

8 BEYOND THE TOOLKIT: BRINGING ENGAGEMENT INTO PRACTICE

The past decade has seen a growing awareness of the value of consultative public engagement in science, to enable a wide range of opinions to feed into policy-making discussions. Can this experience be used to develop an ‘off-the-shelf’ model for public engagement, which could be slotted into policy-making projects? No, says **Alan Irwin**. The nature of public engagement remains too amorphous and open-ended to slot neatly into rigidly constrained project frameworks. This, he argues, presents particular challenges to institutions attempting to integrate public input into policy making.

Not so long ago, even the woolliest advocacy of dialogue, engagement and more open relations between science and its publics was seen as radical. Now that such talk has become almost mainstream and practical experience mounts up, the really interesting questions start to emerge. How has the widespread support for ‘engagement’ translated into action? And what exactly is engagement for? How in particular does it relate to policy making and decision taking? Such questions are all the more important when members of the public – and especially groups who claim to speak on their behalf – can be quick to challenge what they perceive to be tokenism, empty rhetoric, ‘public relations’ or ‘just going through the motions’. ‘Bringing engagement into practice’ sounds very straightforward but actually raises profound questions – about the purpose of engagement, and about the relationship between broader social assessments of socio-technical change and the policy process.¹

Many involved tend to assume that such questions will be answered through practical implementation and argue that what we really need is some kind of toolkit. In other words, now that several engagement exercises have taken place, what we currently lack is a designated set of engagement instruments, preferably accompanied by clear advice on when and where each works best. For a civil servant or institutional manager running a consultation exercise, such a toolkit has obvious appeal. It seems only sensible that practical lessons should be learned

from previous experience and translated into specific do’s and don’ts. I also recall one policy maker’s frustrated response to my academic analysis of a previous UK engagement exercise: please could you add a final paragraph telling us exactly what we should do next time?

While there is nothing wrong with drawing practical lessons from experience, there are substantial limitations to the ‘toolkit’ approach and the restricted engagement framework it implies. Attempts to sanitise, rationalise and streamline public engagement and dialogue risk killing the very spark that gives engagement exercises their excitement and makes them worthwhile. And reasonable attention to the practicalities of organising such initiatives should not get in the way of more expansive consideration of the lessons to be learned.

Thus, one increasingly understood dimension of engagement is that public groups may ‘frame’ the underlying issues very differently to metropolitan policy makers. (See ‘Messages and Heuristics’, pages 20–25.) What may appear a narrow technical issue to the latter (are GM crops safe to be grown?) can appear much broader to the former (what are the underlying benefits to consumers? What will be the impact on British agriculture and the British countryside? Isn’t this just another example of US companies throwing their weight around?). The danger of the toolkit approach is that it risks dismissing, or simply not recognising, such broader interpretations and competing frameworks. The assumption is that public engagement represents an extension of business as usual rather than a potential challenge to institutional priorities and ways of working.

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Setting the stage

So what can we learn from experience? The STAGE project (Science, Technology and Governance in Europe) provides some insights. Running between 2001 and 2005, this European Commission-sponsored project developed 26 case studies of policy making and social engagement across eight member states. The focus on western European initiatives is informative since the nations of the EU have become absolutely pivotal to practical initiatives in this area – and especially for what has become known as ‘deliberative governance’.

The STAGE case studies focused on three main areas: information and communication technologies, biotechnology, and the environment. Unsurprisingly, given the period under study, issues of biotechnology, stem cell research and GM foods featured prominently (all case studies and papers



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The structure of each carefully designed game is such that players spend a considerable time exploring an issue before being given the opportunity to →

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£194 395 (2003, Society Award) – Establishing Democs (Deliberative Meetings of Citizens): Spreading and embedding them

Applicant

Perry Walker, New Economics Foundation (NEF)

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Left: Perry Walker facilitating a Democs game.

from STAGE can be found at www.stage-research.net). The cases highlighted initiatives towards more open forms of scientific governance, including the ‘GM Nation?’ public debate in the UK and the earlier Dutch treatment of GM foods, Swedish debates over nuclear waste management, environmental protection in Portugal, and discussions over biotechnology in Denmark, Norway, Finland and Greece. The project analysed contemporary exercises in deliberative governance but also suggested that more conventional approaches – such as governance by the market, corporate stakeholders and groups of experts – remain dominant.

