The Nature of Electric Utility Company Names

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The name and existence of an electric utility company frequently enter the awareness of the average American but without much attention paid to the name itself. Most households receive an unwanted monthly reminder of their utility company and occasionally find themselves without electricity for a period of time. People also observe meter readers, utility trucks, transmission lines, power plants, and other utility-related items. These instances, plus the frequent media reports of utility rate increases, construction problems, and other activities mean that utilities and their names become part of the public's consciousness and are visible within the landscape of many areas.

Although utility names are perceived and viewed, little research has been performed on the general character of this group of corporate names, or for that matter, on any group of corporate names. Aside from Boddewyn's work on changes in naming patterns of industrial corporations,[1] most studies of corporate names are related to choosing a name for a particular company and making sure the name is legally available for use.[2] This paper examines the characteristics of the component parts of electric utility names. The set of names encompasses all major electric utilities in the United States and an important part of the examination includes comparing the utility names with the names of industrial corporations in general.

One hundred sixty-four utilities are included in the study because they satisfy the criteria of being privately owned and serving at least 10,000 customers. Publicly owned utilities are excluded because of their small size and, more importantly, because their names show little variation.

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[1]J. Boddewyn, "The Names of U.S. Industrial Corporations: A Study in Change," *Names*, 15 (1967), pp. 39-52.

[2]Among recent studies of corporate names are: G. Gottlieb, "Corporate Name Clearance — Potential Trademark Trouble Spot," *Business Lawyer*, 33 (1978), pp. 2263-2271; W.R. Laney, "Choosing and Protecting Corporate Name," *Oklahoma Law Review*, 30 (1977), pp. 507-548; J.R. Mancuso, "How to name — and not name — a business," *Harvard Business Review*, 56 (1978), pp. 20-26; R. Weigel, V. Weigel, G. Thorton, and F. Magnusson, "Assessment of Preferences Among Company Name by Semantic Differential and Free Association," *Psychological Reports*, 37 (1975), pp. 1163-1166.

Public utility names, like Culpeper Light and Power Plant (Culpeper, Virginia) or Ely Water and Light Department (Ely, Minnesota), almost invariably include the name of the town or city which owns the utility. Use of a 10,000 customer cutoff level is arbitrary, but eliminating the numerous small private utilities and rural cooperatives does not adversely affect the study of electric utility names.

The names of the utility companies have been taken from *Moody's Public Utility Manual*.[3] Except for two names, each of the 164 names is composed of three parts: (1) a specific name, (2) a generic name, and (3) a legal designation. For example, Long Island Lighting Company and Florida Power Corporation are typical utility names with "Long Island" and "Florida" being the specific names, "Lighting" and "Power" the generic names, and "Company" and "Corporation" the legal designations. The two exceptions, CP National Corporation and UGI Corporation, are utilities which lack generic parts to their names. In examining the names, any prepositions or articles as in Public Service Company of Colorado or The Hartford Electric Light Company are ignored and the repeated use of Thomas Edison's name means that "Edison" is treated as a generic. When the utility names are compared with corporate names, *Fortune's* list of the 500 largest industrial corporations is used to be representative of corporate naming patterns.[4]

SPECIFIC NAMES

The principal characteristic of electric utility specific names is the common use of geographic names. As Table 1 indicates, states, cities, and physical features like rivers, lakes, oceans, and mountains are frequently used to suggest where the utility company operates. In fact, 91 percent of the 164 utility company names have geographic specific names.

State names, either alone, modified, or in combination, comprise the largest group of geographic specific names. Allowing Delmarva Power and Light Company to count for Delaware and Maryland, 43 of the 50 state names are used in utility names. The seven states which do not have a utility using their names are small (Rhode Island), sparsely populated (Wyoming), or served by public utilities (Tennessee). Fourteen of the utilities using state names have names that provide more detailed information about where a utility is located. A modified state name like West

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[3]*Moody's Public Utility Manual* (New York: Moody's Investor Service, 1981).

[4]"Fortune Directory of the 500 Largest Industrial Corporations," *Fortune*, 103 (May 1981), pp. 322-349.

