environmental politics

Environmental Politics

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Volume 34
Number 6
September 2025

ISSN: 0964-4016 (Print) 1743-8934 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/fenp20

NIMBYs, shills and liars: ancient woodland, high-speed rail and the legibility of justifications

Richard MacDonald

To cite this article: Richard MacDonald (11 Sep 2025): NIMBYs, shills and liars: ancient woodland, high-speed rail and the legibility of justifications, Environmental Politics, DOI: 10.1080/09644016.2025.2557060

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2025.2557060

Published online: 11 Sep 2025.

ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS
https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2025.2557060

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

NIMBYs, shills and liars: ancient woodland, high-speed rail and the legibility of justifications

Richard MacDonald

Department of Media, Communications and Cultural Studies Goldsmiths, University of London, London, UK

ABSTRACT

This article examines the environmental controversy around the planning and construction of high-speed rail in the UK (HS2) to analyse the changing dynamics and mediation of intra-green contention. The study situates a protracted episode of contention staged on Twitter, focused on the damage and destruction of 108 ancient woodlands by the construction of HS2, in a longer event history initiated by the first UK public consultation on high-speed rail. The article argues that platform-mediated interaction that delegitimises opponents as bad-faith actors, NIMBYs, shills and liars, also has the detrimental effect of obscuring the justifying arguments of critics of purportedly green infrastructure like high-speed rail. The article argues that it is not so much polarisation, but delegitimization that constitutes the greater risk of platform-mediated intra-green contention, an outcome that could be mitigated by discursive forums and iterative processes where trust can be built over time.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 14 November 2024; Accepted 1 September 2025

KEYWORDS High speed rail; NIMBY; justifications; biodiversity offsetting; environmental melodrama

Introduction

High-speed rail networks are rapidly expanding around the world. Demanding of land and massively disruptive to the lives of those who dwell in their footprint, the construction of high-speed rail has sparked environmental protest in many parts of the world (Della Porta and Andretta 2002, Leheis 2012, He *et al.* 2016). Yet high-speed rail also boasts green credentials, which are actively promoted by its sponsors, appealing to some environmental publics. In the UK, one of the key pillars of the strategic case for a new high-speed rail line to connect London and the North of England via Birmingham (referred to as HS2) was that it would reduce transport-related greenhouse gas emissions. HS2, it was argued, would play

CONTACT Richard MacDonald r.macdonald@gold.ac.uk

a key part in the UK's future low-carbon transport system and support the country's commitments to drastically reducing emissions mandated in the 2008 Climate Act. For opponents and critics of HS2, the local environmental costs in terms of lost and damaged landscapes and habitats, and detrimental impacts on biodiversity, far outweigh any potential benefits, contingent as these are on policies that would encourage passengers to shift away from carbon-emitting road and air travel.

Focusing on HS2, a dramatically truncated mega-project, this article examines the dynamics of 'intra-green' conflicts (Blok, 2025) and their mediation.[1] From the first public consultation in 2011 onwards, opponents of HS2 articulated concerns regarding the impact of HS2 on England's scattered ancient woodlands. Whilst ancient woodland was by no means the only affected habitat, it did acquire an iconic prominence in the arguments of opponents. In late 2019, two years after parliamentary approval, construction was paused while an independent review considered the project's future. An alarming claim that 108 ancient woodlands would be damaged and destroyed by HS2 began to circulate, acting as a contentious lightning rod in this fractured landscape of environmental opinion, a focus for supporters and opponents alike. On Twitter,[2] where politicians, celebrities and activists posted the 108 ancient woodlands damaged or destroyed claim for several months, frustrated supporters of HS2, many convinced of its low-carbon credentials, dismissed opponents as NIMBYs, 'shills' or stooges for the road lobby, hypocrites and liars.

Rather than focusing exclusively on this episode of platform-mediated contention and polarisation, this article examines longer-range 'issue dynamics' (Maares & Moats 2015: 6) surrounding HS2 and ancient woodland, providing a deeper temporal perspective which contextualises the 2019 episode of claim and reaction. Neither the 108 ancient woodlands claim, nor the NIMBY label mobilised in response, were newly conjured out of thin air. The aim of the article, however, is not simply to find the past in the present, tracing the appearance of labels and claims back through time to a point of emergence, but to consider how the threat to ancient woodland from HS2 was constructed and contested through changing media ensembles, offering different formats for articulation, interaction and participation in the formulation of justifying arguments, claims and counter-claims.

This study addresses the environmental controversy around the planning and construction of high-speed rail in the UK to analyse the changing dynamics and mediation of intra-green contention. It builds on a growing body of international research on high-speed rail and environmental protest, and an emergent literature focused specifically on the deficiencies of the HS2 planning and engagement process in the UK (Phillips 2017, Cohen and Durrant 2019, Durrant 2025). The study contributes to this literature by foregrounding the mediating role of social media platforms in staging intra-

green conflict in a way that delegitimises opponents as bad faith actors – NIMBYs, shills and liars – and obscures the justifying arguments offered by opponents of purportedly green infrastructure like high-speed rail. Situating a singular yet protracted episode of contention staged on Twitter in a longer event history initiated by the first public consultation on HS2 provides a means to decentre the platform to better assess its role and influence. In conclusion, the article argues that it is not so much polarisation but delegitimization that constitutes the greater risk of platform-mediated intra-green contention, an outcome that could be mitigated by discursive forums where trust can be built over time.

The article is structured as follows: I introduce the theoretical framework that underpins the research next in two parts. I develop an approach to mediated contention that foregrounds on the one hand the dynamic interactions between the use of the NIMBY label by supporters of HS2 and the public justifications offered by opponents of development, and on the other the role of melodrama as a genre of environmental communication and the reactive logic of social media. I then outline the research approach followed by two sections that outline dynamics of contention in distinct phases of the event history: the phase of public consultation on HS2 in which a nascent critique of neo-liberal conservation was formulated, alongside other justifying arguments by both local action groups close to the proposed route and Environmental NGOs, and a late phase of campaigning and protest predominantly, though not exclusively, staged on social media and driven by ENGOs. A discussion section draws out the key insights of this event history for understanding mediated contention within and between environmental publics.