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Pulling together such a complex range of experiences and a variety of national contexts is far from straightforward. The STAGE project found significant differences across the eight European countries – and even within a single country it is often impossible to identify a unitary policy style. To take the UK as an obvious example, it is tempting to pick out the relatively few high-profile engagement initiatives, such as ‘GM Nation?’, and neglect the fact that these are decidedly atypical. However, the STAGE team identified several broad features of the governance of science and technology in Europe.^{2,3}

While significant activities are taking place across western Europe, these tend to fit within a restricted policy framework, closer in spirit to the toolkit approach than broader reflection. Rather than summarise all the STAGE conclusions, I will focus here on six findings that appear especially relevant.

Democratic engagement has a tendency to become messy, sprawling and all-encompassing.

First, there is a tendency across Europe to view broad public deliberation as a one-off hurdle to be cleared when governments or scientific institutions choose, often quite late in the decision-making process. This sense that engagement is an activity to be initiated by policy makers at ‘the right time’ has significant planning benefits. However, it does suggest a limited definition of the purpose of engagement, and presents public dialogue as one discrete phase of decision making rather than an essential constituent of the policy process. Moreover, rhetoric is running well ahead of practice. Broad, nationwide debates are still exceptional. More frequent are questionnaires, focus groups and consensus conferences, usually organised on an ad hoc basis.

The STAGE studies also suggest that there is still considerable insulation between attempts at engagement and ‘mainstream’ policy. While there is lots of talk about engagement right now, most policy processes simply continue according to their own dynamic. So, for example, conventional treatments of ‘sound science’ and, very importantly, science-led economic growth have remained largely unaffected. The importance of global economic competition is often underemphasised within engagement initiatives. High-profile but atypical initiatives are generally marginal in comparison with the infrastructures dedicated to scientific/ technological development.

Deliberative governance is no easy solution to social contention and controversy.

Another general finding is that the framing of debate in Europe is typically decided by a small coterie of officials, organisations and experts of different sorts. Once again we return to the central tension within engagement and consultation exercises. Traditional approaches to public administration put a premium on tight organisational control, clear deadlines and rational planning (often drawing upon the advice of recognised experts and established stakeholders). Democratic engagement has a tendency to become messy, sprawling and all-encompassing as discussion moves away from specific technically defined topics and towards, for example, issues of identity, empowerment and globalisation. If a broader culture of engagement and external scrutiny is to be encouraged then a greater willingness to relinquish central control may be required.

Engagement exercises are also often marked by disputes over timing, organisation and ‘bias’. Certainly, deliberative governance is no easy solution to social contention and controversy – despite claims that engagement will lead to ‘societal consensus’ or else the ‘rebuilding of public trust’. While officials tend to see such disputes as a distraction from the ‘real’ questions as previously defined by debate sponsors, they are a fundamental part of the democratic process. Once again, we can see the challenge posed by a wider engagement culture for institutions less familiar with adversarial, untidy and contentious forms of political expression.

Deliberative governance poses challenges not only for governments, scientific organisations and industry, but also for NGOs, which often claim to speak for the public. Engagement exercises therefore offer at least the potential for that claim to be undermined. Despite frequent accusations that debates have been hijacked by particular groups and interests, public engagement can be risky for all parties.

→ declare their own stance. This allows for introspection and mulling over amid the card play, rather than the usual quid pro quo of standard conversation.

This structure enables players (usually six) to get to grips with the key information they need to discuss a complex issue. Indeed, owing to the very nature of the subject matter, it’s the first time many players will have formulated an opinion about any game’s central issue, discovering their own feelings about a particular topic. Again, this is key, with the experts involved in developing game subjects taking care to represent all possible viewpoints to minimise bias. Following each game, results are fed back to NEF, where they are collated into a larger overall picture.

The results of each game, available on the Democs website, can have real impact. The approach has helped policy makers and government to take the temperature of public opinion (whether it’s GM foods or ambient noise levels in Greater London), so each game played is capable of influencing public policy and helping to shape real decisions.

Participants gain too. Players leave the game with renewed confidence in their own ability to grapple with difficult subjects and more confidence to challenge the ‘expert opinions’ of others.

Central to its success, Democs offers safety and fun. The innovative, gently guided, playful environment is unencumbered by the usual ‘rules of →

Right: Materials used in the stem cell Democs game.



Indeed, it may be that this ‘riskiness’ is an important ingredient for a debate’s success. (See ‘Between People and Power’, pages 62–67.)