Texas Utilities Company suggests what part of Texas this company serves. City specific names, a second significant category of geographic specific names, also provide more precise locational information because utilities with city specific names usually serve no more area than the metropolitan area for which they are named. Atlantic City Electric Company and Dayton Power and Light Company are examples of exceptions which serve larger regions, but overall utilities with city specific names when compared to all utilities have substantially smaller service areas. Utility names containing names of physical features represent another important group of geographic specific names. Although rivers with six utility names are the most common feature named, other features such as oceans, lakes, mountains, hills, valleys, peninsulas, and islands are used at least once in a utility name. A most unusual utility name, Edison Sault Electric Company, is included in the physical feature category because the French term "Sault" refers to "falls" or "rapids." "Sault" normally would be a generic, but is used as a specific name in this utility name and in other names like Long Sault Rapids, Minnesota.[5]

Table 1. Electric Utility Company Specific Names

Specific Name	Number	Percent	Examples
State	55	33.6	Virginia Electric and Power Co.
City	37	22.6	Detroit Edison Co.
Physical Feature	22	13.4	Niagara-Mohawk Power Corp.
Modified State	14	8.5	Central Illinois Light Co.
Non-Specific Geographic	13	7.9	Southwestern Public Service Co.
Combined States	5	3.1	Montana-Dakota Utilities Co.
Merger	5	3.1	Union Electric Co.
Customer	3	1.8	Consumers Power Co.
Initialism	2	1.2	UGI Corp.
County	2	1.2	Orange and Rockland Utilities, Inc.
State Nickname	2	1.2	Old Dominion Power Co.
Miscellaneous	4	2.4	Columbus and Southern Ohio Electric Co. Duke Power Co. Duquesne Light Co. Empire District Electric Co.
TOTAL	164	100.0%	

[5]G.R. Stewart, *American Place-Names* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 427.

A final group of geographic specific names includes utilities like Interstate Power Company and Northern States Power Company which only broadly indicate where the utilities are located. One utility in this group is the only utility with a misleading geographic specific name. Northwestern Public Service Company established in 1923 serves eastern South Dakota, not the Pacific Northwest or the northwestern part of any state.

The usage of geographic names in electric utility names sharply contrasts with the names of industrial corporations in general. In 1980, only 9 percent of the names of *Fortune's* 500 Corporations contained geographic specific names. This information for 1980 supports the conclusion of Boddewyn that geographic specific names are becoming much less common.[6] Boddewyn's data show a trend away from geographic names with 17 percent of the companies having geographic names in 1940 and 14 percent in 1960. Electric utility names do not follow the pattern of using non-geographic names primarily because the location of their service area is one of the few characteristics which distinguishes one utility from another. Electric utilities operate in a similar fashion, are affected by similar regulations, and produce the same product, leaving their geographic location as a major factor which differentiates the utilities.

With utility names having such a large proportion of geographic specific names, few examples of other kinds of specific names exist. Although personal names are common among industrial corporations where 39 percent of the names in 1980 contain personal names, not one of the utility specific names directly uses a person's name. At least one small utility in the 1960s did have a person's name, but Paul Smith's Electric Light and Power and Railroad Company was purchased by Niagara-Mohawk Power Corporation in 1966.[7] Not quite as surprising as the total absence of personal names is the paucity of names denoting the merger of utility companies. Whereas the vast majority of utilities are the result of numerous mergers and acquisitions, only five of the utilities utilize terms like "United," "Union," and "Consolidated" to indicate their merged nature.

Two other kinds of specific names which are becoming increasingly common in industrial corporations are initialisms and acronyms. Initialism and acronym use in 1960 compared to 1980 shows a nearly fourfold increase. Boddewyn in 1960 reports that 4 percent of *Fortune's* 500 Corporations used initialisms or acronyms,[8] while in 1980 the figure was 15 percent. Use of these kinds of specific names by utilities has also

[6]Boddewyn, p. 43.
[7]*Moody's*, p. 2869.
[8]Boddewyn, p. 44.

shown an increase over the last two decades, but the increase is not very significant because the change is from zero to just two utilities currently using initialisms. Whereas utilities seldom use initialisms or acronyms in their official names, many companies are known informally by their initials or by an acronym. For example, "Socal" is an acronym used for Southern California Edison Company and "NIPS" and "O G&E" refer to Northern Indiana Public Service Company and Oklahoma Gas and Electric Company respectively.

GENERIC NAMES

Electric utility generic names exhibit considerable variety although the three generics of "Power," "Power and Light," and "Electric" cover almost half of the names (see Table 2). Generic name variety is increased by the use of many different combinations of a relatively limited vocabulary. Excluding the fifteen unique generics, the generic vocabulary consists of only eight words: "Power," "Light," "Electric," "Public," "Service," "Gas," "Edison," and "Utilities." These words are used in different combinations to create similar but distinct generic names for electric utilities. In this manner, Oklahoma Gas and Electric Company and South Carolina Electric and Gas Company have different generic names; and El Paso Electric Company, Southwestern Electric Power Company, and Texas Electric Service Company are utilities which serve parts of the same state and have different generic names using "Electric."

