were going to be most directly affected by the store. This, they asserted, was not a stake which Wal-Mart, technical engineers and even local bureaucrats could claim.

The group portrayed Wal-Mart as an outsider and contrasted it with their own insider, local status as community members. One leader told me that she had read a quote from Wal-Mart founder, Sam Walton, which said that the company would not build where they were not wanted. “So I thought, well we need to raise visibility and make sure that they know they are not welcome.” As a consequence, the group staged a series of “Wal-Mart Not Welcome” rallies – carrying picket signs that read: “Wal-Mart Un-Greeters” and “Wal-Mart: Anti-Community, Labor, Family, American!” They portrayed the corporation as uncaring and unfeeling, especially when it came to their safety and the safety of their children. The activists argued that this, as much as any technical reason, made the company undeserving to be part of the community. A resident said, “It doesn’t seem like Wal-Mart cares about the concerns of our community. . . [if she could talk to Lee Scott (Wal-Mart CEO) she said that] I’d ask him, heart to heart, business aside, if he had a child going to [the elementary school], would he think a supercenter going in next door is a good idea?”

They described the group as the underdogs in the battle, calling themselves “just ordinary residents,” “unpaid citizens,” “just a bunch of volunteers,” and a “rag-tag team of housewives.” This was also the view of the larger community. The local paper, writing about a meeting the group had with Wal-Mart, wrote: “four local moms and three representatives from the world’s largest retailer.” Activists used their underdog status to spotlight their own credibility – they were fighting Wal-Mart not because they disliked the company, were a mouthpiece for other national organizations, or had political aspirations. They were fighting because they were legitimately concerned about their children’s and their community’s future. One leader explained:

I don’t think that many people would fight as hard as they are, if they weren’t concerned about the safety of their kids. At first, people just dismissed us as just another anti-Wal-Mart group. I think a lot of times citizens get up to speak in front of governmental

agencies and they are immediately dismissed, “Oh yeah, they are just anti-development.” But we have focused on something that the government can legitimately take action on: traffic and children’s safety. I think we have been able to come across as a more serious group because of it.

This focus on children and motherhood was forever in the forefront of the campaign. A woman who identified herself as a “mom” remarked at a planning meeting: “Who cares about brick and mortar when our kids are at risk?” But unlike Murray’s analysis of Queens activism (2003), activists in this community did not use maternalized politics as a strategy of last resort. Instead, their identity as mothers and parents grounded the fight; it was a driving force behind the movement. Members remarked that they were doing this for the safety of their kids and the safety of the community and their discourses and political actions reflected this stance. The group’s opposition strategies often focused on their kids and the schools. Children were ever present. Group sponsored events included kids and the school, in fact many of the events were targeted to be family friendly. For example, one of the group’s early public events was a “PJ Party” where families came to the local school to play games and sign anti-Wal-Mart petitions – all in their pajamas. While the adult party goers signed letters to local lawmakers, their children signed postcards – in crayon – to Wal-Mart CEO Lee Scott urging him not to build so “close to their playground.”

Residents also asserted their credibility in their identity as residents and community members. They addressed the planning commissioners by asserting that they were “taxpayers,” “voters,” “property owners,” and long-time residents of the area. They made it clear that they felt that it was their right to not only be heard, but to be heeded. And they argued that the building was not right or appropriate for their community – at least in that location. “I go, I am not anti-Wal-Mart, I am anti-Wal-Mart at that spot. But that is a bad spot for it. But that’s the thing that kind of just got me, ‘oh my god that is a *bad* idea.’ I mean the common sense of it, and how much traffic that is actually going to bring to that area is the thing really got under my goat.”

Finally, they questioned both Wal-Mart’s and the township’s conceptions of evidence, legality and safety. In hearings resident’s relayed their own experiences with traffic congestion, fears about crime and safety. They insisted that their own experiences were valid. During a township hearing, an activist who collected petition signatures told commissioners that she often had people tell her stories about accidents that had happened on the roadway near the proposed development. She said that local residents said it was “foolish” to locate such a development so close to schools. She concluded, “It doesn’t take a traffic engineer to know what it is like to be in a traffic accident.”

To the activists, personal knowledge and experience were valid sources of evidence to make a decision. They urged their members to write or email the department of transportation giving personal examples and stating the safety concerns that they “have as a driver on these roads.” They challenged traffic engineers as being out of touch with the real problems in the area. One leader remarked, in response to the problems with the traffic studies: “Because many of them [traffic engineers] have never even traveled on the road, or been to the intersection, and yet they are making decisions that impact thousands of people.”