Finally, an important issue for the relationship between public engagement and public policy is the treatment of scientific evidence. In most countries under study there is a tendency to keep ‘science’ and ‘the public’ apart or, more precisely, to limit public engagement to matters of ethics and values. If one of the great merits of engagement is the broad challenge it offers to assumptions and working practices that are taken for granted, this is a very questionable limitation.

Where next?

Where do such findings leave our discussion of ‘bringing engagement into practice’? One clear implication is that, while public engagement may have become accepted in certain countries (with the UK one of the most prominent examples), the relationship to scientific governance remains underdeveloped and ill-defined. This is hardly surprising given the relatively limited experience of engagement, consultation and dialogue in a country such as the UK – and also the novelty of deliberative principles within that country’s political culture (for example, when compared with Denmark or The Netherlands).

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Looking to the future, the point is not to dismiss the undoubted progress that has been made nor to make the administration of such exercises even more demanding. Instead, and for the first time in the UK, we are in a position to move beyond both broad slogans and specific criticisms towards a greater reflection over just what public engagement is for and how this relates to the culture and practice of science and technology governance. Toolkits will be little help. Instead we must address more basic issues of the relationship between social assessments of technical change and the models and projections offered by various groups of experts. And we need to look at the interaction between scientific and other kinds of evidence, and recognise a wider range of expertises than is currently the case.

It is very important that we consider public engagement as above all an opportunity. One of the glaring problems with the old deficit approach was the anxiety, discomfort and defensiveness it revealed about the relationship between technical change and wider social assessments. I suggest instead that we view a robust culture of appraisal, engagement and debate as a major societal asset.

With that in mind, rather than thinking of ways of closing down and limiting engagement, we should maintain a shameless commitment to experimentation. There is no blueprint, no gold standard, no guarantee of success. Instead, and in the best spirit of science, we can explore new approaches, learn from our mistakes and accept that criticism is a necessary part of learning.

One of the greatest challenges of engagement is a challenge of institutional leadership.

As I have already emphasised, it is important that the outcomes of engagement are taken seriously and, equally, are seen to be taken seriously. This does not mean that every exercise should be viewed as a referendum. Instead, an explicit commitment is required to treat public views with respect and as one essential element within the policy process, to reflect upon such views, and to make explicit the institutional response – even if (as is perhaps inevitable) this is to challenge or disagree with certain viewpoints.

Finally, what about the institutions that are largely driving these activities? My sense is that one of the greatest challenges of engagement is a challenge of institutional leadership. How to act in a more complex and, at times, uncertain environment? How to make decisions in the knowledge that social consensus may not be possible? How to broaden the knowledges and expertises that can be drawn upon while recognising the embedded limitations and uncertainties? Engagement as an issue does not stand alone but is one element within a wider pattern of change and opportunity. It follows that engagement cannot be an end in itself but rather one important means of enriching the culture of scientific governance, informing the operation of policy processes and influencing the direction of technical change.

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References

- 1 See Irwin A. The politics of talk: coming to terms with the ‘new’ scientific governance. *Social Studies of Science* 2006;36(2):299–320.
- 2 Hagendijk RP et al. Report on the STAGE project: Science, Technology and Governance in Europe. 2005. www.stage-research.net/STAGE/content/reports.html.
- 3 Hagendijk R, Irwin A. Public deliberation and governance: engaging with science and technology in contemporary Europe. *Minerva* 2006; forthcoming.

→ engagement’ that a complex debate would involve. Players feel at ease within the game world and are given the time to explore, discuss and find common ground with other players.

Democs is one of a range of new approaches to public involvement that have been supported by the Wellcome Trust. Another example is the ‘deliberative mapping’ project developed by Andy Stirling (Science Policy Research Unit, University of Sussex), which aims to bring specialist and lay groups together to discuss policy-related issues. It is no trivial exercise: both groups go through six individual sessions, meeting jointly for a day-long discussion mid-way through. The advantages are that issues can

be gone through in depth and looked at from different angles – a whole range of policy options can be considered. But the time investment means it won’t be suitable for every circumstance – evidence that public engagement requires a variety of different approaches.

Helping to attain maximum penetration, a key element of a Society Award, Democs kits are available for both adults and schoolchildren (developed with the help of a government Sciencewise grant). These kits, covering ten important and potentially controversial subjects, are available in printed form, by direct download or on CD-ROM from www.neweconomics.org.

It is hoped that Democs will eventually become self-sustaining, as it continues to help stimulate new thinking and understanding of science-based issues in the public domain while decision makers take increasing interest in the results produced.

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