The NIMBY label and its relationship to public justifications

The NIMBY label, as Kate Burningham (2000, p. 55) observes, plays an active role in land use disputes. Analysis of disputes, she advises, should refrain from using the pejorative term to define the motives and interests of local actors, focusing instead on the use that protagonists make of the label and the strategies of local actors to affirm the credibility of their cause in response. NIMBY implies that opposition to development is self-interested rather than principled, as such the label acts 'as a succinct way of discrediting project opponents' (Burningham 2000: 55). Similarly, Eden emphasises that the term NIMBY is typically used to undermine and devalue both local lay knowledge and organised 'specialised publics' in relation to the presumed disinterestedness of professional expertise, and an idealised general public (Eden 2016: 26–36). She also notes that 'environmental publics become aware of the threat of being labelled NIMBYs, and deliberately invent, name and portray themselves in ways to avoid this' (Eden 2016: 55). Numerous scholars have

shown that local critics of proposed developments produce complex, sophisticated and principled arguments to justify their opposition, and that far from being ill-informed or ignorant, they are highly motivated to develop knowledge of the environmental issues at stake (Burningham 2000, Wolsink 2006, Devine-Wright 2009, Eden 2016, Eranti 2017).

This article follows recent studies of land use, planning and development which approach the conflicts that arise through the pragmatic sociology of Boltanski and Thévenot and their work on modes of evaluation and public justification (Boltanski and Thévenot 1999, Ylä-Anttila and Luhtakallio 2016, Eranti 2017). Grounded in the critical capacity and activity of ordinary people and what they refer to as the 'ordinary sense of justice' that people invoke in their disputes, Boltanski and Thévenot's work has the potential to move analysis of planning conflicts away from the reductive simplifications of NIMBYism. Their starting point is that anyone who seeks to address and resolve a public problem, in reaching out to others and coordinating local action must in the process develop justifying arguments.

Public justifications invoke arguments which appeal to a notion of the common good, defined in various ways. Boltanski and Thévenot (1999) refer to these conceptions of the common good as 'orders of worth' and outline the following key categories: market worth, which prioritises monetary value; industrial worth which values efficiency that harnesses scientific expertise; civic worth which centres on collective wellbeing and equality among citizens; domestic worth which concerns values arising from tradition and heritage; inspiration worth, involving judgements based on inspiration, passion and emotion prompted by an inspiring source person or object, and finally the worth of fame or renown. Relatively underdeveloped in Boltanski and Thévenot's (1999) original formulation is what they refer to as green or ecological worth emerging in the context of burgeoning environmental activism. These grammars of ecological worth foreground arguments that transcend the established notions of the common (human) good and envisage a different relationship between humans and non-human forms of life. Thévenot *et al.* (2000) characterise these non-anthropocentric arguments as centring the value of what is singular, unique or scarce about the natural habitats and species threatened by development.

Mediation, melodrama and the mobilisation of attention

Public justifications, and issue making more broadly, occurs in and through changing media ensembles: rhetorical formats and genres, platforms and material technologies. A prominent space of issue making in the early consultation phase of the event history were self-published community blogs run by local action groups, where resources supporting the articulation of justifying arguments were circulated. Later, after HS2 was approved by

parliament, blog posts dwindle in length, ambition and frequency and are increasingly eclipsed by issue formation, and contestation, through social media platforms such as Twitter, which reach and engage publics well beyond those affected, and introduce a distinctly different set of reactive dynamics and interactive protocols.

Analysis of this later phase of mediation draws on Schwarze's (2006) situated approach to environmental melodrama and Gerbaudo's work on the logics of social media platforms (Gerbaudo 2022 2018). Schwarze observes that melodrama is a recurrent rhetorical form in environmental controversies, but one that is frequently condemned for its presumed simplifications and polarising effects. Recognising the transformative potential of melodrama Schwarze calls instead for a situated analysis of the use of melodramatic rhetoric in particular circumstances (Schwarze 2006, p. 256). Similarly, rather than condemn social media platforms as ersatz public spheres, Gerbaudo analyses their crowd logic which provides new opportunities for massively mobilising attention which quickly dissipates. These volatile, turbulent gatherings magnetised by algorithmically amplified issues assemble fluid collectives of individualised users who are mobilised primarily through emotional resonance rather than through reasoned argument. The most common form of engagement or interactivity associated with the social media crowd is rapid reaction to content in the form of low-intensity, simple action formats, liking, retweeting, rapid, one-off, on-the-fly comments in response to content. Gerbaudo argues that 'much of the discussion occurring online is built around the expectation that people will react to content, either by endorsing it or disapproving of it' (Gerbaudo 2022, p. 131). Aggregated reaction amplifies topics, enhancing their visibility and reach, leading Gerbaudo to state that reaction is both the measure and the fuel of the social media public sphere (Gerbaudo 2022, p. 132). Elsewhere, Gerbaudo argues that social media platforms have come to be identified as 'channels of populist yearning', as providing a forum for the disaffected, including in the case of HS2, those disaffected by the planning process (Gerbaudo, 2018: 745). Yet the deeply asymmetrical structure of attention, amplifying prominent opponents of HS2 like celebrities with large follower counts, creates its own resentments. Consequently, on Twitter both supporters and opponents of HS2 could cast themselves as marginalised, anti-establishment voices on high-speed rail in the UK.