Finally, they urged local policy makers and technical engineers to use “common sense” and consider the bigger picture impact that the store would have. Relaying the results of a local road commission meeting to members, the group wrote: “At one point [the road commissioner] stated that his “gut” told him that this site is going to be a traffic problem. He did not believe he

could make decisions based on his gut, when the ‘experts’ were telling him the site would work. Our guts know that this site will not work. That is what keeps us motivated.” Nor would they allow local bureaucrats to lose sight of the fact that *they* were the people behind the numbers being analyzed. “We hope the Road Commission and MDOT walk away from the meeting with information about the people [the Wal-Mart proposal] impacts. We would hope they are thinking about the people behind the statistics they analyze.”

Implications: The Tension between Claims

This evidence suggests that the activists certainly understood the role that data and statistics had to play in their communication with policy makers, but they also made it clear that their identity was a critical factor in their campaign. Their subjectivity conjoined with their objective claims to form the basis of their credibility. However, the combination of claims was not without tension.

Though the ultimate political goal was singular – to deny the store at that proposed location – the political strategies, information, and identity claims the group used were ever-changing and evolving depending on which entity it was trying to influence and at what point. Further, those strategies were often over-lapping because this group, like many grassroots organizations, was waging a campaign on multiple levels – locally, at the state level, and eventually at the national level. Within a one week period, the organization was trying to get media coverage, attend technical hearings on traffic statistics, lobby elected state officials to get involved in the local battle, partner with a national anti-Wal-Mart organization, and mobilize the larger community. So while they understood that having a bunch of “protesting mothers” would be an embarrassment to Wal-Mart and earn them media coverage, they also understood that in order to be taken seriously by local officials their arguments must be perceived as rational and fact-based.

The result was that they could never stake their credibility in either their subjectivity or their objectivity – those sets of claims were often in a struggle. The tension was clear to the activists themselves. Group leaders debated about having political actions that portrayed their children, fearing that it would be like “using kids.” A member explained, “You know we actually wrestled a lot with that, because we were really wrestling with that we don’t want this to be something where we are using kids. . . . And um, yeah, and that’s something I really wrestled with. Because you don’t want people that can’t make their own decisions, like the people who oppose abortion have their kids out there carrying. I really struggle with that.”

At one point the group stated publicly that it would not oppose the Wal-Mart’s entrance into the community if it moved to an alternate location two miles away. They argued that the other location was far more appropriate for a big box store because the road infrastructure there could support it and, importantly, it was not near any schools. But the concession was a struggle for some members, “You know in a way you do feel like are you selling out and if it’s bad to be across from your schools, then it’s no better to have it...then people call you a NIMBY, you can’t win, but I figure I’ve done enough. I personally committed enough time and effort and did what I originally set out to do and I probably will continue for my whole life trying to educate people about Wal-Mart in some way. And not shop there. I certainly personally won’t shop there, I doubt my kids ever would. So I feel like okay maybe I was a little ripple in the pond. Yeah. I guess I could live with that. Let’s just say that. If someone came up and called me a sell out, I could live with it.”

But these tensions were also a way for others to dismiss or detract from the activists' credibility. The group was dismissed as just anti-Wal-Mart, anti-growth, NIMBYs, elitists and racists. The elected commissioners, who were Democrats, claimed that the group members were just Republicans trying to make the township look bad. And other residents in the community blamed the activists for Wal-Mart's entry into the community. One editorial read: "Why does Wal-Mart want to be a resident? Take a look in the mirror and you will see why! It is because of you newcomers/NIMBYs, who have turned [the town] from a sleepy little town 34 years ago into a growing metropolis. If not for you, Wal-Mart would have no interest in our town. Hypocrites, one and all."

And when the group tried to lay a stake in more traditional forms of objectivity – providing data, statistics, and reasoned arguments they were dismissed because they were "just citizens" who did not understand the planning process. They were criticized in editorials and public meetings for spreading misinformation about the planning commission. And they were chastised by other residents because they did not understand what "could legally be done." At the final site approval meeting one resident stated: "I feel like a voice crying in the wilderness here. Officials from our government have been subjected to bombastic venom. Children have been exposed to violence and nastiness. Lies have been circulated as truth. Subdivisions have been fragmented. . . The anti-Wal-Mart factions have descended to such depths that they have disregarded the law and any sense of civil regard for the township of Pittsfield and the elected and appointed officials."

Conclusion: The Production of Civic Credibility

This southeast Michigan grassroots group is not dissimilar from many in the country. From a group of unassociated individuals, an organization of citizens formed as a way to impact local policy. On the surface this was a straightforward story: citizen activists mobilize to protest a multi-national corporation and lobby local policymakers. But the story is more complicated. Community activism may indeed be based in political strategies and mobilization, but it is also based in citizens ability to gain civic credibility. And despite citizenship, voter status, education, and affluence, civic credibility is not automatically granted. It takes work to produce.

