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Nuclear technologies in the Great Basin oral history project

Danielle Endres

University of Utah, Department of Communication

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NUCLEAR TECHNOLOGIES IN THE GREAT BASIN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Project Website: <http://www.hum.utah.edu/display.php?pageId=2542>

Danielle Endres, Ph.D.
 Assistant Professor
 Department of Communication
 University of Utah
 255 S. Central Campus Dr., LNCO 2400
 SLC, UT 84112
 801-585-7308
 801-585-6255 (fax)
danielle.endres@utah.edu

PHASE ONE: HIGH-LEVEL NUCLEAR WASTE SITING ORAL HISTORIES

INTRODUCTION

The United States currently faces a nuclear waste crisis. According to a 2002 report by former Secretary of Energy Spencer Abraham, “We have a staggering amount of radioactive waste in this country.”¹ The Department of Energy (DOE) estimates that by 2035 the U.S. will have approximately 115,000 metric tons of high-level nuclear waste, which exceeds the capacity of the proposed federal storage site at Yucca Mountain.² Deciding where and how to store nuclear waste is a significant nuclear, environmental, and health policy issue. The decisions that we make about nuclear waste siting greatly impact the future of nuclear technologies and the communities and environments surrounding the sites.

This research project attempts to understand the rhetorical nature of the historical and contemporary controversy over nuclear waste siting in the U.S. through the collection and rhetorical analysis of oral histories from people involved in high-level nuclear waste siting decisions. A crucial part of studying the Atomic West is archiving stories, documents, and events that constitute the relationship between nuclear technologies and the West.³ However, strikingly absent in this growing body of scholarship are oral histories that specifically address nuclear waste siting decisions from a variety of perspectives. This project will archive and analyze the stories of people involved in the controversies over high-level nuclear waste in the American West including: (1) the controversy over the proposal to permanently store high-level nuclear waste at Yucca Mountain, Nevada (1982-present); and (2) the Private Fuel Storage/Skull Valley Goshute private proposal to temporarily store high-level nuclear waste on the Skull Valley Reservation (1987-present). This research project significantly contributes to my overall research trajectory of examining the rhetoric of nuclear waste siting decisions. Most significantly, this research will be incorporated into a scholarly book manuscript that I am in the process of writing.

JUSTIFICATION

There are several justifications for this project. First, this project fills a gap in current scholarship about nuclear issues in the American West by contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the controversy over nuclear waste siting. Some oral history scholars have directed their attention to nuclear issues in the West, but they have focused on nuclear testing at the Nevada Test Site and Uranium mining/milling.⁴ There are no oral histories dealing with the most recent issues of nuclear waste siting in the American West. Moreover, the body of research

on the social and political dimensions of nuclear waste siting decisions would benefit from oral histories that fill in historical gaps and provide the perspectives of people in the American West involved in the decisions.⁵

Second, the oral histories will provide a dataset for a rhetorical analysis that will significantly enhance current scholarship on nuclear waste siting decisions and nuclear communication. My ongoing research on the rhetorical dimensions of nuclear waste siting decisions⁶ will greatly benefit from a new set of previously unavailable data (oral histories) for rhetorical analysis. Moreover, the examination of oral histories from a rhetorical perspective contributes to scholarship in nuclear communication that has not previously drawn from oral histories or sufficiently addressed nuclear waste siting decisions.⁷

Third, rhetorical analysis of nuclear waste siting decisions can offer suggestions for how to create just and equitable processes of decision-making. Deciding where and how to store our nuclear waste is a significant nuclear, environmental, and health policy issue that will not go away as long as we continue to use nuclear technologies. With current proposals for new nuclear power plants, the problem of nuclear waste will only become more acute. Each new nuclear reactor that we license in the United States will create approximately 30 more metric tons per year of high-level waste on top of the 3,000 metric tons per year that we currently create. Whether or not we continue to license new reactors, we will likely have to site multiple high-level nuclear waste repositories in the U.S. An understanding of the rhetorical dimensions of current siting controversies can help us to create just communicative processes for contemporary and future siting decisions.

OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

I will use the oral histories as texts for rhetorical analysis that seeks to uncover the strategies of language and influence that are used by the stakeholders in nuclear waste siting decisions in the cases of Yucca Mountain and Skull Valley. To date, my research has focused on the rhetorical strategies employed by various stakeholders as part of these decisions, using existing written documents such as laws, newspaper articles, community records, public hearing transcripts, government documents, activist organization documents, and mediated accounts. At times the voices of the people most affected by particular policies or events are not included in written accounts. Therefore, oral histories serve a unique role in the construction and our understanding of the history of waste siting decisions. Beyond a description of the arguments presented by each stakeholder group, this project examines *how* these arguments are constructed in ways that frame the debate, include or exclude certain perspectives, and in some cases achieve particular policy objectives. This project seeks to extend my previous research to understand the rhetoric of nuclear waste siting decisions better. The research questions that guide my rhetorical analysis are: (1) *How are nuclear waste siting decisions perpetuated through rhetorical strategies?* (2) *How do people involved in nuclear waste siting decisions use language to frame and inform the siting process?* (3) *How does rhetoric play a crucial role in the theory and practice of environmental policy making, particularly nuclear waste siting decisions?*

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

As there are two parts of this project—the collection of oral histories and rhetorical analysis of oral histories—I will discuss the methods and procedures for each separately.