Research approach

I conducted ethnographic research over two years starting in March 2020, shortly after the independent inquiry was reported. In practice, digital ethnography involved what Postill and Pink refer to as the everyday routines of checking in on what is being posted and shared,

exploring links to other sources of news and comment, and archiving (Postill and Pink 2012). Following an initial mapping of online sites where the environmental impacts of HS2 were discussed, Twitter became the research 'homebase' (Postill and Pink 2012, p. 129) based on the greater intensity of comment and debate found there. I followed a roughly equal number of commentators on both sides of the debate about HS2 and its environmental impacts. These were individual and organisation-run accounts posting HS2-related comments on a more-or-less daily basis. I used Twitter's search tool to recover retrospective posts circulating the 108 Ancient Woodlands claim and selected posts that received the largest numbers of replies, predominantly those from TV personalities, celebrities, politicians and ENGO accounts. These replies were manually coded to create a typology of reaction and interaction. This typology distinguished responses that mobilised evidence, those that simply contradicted the original post without elaboration, and those that included a negative characterisation of the person or organisation commenting, with the most common sub-categories of the latter being allegations of lies, misinformation, ignorance, hypocrisy, undisclosed interests and NIMBYism. Of course, this method of analysis, which reconstructs online interaction, struggles to capture the real-time volatility and speed of reaction.

Later, the boundaries of the project expanded from a close investigation of a singular episode, the 108 ancient woodlands claim, to one tracing a more extensive event history (see Dauvergne and Neville 2011, Tilly and Tarrow 2015), outlining the changing dynamics of contention from the first consultation in 2011 to the 2019 review. This process drew on a wide range of documentary and media source materials produced by both sponsors and critics of HS2, including consultation reports, sustainability statements, public submissions to consultations and to parliamentary select committees, government policy reviews and planning guidance, press and media reports, community blogs, NGO reports and web campaign materials. The event history revealed both continuities in the composition of 'the issue network' (Marres and Rogers 2005), publicising threats to ancient woodland across these two periods, and significant shifts: the activity of voluntarily run local action groups significantly diminished after the project was approved, professionally staffed ENGO campaigns persisted and direct action protests gained in prominence. The combination of ethnographic and documentary methods was pursued with the intention of analysing online contention within a broader diachronic frame. Other, more institutionalised sites of intra-green contention, such as the policymaking processes of the UK's Green Party, which reversed its opposition to HS2 in 2024, were beyond the scope of the research.

Ecological worth and the critique of neoliberal conservation (2011–2014)

In 2010, proposals for HS2 were formally made public in the High-Speed Rail Command Paper (Department for Transport 2010). Prior to this, as Cohen and Durrant (2019) observe, planning and policy around a new high-speed rail line, first mooted in a report by engineering consultants Atkins in 2003, was largely a conversation restricted to politicians and policy experts, with limited engagement with the wider public. The Command Paper, published during the final months of a Labour government, was followed shortly after by a public consultation which opened in February 2011, run by the Department of Transport under a coalition Conservative-Liberal Democrat government, indicating the cross-party consensus supporting HS2. Publication of the proposed route for phase 1 quickly led to the formation of 72 local action groups along the route. Local groups opposed to the plans were coordinated at a national level by the umbrella organisations, Stop HS2, the HS2 Action Alliance, and Action Groups Against HS2 (AGAHST). In parallel, there was also coordination between a number of larger national NGOs through the Right Tracks Charter, which formulated core principles that they felt should underpin the planning, design and implementation of high-speed rail in the UK.

Publication of the plans, followed by public consultation, created new opportunities for both locally affected and organised publics to challenge the arguments underpinning HS2 and offer alternatives. No sooner was the black box of elite policymaking opened up a crack than the NIMBY label made an appearance. On the same day that the consultation was launched, 28 February 2011, The Times carried a short article with the headline 'High Speed Rail Opponents are NIMBYs, says Minister'. The Times reported that the Transport Secretary, Conservative minister, Philip Hammond, believed that 'Opposition to high-speed rail is driven by "Nimbys" peddling inaccurate scare stories' (Pank 2011). The following month, the Metro newspaper carried the following quote from the transport secretary: 'There is not much more to their argument than Nimbyism . . . I don't blame them for fighting their corner but they should be honest that their objection to this project is that it comes through their backyard. It is not a principled objection' (Higginson 2011). Perhaps the most inflammatory characterisation of opponents in this vein, though hardly subtle, did not actually use the term NIMBY. In June 2011 the pro-HS2 Campaign for High-Speed Rail ran a billboard poster campaign in a number of northern cities. The posters depicted a suited gentleman in front of a country estate with the slogan, 'their lawns or our jobs', framing the conflict over HS2 as one between privileged land-owning southerners and economic growth in the North. It later transpired that the Campaign

for High-Speed Rail was set up by the lobbying firm Westbourne Communications, which was contracted by HS2 Ltd and the Department for Transport. A Spinwatch report authored by Anna Minton described the Campaign for High-Speed Rail as a classic case of astroturfing, a fake grassroots campaign, run by lobbyists and paid for by the Department for Transport (Minton 2013). These were the powerful actors promoting the NIMBY label at the time of the first public consultation on HS2.

In fact, a key terrain of conflict during the consultation phase was not the private lawns, as depicted by HS2 lobbyists, but ancient woodland. As noted above, the NIMBY label is used to delegitimise opposition to development. But publics both anticipate and respond to the label, articulating and clarifying the justifications that promoters of development claim are absent. In the formal responses to the consultations and the campaigning around them, ancient woodland emerged as an object of concern around which both local action groups and ENGOs converged.

The concept of ancient woodland, defined as a site that has been continuously wooded since 1600, emerged through the pioneering work of woodland ecologists in the 1970s and 80s (Rackham 1971, 1976, 1980, Peterken 1977, Goldberg *et al.* 2007). Since then, ancient woodland has been recognised as having unique value for nature conservation and biodiversity. Ancient woodland features undisturbed soil and fungi, it is richer in native flora and fauna and more likely to be a habitat for rare and uncommon species. Ancient woodlands are typically small (less than 20 hectares) and scattered, predominating in the Southeast of England but distributed across the country. Since 1981, the Nature Conservancy Council, and its successor Natural England, has maintained an inventory of ancient woodland, and conservation of these sites has strengthened, although they lack the statutory protection afforded to designated sites of special scientific interest. The 2010 Lawton report into the UK's wildlife and ecological networks, published shortly before the first Department for Transport/HS2 Ltd consultation, collectively categorised ancient woodland as a Tier 2 site, which, along with other local wildlife sites has 'high biodiversity value but without full statutory protection' (Lawton *et al.* 2010, p. 30). In the UK national planning policy ancient woodland is recognised as an irreplaceable habitat, and guidance proposes that any development resulting in loss or damage to ancient woodland should be refused by the planning authority unless there are 'wholly exceptional reasons' (National Planning Policy Framework 2023, p. 54). Nationally significant infrastructure projects where 'the public benefit would clearly outweigh the loss or deterioration of habitat' are considered an exception (NPPF 2023, p. 54). Then sponsors of a development are required to propose appropriate measures to compensate for the loss or deterioration of the ancient woodland. As a category in UK conservation and planning

policy ancient woodland is in the precarious position of being both intrinsically irreplaceable and contingently replaceable simultaneously.