This work also suggests that the grounding of credibility in a civic setting may require different conceptualizations than have previously existed. Previous work in the sociology of knowledge has discussed how claims to credibility are grounded in ideas of objectivity – the removal of personal opinions and a position of self-detachment and impartiality. In a civic setting, however, the production of credibility seems to be only partially grounded claims to objectivity. This case reveals that community activists also framed and presented themselves, information about their cause, and their goals using claims to their own subjectivity. While providing data and statistics about Wal-Mart and its potential impact on the community, the activists also appealed to their personal judgment and identity as mothers, parents and community members. These objective and subjective claims were sometimes paradoxical and in conflict. At other times, the claims were used strategically. But in the end, the differing claims to credibility worked together to produce believable, authoritative community spokespeople, what is termed here as *civic* credibility.

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NOTES

¹ I recognize that this form of data is subject to dispute and may not be considered objective proof by many. However, I am using the word prove to indicate the intention of the activists.

² I entered the group in February 2005, approximately three months after its initial organization. Data was then collected over a one-year period, concluding in February 2006 after the planning commission granted approval for the site's construction. A number of methods were employed to collect data, including observing group activities, participant fieldwork, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. These various data gathering techniques ensured a more holistic view of how the community activists, local bureaucrats and the larger community understood the activist's campaign. This also allowed for triangulation of data so that misperceptions or inconsistent statements from informants could be more easily revealed.

Like many ethnographies, my data gathering consisted primarily of field observation and interviews. I attended twelve of the community activist's group activities, including rallies, public events, group "strategy" meetings, and township meetings. During each observation I took extensive field notes. I was alerted of activities either through the group's email listserv (of which I was a member) or through direct contact with members.

In addition to attending public events, I was a participant in the group's "behind the scenes" activities. In this study, group participation primarily took the form of working on the organization's website. During the year, I worked intermittently on updating the content of the site. Because of my research focus – the process of gaining civic credibility and how information and identity are used to produce that credibility – I felt I could only provide basic technical help with the website and therefore only posted information that the leaders gave me directly. I did not find information – research, articles, or data – to post to the site. My participation in the group had importance for three main reasons. First, it allowed me to engage in less formal and more frequent conversations with members and leaders. Leaders forwarded me email regarding their activities, including letters and emails sent to local officials, information about other groups who contacted them, and discussions about specific strategies. Because of my participation, I was also able to engage in less formal conversations with group members where extensive field notes were taken. In conversations or email where I sensed that the informant was speaking to me in confidence, I censored notes. Second, my participation – even though somewhat peripheral – allowed me to recruit interview participants. Finally, participation was a way for me to give back to a group of people who were already over-taxed and were generous in their time with me.

Along with fieldwork, I conducted eighteen in-depth, semi-structured interviews with ten different group members. I used both snowball sampling and fieldwork participation to recruit interview participants. Throughout the course of the year, I interviewed members during two rounds – at the beginning of fieldwork and about nine months into the study. I interviewed the three main group leaders three to four times throughout the course of research. Although I used an interview schedule to guide each interview, I was flexible in adapting the order, wording, and nature of questions. These more structured interviews were invaluable because they gave me a chance to confirm what I had been seeing in the field, go into more detail on specific issues, and also get a sense of how group members understood their campaign. Because all three of the group leaders maintained leadership throughout the process, multiple interviews allowed me to understand how the campaign, strategies, tactics, and awareness evolved over time.

Media, local governmental, and member documents were an important source of data for this study because they helped to shed light on how the group represented itself as well as how others understood the issue. The group's campaign against Wal-Mart generated a significant amount of media coverage. As such, I analyzed 150 to 200 local and regional news stories about Wal-Mart in this community and Wal-Mart in Michigan more generally. Over the length of the study, I analyzed approximately 45 letters to the editor in local newspapers. And in order to understand the larger, national

discourses about Wal-Mart, I monitored anti-Wal-Mart websites. In addition to media coverage, I analyzed 105 email “action alerts” that the group sent out to their members. Finally, I looked at planning commission meeting minutes and attorney memos regarding the Wal-Mart proposal.

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³ Data analysis was conducted in two rounds of inductive and then deductive coding. Initially, I used open coding (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995) to identify major themes. This inductive process, where transcripts and field notes were read without pre-established categories in mind, led to more specific thematic codes that were later used in analysis. As a way to triangulate my understanding of what participants were saying, I used grounded coding on all media and group-generated documents (such as email alerts, flyers, and press releases). I then grouped those codes into broader categories and compared the two sets of coding categories. After themes had been identified, coding took on a more deductive approach where all data was coded using a single codebook.

⁴ These facts included articles regarding Wal-Mart’s track record of leaving abandoned stores, the number of police dispatches at the local Sam’s Club, the number of car trips the neighboring Wal-Mart generates, and details of the traffic study conducted for the site plan.