In accordance with Oral History Association guidelines and in cooperation with the University of Utah American West Center and the J. Willard Marriott Library, this oral history project will collect and archive oral histories related to nuclear waste in the American West. The first step in this project is to compile an initial list of potential narrators based on background

research. Constituent groups from which I plan to elicit narrators represent a broad cross-section of populations involved with nuclear waste siting decisions including: (1) Western Shoshone, Southern Paiute, and Skull Valley Goshute tribal members involved with proposed storage facilities for nuclear waste; (2) federal agency employees (BLM, DOT, DOE); (3) representatives from corporate or organizational entities on both sides of nuclear controversies (e.g. Energy Solutions, Heal Utah); and (4) private citizens from whatever walks of life who feel strongly about nuclear waste. I have compiled an initial list of potential narrators based on these constituent groups and plan to use snowball sampling to gather names of additional narrators as the project goes forward; in other words, I will ask each narrator to suggest the names of other potential narrators.

Rhetorical criticism is the study of the art of persuasion. It seeks to make visible the often invisible elements of influential discourse using rhetorical theories and concepts. In developing a theory of the rhetoric of nuclear waste siting the primary texts come from a variety of symbolic actors with a “stake” in the siting decisions including the United States federal government, affected tribal governments and members, local governments and citizens, and members of the nuclear industry. Oral histories are the last set of texts I need to conduct my analysis. This set of texts represents the multiplicity of voices and perspectives in the controversy and will allow for a nuanced analysis of the rhetorical dimensions of individual sets of texts as well as the interaction between texts. Rhetorical criticism involves closely reading texts to reveal the rhetorical strategies and dynamics of the texts. Specifically, I use the method of argument evaluation to understand the rhetorical strategies and arguments of each stakeholder group through their texts.⁸ Then, I closely read the texts in interaction with each other. Rhetorical criticism proceeds inductively. Using an emic-oriented approach, I will be open to discovering new findings and rhetorical dimension of the texts as I analyze them.⁹ In sum, my method of rhetorical criticism includes: selection of texts, closely reading the texts drawing from my previous work and new rhetorical concepts, and developing a theory of the rhetoric of nuclear waste siting.

ENDNOTES

¹ Spencer Abraham, *Recommendation by the Secretary of Energy Regarding the Suitability of the Yucca Mountain Site for a Repository Under the Nuclear Waste Policy Act of 1982* (Washington D.C., February 2002, YMP-0603).

² U.S. Department of Energy Office of Civilian Radioactive Waste Management, “Nuclear Waste Explained: How Much Nuclear Waste is in the United States?” [Web page], <http://www.ocrwm.doe.gov/ymf/about/howmuch.shtml>.

³ Philip L. Fradkin, *Fallout: An American Nuclear Tragedy* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1989); Grinde and Johansen; Bruce Hevly and John M. Findlay, eds., *The Atomic West* (Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1998); Kuletz, Raye C. Ringholz, *Uranium Frenzy: Saga of the Nuclear West* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2002); Rebecca Solnit, *Savage Dreams: A Journey into the Landscape Wars of the American West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

⁴ The Uranium Oral History Project (1970-1971) housed at the J. Willard Marriott Library at the University of Utah; The Nevada Test Site Oral History Project housed in the College of Liberal Arts and The University of Nevada Las Vegas; Navajo Uranium Miners Oral History and Photography Project (1996-1998) housed at the University of New Mexico General Library Center for Southwest Research; Carole Gallagher, *American Ground Zero: The Secret Nuclear War* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993).

⁵ Douglas Easterling & Howard Kunreuther, *The Dilemma of Siting a High-Level Nuclear Waste Repository* (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995); Micahel B. Gerrard, *Whose Backyard, Whose Risk: Fear and Fairness in Toxic and Nuclear Waste Siting* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995); Kuletz; Kristen Shrader-Frechette, *Burying Uncertainty: Risk and the Case against Geologic Disposal of Nuclear Waste* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Paul Slovic, M. Layman, N. Kraus, James Flynn, J. Chalmers, and G. Gesell, “Perceived Risk, Stigma, and Potential Economic Impacts of a High Level Nuclear Waste Repository in Nevada,” in *Risk, Media and Stigma: Understanding Public Challenges to Modern Science and Technology*, ed. J. Flynn, P. Slovic,

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⁶ Danielle Endres, "The Guise of Deliberation: A Rhetorical Criticism of Arguments in the Yucca Mountain Site Authorization Controversy" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, 2005); Danielle Endres, "Nuclear Colonialism and Rhetorical Exclusion: American Indian opposition to the Yucca Mountain Nuclear Waste Site" under revision for *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*. Danielle Endres, "Public Participation through Public Science: Scientific Argumentation in the Yucca Mountain Controversy" under revision for *Environmental Communication: Journal of Nature and Culture*; Danielle Endres, "Yucca Mountain as Sacred Land or National Sacrifice Zone: Argumentation and Values in the Controversy over the Yucca Mountain Nuclear Waste Site" under revision for *Argumentation and Advocacy*.

⁷ For example: William J. Kinsella, "One Hundred Years of Nuclear Discourse: Four Master Themes and their Implications for Environmental Communication." in *The Environmental Communication Yearbook Volume II*, ed. Susan L. Senecah, 49-72 (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2005); Bryan C. Taylor, "Nuclear Waste and Communication Studies," *The Review of Communication* 3 (2003): 286-292; Bryan C. Taylor and others, *Nuclear Legacies: Communication, Controversy, and the U.S. Nuclear Weapons Complex*, (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007).

⁸ Edward Shiappa, ed. *Warranting Assent: Case Studies in Argument Evaluation*. (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995).

⁹ Edwin Black, "A Note on Theory and Practice in Rhetorical Criticism," *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 44 (1980): 331-336; Michael Leff, "Interpretation and the Art of the Rhetorical Critic," *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 44 (1980): 337-349.