The idea that sites of biodiversity lost to development could be compensated through habitat creation and biodiversity gains elsewhere came to be enthusiastically adopted in the UK in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crash; HS2 was a significant driver in that process (Apostolopoulou and Adams 2019). Biodiversity offsetting promised a win-win scenario to the Conservative-Lib Dem coalition government presiding over public sector austerity and planning deregulation (Carver 2023). Environmentally rich sites could be secured for housing and infrastructure development, whilst apparently reconciling development with environmental commitments. In fact, as critics have highlighted, the broad adoption of biodiversity offsetting in the UK, and globally, is indicative of a shift to market-based conservation which 'facilitate(s) the relocation of environmental compensation in line with the interests of developers' (Apostolopoulou and Adams 2019, p. 215).

The critique that ENGOs produced of HS2's approach to ancient woodland is outlined in detail in the submissions by organisations including the Woodland Trusts, the Wildlife Trusts and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) to the first public consultation and to the consultation on the Environmental Statement (ES). It is a critique with three key elements which, taken together, affirm the complexity of ancient woodlands as unique, site-specific eco-systems. Firstly, ENGOs challenged the framing of ancient woodland loss by HS2 Ltd as off-setable. Whilst HS2 Ltd focused on methods of compensating for habitat loss, such as the off-setting technique of translocating soils from woodlands felled for construction and moving it to create new habitat, ENGOs argued that HS2 Ltd was obliged first and foremost to avoid loss of habitat. These obligations were enshrined in the mitigation hierarchy which informs government policy on biodiversity and which prioritises avoidance of loss. Secondly, ENGOs critiqued the accounting logic of HS2 Ltd's compensation plans as reductive and ecologically illiterate. For example, The Woodland Trust stated that the ES failed to consider the significance of the temporal lag, potentially lasting decades between the destruction of ancient woodland habitat and the maturation of any woodland planted in compensation for that loss. Once debits and credits on an offsetting balance sheet are considered in real time, the impact of loss and fragmentation on woodland specialist species becomes apparent (The Woodland Trusts 2014, Section 2). Third, ENGOs challenged the baseline data used by the company to evaluate its environmental impact. The Wildlife Trusts estimated that 64% of the entire phase 1 route had not been surveyed for protected species or wildlife habitats. In their view the field survey methodologies adopted by HS2 were inconsistent, potential impacts such as the effects of noise had been downplayed, and existing habitat features undervalued or omitted. They concluded that the ES was 'not fit for purpose

and is unacceptable given the scale of HS2' (The Wildlife Trusts 2014, Executive Summary). The Woodland Trust disputed HS2's assessment of the number of ancient woodlands that would be affected by phase 1 of the project. They argued that 27 ancient woodlands would be affected, rather than the tally of 19 given by HS2 in the ES, noting that no consideration was given to indirect impacts on ancient woodland habitats caused by noise, light, dust and vibration. Other ancient woodlands, not yet formally listed as such on the ancient woodland inventory were also at risk from the scheme, claimed the Woodland Trust (The Woodland Trusts 2014, Executive Summary). The difficulty of determining how many ancient woodlands were at risk, an issue mobilised in the later phase of campaigning, was, according to the ENGOs, indicative of the flawed approach of HS2 Ltd and of the accounting logic underpinning it: poor assessment, failure to consider indirect impacts and an unwillingness to avoid habitat loss rather than compensate for it. Local action groups and their national bodies were significant amplifiers of the expert justifications of ENGOs. Action group blogs regularly cited arguments and evidence found in ENGO reports, consultation responses, and linked their readers to advice and petitions on ENGO webpages.

Besides their ecological worth as complex and unique eco-systems, action groups also articulated other justifications for the preservation of local ancient woodland. Ancient woodland was constructed as having unique cultural value as a repository of deep time and a place of natural beauty that inspires residents and visitors. Emphasising the beauty and tranquillity of ancient woodland in particular, and undisturbed rural landscape in general, these arguments evoke Boltanski and Thévenot (1999) category of justifications based on inspirational worth. Similarly, ancient woodland was valued for its civic worth as cultural heritage and as an amenity in close proximity to local communities, a special category of public and communal things that endure and connect the generations. To paraphrase Honig (2017), publicly accessible woodland constitutes a valued public thing that provides a concrete experience of contiguity across generations, a generative power to join and equalise the generations.

In their highly critical account of public participation in the HS2 planning process Cohen and Durrant conclude that 'opponents' perceptions that many of the decisions had been made prior to public consultation, were largely borne out' (2019, p. 256). In their view, the development of HS2 was a perfect example of the anachronistic strategy 'decide, announce and defend' (2019, p. 252). On one level the efficiency of the strategy was evident in the successful passage through parliament with assent for phase 1 granted in 2017. And yet, Cohen and Durrant add, 'consent and design are just the first part of what will be a long process of construction and implementation and, with this in mind, we reserve the right to withhold judgement on the ultimate

success of the government's strategy' (Cohen and Durrant 2019, p. 254). Moving forward in time to 2019, I now consider the new opportunity structure opened up by the independent review.