Table 2. Electric Utility Company Generic Names

Generic Name	Number	Percent
Power	32	19.6
Power and Light	24	14.7
Electric	23	14.0
Public Service	17	10.4
Gas and Electric	12	7.3
Edison	11	6.7
Utilities	8	4.9
Electric Power	4	2.4
Electric Light	3	1.8
Electric and Gas	3	1.8
Electric Service	3	1.8
Light and Power	3	1.8
Electric and Power	2	1.2
Light	2	1.2
No generic	2	1.2
Unique generic	15	9.2
TOTAL	164	100.0%

Variety among the generic names is further illustrated by the fifteen unique generic names (Table 3). Here, more complicated three-word combinations like "Gas and Edison Light" and a somewhat expanded vocabulary are apparent. The expanded vocabulary includes words like "Illuminating," "Fuel," and "Heat" — words similar in meaning to the often used "Power," "Light," and "Electric." "Telephone," "Hydro-," and "Water" are also added to the generic vocabulary and these terms suggest additional information about utility company operations. Central Telephone and Utilities Corporation provides telephone service as well as electric service, whereas Bangor Hydro-Electric Company and Washington Water Power Company both obtain large portions of their electricity supply from hydroelectric facilities.

Besides exhibiting variety, utility generic names usually convey the nature of the commodities and services being sold. All of the companies in this study sell electricity, and 92.1 percent of the generic names suggest this fact. The only exceptions are the use of "Edison" as a generic name and the two utility names without generics. Having such a large proportion of the utility names indicating the nature of their business is unusual given the trends toward omitting generic names altogether or using general generics like "Industries."[9] In 1960, 43 percent of the industrial corporations in *Fortune's* 500 did not have a generic name, whereas by 1980 the percentage had increased to 57 percent.

Table 3. Unique Electric Utility Company Generic Names

Edison _____ Electric
Electric Illuminating
Electric Light and Power
Gas and Edison Light
Gas and Electric Light
General Electric
Hydro-Electric
Illuminating
Light Fuel and Power
Light Heat and Power
Lighting
Lighting and Power
Public Utilities
Telephone and Utilities
Water Power

[9]Boddewyn, p. 45.

Sixty-five of the utilities also sell natural gas, but this fact is only conveyed explicitly in the seventeen generic names which contain "Gas." And even having a generic name containing "Gas" is no guarantee that the utility sells natural gas because neither Kansas Gas and Electric Company nor Oklahoma Gas and Electric Company sells natural gas. The probable explanation for the misleading generic names is that both utilities provided natural gas in the past but subsequently sold their gas properties and did not bother to change their names.[10] Besides generics containing "Gas," several other generics like "Power," "Public Service," and "Utilities" frequently denote utilities which sell both electricity and natural gas, but by no means is there any consistent generic naming pattern. Illinois Power Company sells both forms of energy, whereas Georgia Power Company sells electricity only.

The generics of "Public Service," "Electric Service," and "Public Utilities" convey another image or impression which utility companies undoubtedly wish to promote among their customers. The image suggested by these generics is a positive one where the utilities are always acting in the *public's* best interests and are trying to *serve* their customers as well as possible. Although the accuracy of this positive utility company image is questionable, clearly a name like Maine Public Service Company implies public service to the residents of Maine.

The last aspect of electric utility generic names to consider is the influence of Thomas Edison. A total of thirteen companies, including some of the largest companies in the country like Consolidated Edison Company of New York, Commonwealth Edison Company in Chicago, and Southern California Edison Company, have "Edison" in their names. The use of "Edison" is particularly noteworthy because it represents the only direct use of a person's name in any of the utility names. Thomas Edison, inventor and also businessman, played a crucial role in the early development of the electric utility industry. Although Joseph Swan in England in 1878 could claim the first successful incandescent light bulb[11] and California Electric Light Company operated the first central generating station in 1879,[12] Edison rapidly eclipsed these achievements.[13] Realizing the market potential of incandescent lighting

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[10]*Moody's*, pp. 916, 3024.

[11]H.W. Meyer, *A History of Electricity and Magnetism* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971), p. 162.

[12]C.M. Coleman, *P.G. and E. of California: The Centennial Story of Pacific Gas and Electric Company* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1952), p. 51.

