

Baby or bathwater? How much of current public engagement should we throw out?

Andy Stirling and Chris Caswill disagree

Dear Chris,

Your recent writings on public engagement in science correctly challenge romantic and uncritical views of citizen deliberation. You rightly warn that top-down engagement can reinforce (not counter) vested interests.

We're facing a new kind of social science technocracy, with supposedly technical 'design' and 'evaluation' concealing underlying politics. Serious tensions are emerging between consensus-oriented participation and the wider role of representative democracy. Together, these difficulties can hinder our shared cause of achieving more democratic choice of appropriate directions for science and technology (S&T).

But these problems are neither restricted nor intrinsic to public participation, as you imply. Unless we see the devils in the detail, we risk throwing babies out with bathwater! Indeed, without clear recommendations for practical alternatives, criticism can favour entrenched interests that undermine democracy even more.

Instead of blanket critiques, we can be more discerning about particular practices. For instance, participation can move away from current fixations with consensus, which 'closes down' by obscuring the implications of different values, priorities and uncertainties. Instead, it can focus on 'opening up' the ways in which divergent social perspectives and interests favour contrasting pathways for research and innovation. It is in this way that bottom-up participation can strengthen S&T by catalysing a more vigorous and accountable general politics of deliberate social choice.

Yours, Andy

Dear Andy,

We have plenty of common ground. You are right to insist that any critical look at 'the push for participation' should lead on to positive proposals. But first there are political issues to be explored:

First, those who argue for deliberative forums like consensus conferences pay almost no attention to the processes of representative democracy. Elected representatives are typically excluded. This seems to stem from over-simplistic beliefs that public participation in the formal institutions of modern democracy is limited only to occasional and unsatisfactory voting in elections.

Second, citizen participation should not be seen, for these purposes, as synonymous with and limited to deliberation. We should be paying equal attention to engagement with (and improvement of) other forms of democracy, in particular representative democracy.

Third, I suggest there is a category difference between public engagement with the governance of science and technology and the more local 'public sphere' arenas in which deliberative democracy is usually shown to have had an effect, such as locations of roads, policing priorities and hospital locations.

Fourth, the goal of strengthening S&T, to which you refer, seems to include a prior commitment to certain outcomes from the processes of S&T governance, rather than genuine debates about sustainability and democratic decision making.

Yours, Chris

Dear Chris,

Posing (and answering) propositions requires openness about underlying values. Mine are about strengthening the contributions of S&T by making them more responsive to diverse, democratically-deliberated priorities.

First, it is true that advocacy of participation can be naive or strategic. But so too can support for existing institutions – which are often even more problematic. Present research and innovation systems are closed and technocratic. Current simplistic general 'pro/anti' rhetorics about S&T further obstruct accountability. They suppress real debate, by treating 'progress' as synonymous with existing vested interests.

Your second proposition is absolutely right, but your third is more tricky. It risks concealing the very political dimension that we're both highlighting. When invoking effectiveness, we should be clear about the aims under which this is judged. Though local and national arenas are different, public engagement is relevant to both. In each case, bottom-up participation can open up the detailed implications of different perspectives and so help illuminate and invigorate wider politics.

Your final concern is misplaced. There are surely few better frameworks for judging outcomes of any social activity than contributions to realising diverse, democratically-debated values of sustainability: human wellbeing, social justice and environmental integrity? This seems a pretty good basis for discussing the strength of S&T...

Yours, Andy

Dear Andy,

I am concerned about an endemic and potentially dangerous belief that collecting together 'mini-publics' to deliberate on scientific and/or technological futures can somehow replace (or at least smooth out) contentious conflicts about purposes, values and benefits.

Representative democracy is certainly not perfect. Nevertheless, it offers vital opportunities for deciding the distribution of resources, the handling of genuine conflicts, and challenging inequalities of power and resource between citizens and large institutions (such as global corporations).

You have helped me clarify my position on S&T, which is that it needs unpacking. My primary concern is with S&T developments which have large societal consequences but are shaped outside the market place, and where the influence of powerful actors – state, scientific institutions and global corporations – is often invisible or only partially visible to the citizen. I'm thinking of, for example, nanotechnology and specifically nano particles, genetic modification and the development of converging technologies. In these circumstances it seems to me to be disingenuous and actually dangerous to rely on deliberation between citizens and those powerful actors, to the exclusion of the representative processes which could give real clout to public concerns.

In that event, we must locate deliberation and participation within a programme of institutional reform, which includes restoring the centrality of the citizen in representative democracy. I see no sign of this in the public participation literature.

Yours, Chris

Dear Chris,

We share concerns about pressures from powerful vested interests that close down our view of alternatives, uncertainties and social ambiguities. These can subvert both democratic politics and participation alike. We agree that representative democracy – though desperately needing rejuvenation – is a hard-won bulwark against tyranny.

Where we disagree is whether there exists – and we need – many different ways to rebalance existing concentrations of power in the steering of directions for science and technology. Contrary to your suggestion, the challenges are as acute 'inside' as 'outside' markets. Either way, social choices are currently being invisibly locked in, in areas like nanotechnology, biotechnology and energy.

Historically, a free press offered (at its best) to strengthen progress in emerging democracies. So too, can participatory practices help open up contending perspectives and possibilities. At their best, these foster rich and empowering engagements between divergent social values, economic interests, scientific uncertainties and technical actualities. They can achieve deeper and more nuanced deliberation than is frequent even in Parliamentary debates or broadsheet features. They offer to catalyse and give voice to a more vibrant civil society.

By highlighting a plurality of well-grounded visions for disparate pathways for research and innovation, diversities of bottom-up participation can help reverse the corrosive depoliticisation of modern democracy.

Yours, Andy

¹ Studies by Puztai, Seralini, Ermakova, Velimirov: See http://www.efsa.europa.eu/EFSA/ScientificPanels/efsa_locale-1178620753812_GMO.htm

Dear Andy,

We agree on the potential contribution to a more vibrant civil society that participatory processes play. Where I think we still diverge is on practicalities, politics and attention to representative democracy.

In practice, there are large problems with attempts at deliberative participation, not least when they address developments in S&T. These attempts are typically small scale, heavily managed, introduced top-down by interested parties and of limited effect.

It is not only social choices which are invisibly locked in to major S&T developments. For example, developments in nanotechnology will be shaped by the interests of corporations and scientific institutions, not by deliberations between small groups of citizens, organised by consultants or social scientists. But these powerful interests, and the political and economic contexts in which they emerge, are normally not up for debate.

Most citizens, understandably, have no interest in continuous participation in the governance of S&T. Consciously or not, citizens delegate these concerns to elected representatives, whom they think may have the power to act on their behalf. Which brings me back to the pressing need to reform and restore representative democracy and its institutions, to include the enhancement of deliberation and citizen participation. My conclusion is that these goals should be pursued together, not as alternatives.

Yours, Chris

Both authors have contributed to The road ahead: public dialogue on science and technology (2009), edited by Dr Jack Stilgoe for Sciencewise

www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk



Chris Caswill is Visiting Professor, University of Exeter and Associate Fellow, Institute for Science, Innovation and Society, University of Oxford
c.j.caswill@btinternet.com

Andy Stirling is Science Director at SPRU (Science and Technology Policy Research) at the University of Sussex
a.c.stirling@sussex.ac.uk