The 2019 campaign to Rethink HS2

In mid-2019, the announcement by then Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, of an independent review into the project's future opened up a window of opportunity for a more adversarial phase of campaigning. Polls showed that HS2 was deeply unpopular with Conservative Party members and in his campaign for leadership of the party Johnson had promised an independent review (Pickard and Plimmer 2019, Politics Home 2019). Enabling work on phase 1 of the project which had begun earlier in the year was paused. Prompted by the Oakervee review, a coalition of ENGOs, led by the Woodland Trust and Wildlife Trusts, including the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth, launched a coordinated campaign urging members to send a message to the government to stop and rethink HS2 in view of its environmental impacts. The campaign took out a full-page advert in *The Times* which gave prominence to the claim that 108 ancient woodlands would be damaged or destroyed by HS2. A parallel strand of campaigning explicitly supportive of the Rethink HS2 alliance was the Stand for the Trees campaign. Whilst Rethink HS2 was clearly identified with a coalition of prominent national NGOs, Stand for the Trees was a more amorphous entity, its organisers were difficult to identity, with TV presenter Chris Packham as its sole figurehead.[3] The Stand for the Trees email list was used to crowdfund Packham's legal costs in challenging the government through judicial review and to mobilise support for direct action in the form of marches, demonstrations and occupations of threatened frontline woodlands by 'tree defenders'.

Central to the Rethink HS2 campaign was the claim that 108 ancient woodlands were threatened by HS2. This claim originated in research undertaken by the Woodland Trust in conjunction with local Wildlife Trusts along the route. The Woodland Trust had been briefing for some time that more than 100 ancient woodland sites were at risk from HS2, but the earliest reference to the specific figure of 108 can be traced to press releases strategically timed to coincide with the announcement of the independent review into the future of HS2 in August 2019. 108 was a total estimated figure for both phases of the original Y shaped route and it included sites where there was direct loss of land to HS2 construction, and those sites where the impacts would be indirect, including noise, vibration and dust. For phase 1 from London to West Midlands those figures broke down to 34 ancient woodlands directly impacted and a further 27 with negative indirect impacts (The Wildlife Trusts 2020). This, it was stressed, was likely to be an underestimate

given the existence of pockets of unrecorded ancient woodland. All affected sites were identified and mapped along the route on the Woodland Trust website.

Substantiating the claim that woodland would be subject to both direct loss and indirect damage both the Wildlife Trusts and the Woodland Trust published resources that evidenced the kinds of damage that even quite small losses of land can have on already fragile woodland eco-systems. An important argument advanced by both organisations was that HS2 threatened further fragmentation, shrinking habitats and severing connections between them, undermining the principles of the 2010 Lawton Review into nature's recovery which emphasised the connectivity of ecological networks.

Through the latter part of 2019, both the Wildlife Trusts and the Woodland Trust used Twitter to circulate the claim that 108 ancient woodlands were threatened. They consistently used phrases that captured a range of impacts both direct and indirect: 'loss or damage', 'damaged or destroyed'. At the same time, they tweeted a broader claim that HS2 would 'destroy swathes of ancient woodland'. In December 2019 these distinct claims underwent something of a mutation as they were taken up by other campaigning forces. This resulted in a mash up of the broader claim that ancient woodland was being destroyed and that 108 ancient woodlands were at risk of loss or damage. What emerged was the altogether different claim initially propounded by the Stand for the Trees campaign that over 100 ancient woodlands were set to be destroyed. This claim came at the conclusion of an emotive short video, timed for Christmas season online release, featuring a young boy seeing off the menace of tree fellers in high vis jackets by leading the local community in decorating a tree and affirming their love of the woods (Stand for the Trees 2019).

Discussion

The threat to ancient woodland from HS2 was constituted as melodrama in the Stand for the Trees campaign. Melodrama, as Schwarze notes, moralises environmental issues and sharpens conflict through a 'bi-polar positioning of characters and forces' (Schwarze 2006, p. 244). As protest-driven campaigns without the restraining motivation to exercise 'stakeholder' influence, Stand for the Trees and adjacent platforms for direct action like HS2 Rebellion heightened melodrama by portraying HS2 as murderous: 'HS2 has blood on its hands', and through the labelling of the project as ecocide (2020). In an apocalyptic register, in speeches at protests and on social media, Packham claimed that HS2 was 'the largest deforestation programme in the UK since the first world war' (@ChrisGPackham, 29 July 2019). Schwarze argues for a contextualised judgement of the use of melodramatic rhetoric in framing

environmental controversies: are the conflicts and divisions that melodrama constructs beneficial in the specific context of dispute? Schwarze suggests that melodrama may have the greatest potential in transforming perceptions when issues have yet to be articulated. Conversely, melodrama is likely to have less potential when controversies are well-defined (Schwarze 2006, pp. 255–256). What is clear is that melodrama not only served to sharpen the conflict between HS2 and conservationists but also deeply entrenched the division between environmentalists for and against the project. Rapid and distributed reaction to the melodramatic messaging of HS2 as ecocide and the destruction of 108 ancient woodlands was then facilitated by social media platforms, notable for their asymmetrical and polarising dynamics.

As Gerbaudo (2022), among others, has emphasised, the logic of participation in the social media public sphere is profoundly hierarchical and unequal. A very small minority of users actively generate content that the mass of users react to. No doubt these deep asymmetries of attention feed frustrations and resentments that also colour and shape the reactions mobilised in these spaces. Among the notables and celebrities on Twitter that amplified the claim that 108 ancient woodlands would be lost or damaged due to HS2 were television presenters, Chris Packham, Iolo Williams, Steve Backshall, musician Annie Lennox, social media savvy MPs, Caroline Lucas of the Green Party and Labour''s Zarah Sultana, and organisations, the RSPB, the Wildlife Trusts, the Woodland Trust, all of which were running twitter accounts with follower numbers in the tens and hundreds of thousands. TV presenter Chris Packham's regular tweets on HS2 and ancient woodland from late 2019, coinciding with his involvement in the Stand for the Trees campaign, frequently received over 6000 likes, were shared in the order of 2–3000 times and attracted hundreds of replies. Similarly, Caroline Lucas's less frequent tweets on HS2 and the loss of 108 ancient woodlands attracted several hundred replies and over 3000 likes. A campaign strategy centred on the large number of threatened ancient woodland was highly effective and the claim that 108 ancient woodlands were at risk of loss or damage became a widely circulated formula through which social media publics could engage with and articulate concern about the environmental impact of HS2. In the process of becoming a viral slogan, however, the claim also became the object of anger and frustration, in particular, the claim was dismissed as misinformation, fake news or lies by Twitter users who were clearly frustrated that the green case for supporting HS2 was not cutting through. Individuals and organisations who propagated the 108 lost or damaged ancient woodlands were dismissed as hypocrites, fools, NIMBYs and liars.