[13]M. Josephson, *Edison* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959), pp. 175-267.

and the associated generation and distribution equipment, Edison formed the Edison Electric Light Company in 1878 with the purpose of manufacturing the bulbs and equipment he was in the process of developing. In 1880, the Edison Electric Light Company became the parent company of the Edison Electric Illuminating Company of New York. The Edison Electric Illuminating Company, which became Consolidated Edison Company, was the first electric utility company using Edison's methods to generate and distribute electricity.[14]

In the following years, additional electric utility companies in other parts of the United States were formed with licenses from Edison Electric Light Company. For example, the Edison Illuminating Company of Detroit, today's Detroit Edison Company, was formed in 1885 and obtained a license from Edison Electric Light Company to serve Detroit.[15] The spread of Edison's methods and name was rapid with 46 Edison illuminating companies in existence by 1886.[16]

Given the involvement of Edison in the development of the electric utility industry and the widespread use of his name, it is logical that "Edison" can be considered to be a generic name and almost synonymous with electricity. What is surprising is that "Edison" and, for that matter, "Illuminating" are not used more often. These terms have been replaced by geographic specific names and the more descriptive generics like "Power" and "Power and Light."

LEGAL DESIGNATIONS

Little needs to be said about electric utility company legal designations because the vast majority of the utilities simply have "Company" as their legal designation (Table 4). The frequent use of "Company" in utility names sharply contrasts with major industrial firms where "Corporation" and "Incorporated" predominate. Reasons for the contrast in legal designations include the unchanging nature of many of the utilities, lack of mergers besides absorbing small utilities, and lack of diversification in products. Utilities are simply companies providing power to restricted areas, not corporations serving national and international markets with several different product divisions or subsidiaries.

The most unusual legal designation is that of Maui Electric Company,

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[14]There were earlier companies which provided "electric arc lighting" service, but this method of electric lighting was superseded by Edison's incandescent system.

[15]R.C. Miller, *The Force of Energy: A Business History of the Detroit Edison Co.* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1971), p. 8.

[16]M.G. Glaeser, *Public Utilities in American Capitalism* (New York: MacMillan, 1957), p. 55.

Limited, a Hawaiian electric utility. The use of "Limited" stems from the relatively recent influence of Britain and British law on Hawaii during the 1800s. In general, the legal designation used by each utility has been determined by the people forming or owning the company and the state and Federal laws regulating the formation of business enterprises. The impact of state laws is illustrated in New York where six of the state's seven utilities use "Corporation" or "Incorporated."

Table 4. Electric Utility Company Legal Designations

Legal Designation	Number	Percent
Company	144	87.8
Corporation/Incorporated	14	8.6
Company, Incorporated	5	3.0
Company, Limited	1	0.6
TOTAL	164	100.0%

CONCLUSIONS

The character of electric utility names is unique, distinctive, and interesting, especially when compared to corporate names in general. First among the reasons why utility names represent an unusual group of names is the overwhelming usage of geographic specific names and the consequent absence of personal names. Corporate names often contain the name of the person who founded or built the company, but this pattern does not occur in utility names. Instead place names are employed to distinguish one utility from another. A second reason for the unique nature of utility names relates to the fact that the utilities do have names with generic parts indicating the nature of their business. Many industrial corporations no longer have any generic name and relatively few have names which suggest what the company produces or sells. Even the legal designations of utilities and corporations in general are different. Most utilities continue to use "Company," whereas many other business enterprises are "Corporations."

Two other noteworthy aspects of utility names are name image and name length. Beyond the relatively few utilities using "Public" or "Service" in their names, most utility names seem to try to convey a conservative image of stability. In contrast, most recent corporate names attempt to suggest vitality, growth, and security all at the same time. With respect to name length, utility names are substantially longer because they usually contain generics. UGI Corporation is the only two-word utility name,

whereas *Fortune's* 500 Corporations lists 170 corporate names with only two words.

Although utility names are currently very distinctive, it is possible that utility names will slowly begin to change toward more initialisms, fewer generics, and in general more similarity to corporate names. Evidence of this possibility is small because only one utility has changed its name in this manner so far. In 1978, California-Pacific Utilities Company became CP National Corporation.[17] In spite of a single name change, additional changes in future years are likely because utilities are beginning to change the scope of their activities. Utilities are starting to expand and diversify into related energy businesses, which means that some utilities will undoubtedly want new names to reflect their changed status.

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[17]*Moody's*, p. 562.