Confronted by an attention-grabbing campaign, the split within environmental publics such as the Green Party manifested online in a frenzy of counterclaims of lies and hypocrisy, targeted at high-profile HS2 opponents. For example, in a video tweeted by Chris Packham in May 2020, the Stand

for the Trees campaign repeated the claim that 'HS2 will destroy over 100 ancient woodlands' over accompanying footage of tree felling (Stand for the Trees 2020). The response from many commenters was to discredit both the message and the messenger. 'What has happened to you? Does factual accuracy have no value?' tweeted one, (User 1, 5 May 2020). Rail Engineer and podcaster Gareth Dennis stated that the claim that over 100 ancient woodlands would be destroyed was 'a complete fabrication' (@GarethDennis, 17 December 2019), and dubbed Packham's claims on HS2 'piffling bollocks' (@GarethDennis, 8 July 2020). His fact-checking video posted on YouTube referred to 'Packham's Porkies' (Dennis 2020). A common trope in the replies was that Packham was opposed to HS2 because he was 'a petrolhead' (User 2, 24 May 2021), or as one commenter put it: 'Bloke who drives a big Land Rover doesn't like railways' (User 3, 3 July 2020). Others argued that Packham was 'a JLR (Jaguar Land Rover) shill' (User 4, 3 July 2020), an allusion to the presenter's involvement in a podcast series sponsored by Land Rover Discovery in 2017. 'No wonder you want HS2 cancelled. More roads mean more cars means more money for you' (User 5, 3 July 2020). 'Shock as Rich NIMBY in the payroll of Jaguar Land Rover opposes railway project', stated another (User 6, 1 January 2021). In fact, a common thread within the reaction to the ancient woodland claim from green supporters of HS2 was to state that those opposed to building an 'electric railway' were implicitly supportive of road building and hypocritical in not raising an objection to woodland destroyed by road projects. In another tweet Gareth Dennis dismissed environmental opposition to HS2 as 'a load of Range Rover drivers trying to stop climate action' (@GarethDennis, 6 January 2021). Opponents to HS2 were cast as rich NIMBYs whose unreasonable demands for tunnelling through the Chilterns had pushed up the costs of the project, ultimately jeopardising its completion. Supporters of HS2 were adamant that you cannot rapidly reduce Greenhouse Gas Emissions without HS2. In an uncanny echo of the neoliberal mantra, HS2's green supporters asserted that there simply was no alternative.

Is the de-legitimisation of opponents in the staging of an environmental issue such as the impact of high-speed rail on woodland habitat, a platform effect? Certainly, some authors have warned of the consequences of routing debate on environmental controversies through a platform-mediated information landscape, one engineered to maximise users' time online, amplifying content that is sensational, divisive and conspiratorial. Writing in 2021, Holly Jean Buck argued:

> The social transition [away from fossil fuels] is constrained by the platforms that now mediate and determine social discourse. Twitter, Facebook, YouTube: their algorithms aren't built for nuanced, dialogic content that will

> allow people to gradually change their minds and question fossil fuels (Buck 2021, p. 5).

People, she argues, inhabit differently mediated realities with little dialogue or opportunity for mutual learning. Identities become entrenched by platform mediation rather than malleable as per the hybrid forum. Under Musk's leadership, X's cutting back of content moderation, the reinstatement of accounts suspended for hate speech and misinformation and a timeline that defaults to algorithmic curation have all further exacerbated these tendencies.

Following Burningham (2000) it is not NIMBYs as such, but rather the use made of the NIMBY label within development conflicts that interests us. Appearing first in 2011 this strategy of delegitimization was not born on Twitter. But with platform-mediation, characterised by asymmetrical structures of attention and a reactive logic, the NIMBY label has 'gone viral', attaching itself to other labels, forms of ad hominem attack – hypocrisy, lies, deceit – designed to undermine the trustworthiness, sincerity or reliability of the person or organisation presenting an issue in public. As Borovali (2018) notes, ad hominem arguments inhibit public debate because they set out to intentionally undermine the legitimacy of adversaries, closing down the issues they have attempted to open up. More than that, as Borovali writes, 'a satisfactory scrutiny of the issue under consideration becomes hampered as a result of the debate being diverted away from the substance (2018, p. 435).' The more it is assumed that arguments are made by bad faith actors – shills and Nimbys – the more obscure, the less legible, the substantive issues become.

Conclusion

Studies of public knowledge controversies have consistently argued that for many contentious issues decisions are made in the face of persistent disagreements (Latour and Weibel 2005, Callon *et al.* 2011; Barry, 2013). Adopting an agonistic conception of democratic decision-making on matters of contention, what matters is not that a final consensus is reached through rational deliberation, but that conflict is founded on recognition of opposing views as legitimately held. Relatedly, scholars working in the field of environmental management use the term wicked problems to describe highly divisive developments characterised by a high degree of scientific uncertainty on outcomes and a profound lack of agreement on values (Balint *et al.* 2011, p. 2). If wicked problems have typically involved conflict between conservationists and developers, increasingly the development of ostensibly green infrastructure to support decarbonisation will involve

reconfigured alliances and conflicts between and within environmental publics with competing priorities, such as biodiversity or net zero, linked to different scales of action and intervention. These wicked problems, environmental conflicts that cannot be resolved through recourse to scientific knowledge alone, require spaces for dialogue, and iterative processes of building mutual trust between networks of actors with different forms of knowledge, affected publics and experts, equally invested in a process they are persuaded is open and fair (Callon *et al*. 2011; Balint *et al*, 2011). The speed and volatility of reaction characteristic of social media contrasts starkly with these conditions.

The case of HS2 in the UK suggests that platform affordances and platform-specific vernaculars (Gibbs *et al*. 2014) have played a role in changing the dynamics of environmental contention, increasing the presumption that opponents on the other side of the argument are bad faith actors, liars and hypocrites who need to be called out as illegitimate interlocutors. And yet, the article makes a case for situating singular episodes of platform-mediated contention in relation to longer-term issue dynamics as revealed in more extensive event histories. Doing so indicates that Twitter was an appealing space of contention on HS2, exerting some gravitational pull, in part, due to the rigid and restrictive top-down management of public opinion through successive consultations, which offered limited opportunities for genuine public participation. Throughout the consultation process from 2011 to 2014, affected lay publics and ENGO's who have sought to make an issue of HS2's environmental impacts have expressed their scepticism as to the openness, impartiality and procedural fairness of the consultations. Public concerns about damage to ancient woodland, along with other local environmental impacts, having been safely corralled and contained in the summaries of consultation reports, and then largely ignored, have overflowed, seeking other avenues of expression and influence.

The case of HS2 and ancient woodland has divided environmental opinion and public in a way likely to prefigure many such conflicts in the decades to come with the accelerated development of green infrastructure, facilitated by market-led conservation. The argument developed here serves as a reminder that the issues raised by publics affected by these developments cannot be resolved through recourse to expert knowledge alone. Just resolution to environmental controversy requires discursive spaces where competing justifications and evaluations of the common good and ecological worth that underpin and shape them can be openly articulated, constructively challenged and critiqued with a presumption that arguments are legitimate, rather than dismissed as lies and rendered illegible.

Notes

1. The UK's first high speed rail line opened in 2003 and connected London St. Pancras with mainland Europe via the channel tunnel. HS2 was originally designed as a Y-shaped route to be constructed in three phases: phase 1 from London to the West Midlands, phase 2a from West Midlands to Crewe and phase 2b from Crewe to Manchester and West Midlands to York and Leeds. In October 2023, the Conservative government cancelled phase 2 in its entirety amidst persistent concerns about cost overruns and project delivery. For an authoritative analysis of the cancellation of phase 2 see Durrant (2025).
2. The research for the article was undertaken prior to Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter, which was completed in November 2022, and the subsequent rebranding of the platform as X. For this reason, I continue to use the name Twitter which was correct at the time of research.
3. A video produced for the Stand for the Trees campaign appears to have been funded by the former Greenpeace executive director John Sauven in a personal capacity (Email correspondence with Greenpeace, UK) and was hosted on Extinction Rebellion's YouTube channel.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to the Department of Media, Communications and Cultural Studies, Goldsmiths, University of London, for providing the dedicated research leave during which I developed this research, and to the Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Kyoto, for hosting me during that sabbatical. I am also grateful to the two anonymous reviewers for their many constructive suggestions.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

References

Apostolopoulou, E. and Adams, W., 2019. Cutting nature to fit: urbanization, neoliberalism and biodiversity offsetting in England. *Geoforum*, 98, 214–225. doi:10.1016/j.geoforum.2017.05.013

Balint, P. J., *et al.*, 2011 *Wicked Environmental Problems: Managing Uncertainty and Conflict*. Washington, DC: Island Press.

Barry, A., 2013. *Material Politics: Disputes Along the Line*. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell.

Blok, A., 2025. Contesting eco-modernist hegemony in Denmark? Green reform nexus and transformative climate advocacy in an established environmental state. *Environmental Politics*, 1–22. doi:10.1080/09644016.2025.2476276

Boltanski, L. and Thévenot, L., 1999. The sociology of critical capacity. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 2 (3), 359–377. doi:10.1177/136843199002003010

Borovali, M., 2018. Ad hominem argumentation in politics. *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 44 (4), 426–436. doi:10.1177/0191453718755206

Buck, H.J., 2021. *Ending fossil fuels: why net zero is not enough*. London: Verso.

Burningham, K., 2000. Using the language of NIMBY: a topic for research, not an activity for researchers. *Local Environment*, 5 (1), 55–67. doi:10.1080/135498300113264

Callon, M., Lascoumes, P., and Barthe, Y., 2011. *Acting in an uncertain world: an essay on technical democracy*. London: MIT Press.

Carver, L., 2023. Seeing no net loss: making nature offset-able. *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, 6 (4), 2182–2202. doi:10.1177/25148486211063732

Cohen, T. and Durrant, D., 2019. Public engagement and consultation: decide, announce and defend. *In*: I. Docherty and J. Shaw, eds. *Transport matters*. Bristol: Policy Press, 251–278.

Dauvergne, P. and Neville, K.J., 2011. Mindbombs of right and wrong: cycles of contention in the activist campaign to stop Canada's seal hunt. *Environmental Politics*, 20 (2), 192–209. doi:10.1080/09644016.2011.551024

Della Porta, D. and Andretta, M., 2002. Changing forms of environmentalism in Italy: The protest campaign on the high speed railway system. *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, 7 (1), 59–77. doi:10.17813/maiq.7.1.j5248k8559158165

Dennis, G., 2020. Why HS2? Packham's vanity project [Video] 9 July. https://youtu.be/l0P4gOpKVm4 .

Department for Transport, 2010. *High speed rail*. London: HMSO.

Devine-Wright, P., 2009. Rethinking NIMBYism: The role of place attachment and place identity in explaining place-protective action. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 19 (6), 426–441. doi:10.1002/casp.1004

Durrant, D./., 2025. What killed HS2? Explaining the loss of political support for the UK's high-speed rail megaproject. *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy & Society*, 18 (2), 359–370. doi:10.1093/cjres/rsaf005

Eden, S., 2016. *Environmental publics*. London: Routledge.

Eranti, V., 2017. Re-visiting NIMBY: from conflicting interests to conflicting valuations. *Sociological Review*, 65 (2), 285–301. doi:10.1177/0038026116675554

Gerbaudo, P., 2018. Social media and populism: an elective affinity? *Media, Culture & Society*, 40 (5), 745–753. doi:10.1177/0163443718772192

Gerbaudo, P., 2022. Theorizing reactive democracy: the social media public sphere, online crowds and the plebiscitary logic of online reactions. *Democratic Theory*, 9 (2), 120–138. doi:10.3167/dt.2022.090207

Gibbs, M., *et al*., 2014. #Funeral and Instagram: death, social media, and platform vernacular. *Information Communication & Society*, 18 (3), 255–268. doi:10.1080/1369118X.2014.987152

Goldberg, E., *et al*., 2007. The ancient woodland concept as a practical conservation tool in Great Britain. *Journal for Nature Conservation*, 15 (2), 109–119. doi:10.1016/j.jnc.2007.04.001

He, G., Mol, A.P., and Lu, Y., 2016. Public protests against the Beijing–Shenyang high-speed railway in China. *Transportation Research Part D: Transport & Environment*, 43, 1–16. doi:10.1016/j.trd.2015.11.009

Higginson, J., 2011. Minister: Only nimbys oppose 250 mph trains. *Metro*, 21 Mar.

Honig, B., 2017. *Public things: democracy in disrepair*. New York: Fordham University Press.

HS2 Rebellion Website, 2020. HS2 rebellion disrupts UK's Department for Transport to demand urgent action on the climate emergency and push the government to stop ecocide and stop HS2.

Latour, B. and Weibel, P., 2005. *Making things public: atmospheres of democracy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Lawton, J.H., *et al*., 2010. *Making space for nature: a review of England's wildlife sites and ecological network*. Report to Defra. Available from: https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20130402170324mp_/http://archive.defra.gov.uk/environment/biodiversity/documents/201009space-for-nature.pdf

Leheis, S., 2012. High-speed train planning in France: lessons from the Mediterranean TGV-line. *Transport Policy*, 21, 37–44. doi:10.1016/j.tranpol.2011.11.004

Marres, N. and Moats, D., 2015. Mapping controversies with social media: the case for symmetry. *Social Media + Society*, 1 (2), doi:10.1177/2056305115604176

Marres, N. and Rogers, R., 2005. Recipe for tracing the fate of issues and their publics on the web. *In*: B. Latour and P. Weibel, eds. *Making things public: atmospheres of democracy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 922–935.

Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2023. *National planning policy framework*. London: Crown Copyright. Available from: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/669a25e9a3c2a28abb50d2b4/NPPF_December_2023.pdf

Minton, A., 2013. *Scaring the living daylights out of people: The local lobby and the failure of democracy*. Spinwatch Report.

Pank, P., 2011. High-speed rail opponents are nimbys, says minister. *Times* (London), 28 Feb.

Peterken, G.F., 1977. Habitat conservation priorities in British and European woodlands. *Biological Conservation*, 11 (3), 223–236. doi:10.1016/0006-3207(77)90006-4

Phillips, J., 2017. The "whys and wherefores" of citizen participation in the landscapes of HS2. *Planning Theory & Practice*, 18 (2), 328–333. doi:10.1080/14649357.2017.1307538

Pickard, J. and Plimmer, G., 2019. Boris Johnson raises doubts over HS2 line. *The Financial Times*, 17 Jun.

Politics Home, 2019. Conservative members want leadership rivals to axe HS2 and aid target, poll reveals. https://www.politicshome.com/news/article/conservative-members-want-leadership-rivals-to-axe-hs2-and-aid-target-poll-reveals [Accessed 20 Apr 2025].

Postill, J. and Pink, S., 2012. Social media ethnography: The digital researcher in a messy web. *Media International Australia*, 145 (1), 123–134. doi:10.1177/1329878X1214500114

Rackham, O., 1971. Historical studies and woodland conservation. *In*: E. Duffey and A.S. Watt, eds. *The scientific management of animal and plant communities for conservation*. Oxford: Blackwell, 563–580.

Rackham, O., 1976. *Trees and woodland in the British landscape*. London: Dent.

Rackham, O., 1980. *Ancient woodland*. London: Edward Arnold.

Schwarze, S., 2006. Environmental melodrama. *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 92 (3), 239–261. doi:10.1080/00335630600938609

Stand for the Trees, 2019. Last Christmas [video]. Available from: https://youtu.be/M7yI50AS_Tw?feature=shared

Stand for the Trees, 2020. Betrays us all. [Video]. Available from: https://youtu.be/0nyCTVFzQkc?feature=shared

Thévenot, L., Moody, M., and Lafaye, C., 2000. Forms of valuing nature: arguments and modes of justification in French and American environmental disputes. *In*: M. Lamont and L. Thevenot, eds. *Rethinking comparative cultural sociology: repertoires of evaluation in France and the United States*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 229–272.

The Wildlife Trusts, 2020. What's the damage? Why HS2 will cost nature too much. http://57ac0c4836212612790f-823d78da580330fdca9d1ec4339d74c1.r33.cf1.rackcdn.com/What's%20the%20damage%20-%20Full%20Report%20digital.pdf [Accessed 01 Apr 2025].

Tilly, C. and Tarrow, S., 2015. *Contentious politics*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press.

The Wildlife Trusts, 2014. Written evidence submitted by the Wildlife Trusts. Available from: https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/49413/html/

Wolsink, M., 2006. Invalid theory impedes our understanding: a critique on the persistence of the language of NIMBY. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 31 (1), 85–91. doi:10.1111/j.1475-5661.2006.00191.x

The Woodland Trusts, 2014. Written evidence submitted by the Woodland Trust. Available from: https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/49317/html/

Ylä-Anttila, T. and Luhtakallio, E., 2016. Justifications analysis: understanding moral evaluations in public debates. *Sociological Research Online*, 21 (4), 1–15. doi:10.5153/sro.4099