



Sustainable participation?

Mapping out and reflecting on the field of public
dialogue on science and technology - Summary Report

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Introduction

Public engagement in science and technology has changed dramatically over the past two decades, moving beyond one-way science communication to also emphasise two-way or multi-way dialogue. Much effort has gone into developing engagement approaches and evaluating their effectiveness. Most of what is known comes from case studies of individual public participation processes. This report summarises a project that took a different approach to offer broader insights into the past, present and future state of the public dialogue field. It involved 21 of the UK's key thinkers, practitioners and policy-makers in this area, mapping out and reflecting on the field as a whole, around the following themes.

- **Key developments** - including the institutionalisation, commercialisation and professionalisation of public dialogue on science and technology related issues.
- **Networks, roles, relations** - understanding the character of UK public dialogue networks, the motives and roles of different actors, and relations between them.
- **Dialogue expertise** - through mapping the range of UK public dialogue expertise, its varied meanings, and considering who counts as an expert on public participation.
- **Learning** - concerning the extent to which networks and institutions associated with public dialogue are learning about and learning from participation.

Taken together, these strands offer insights on the future sustainability of the field, both in terms of sustaining meaningful democratic engagement and making science and innovation more socially, ethically and environmentally responsive and responsible.

Though funded by Sciencewise Expert Resource Centre (Sciencewise-ERC) this is not a study of Sciencewise-ERC. It is about the field, the industry, and associated participatory governance networks that have grown up around public dialogue, the actors involved, their roles and relations, and the nature of public engagement expertise. These issues are understudied in social scientific research. They are

also of great practical relevance to Sciencewise-ERC and other individuals and organisations interested in public participation, including those from sectors beyond science and technology.

'Public dialogue' is interpreted more broadly in this report than Sciencewise-ERC's specific definition. Interview participants adopted their own meanings of the term, which were often synonymous with deliberative public engagement and at times extended to 'dialogue' that occurs in more informal or uninvited spaces of science and society interaction.

An emerging UK dialogue network

The research presented here builds on an earlier project carried out by the author in 2001-2003. It was one of the first ever studies of public participation experts and used a mapping approach to understand their networks, roles and relations. The research showed a network of dialogue experts to be emerging, centred on a core group of academic social scientists, public participation practitioners and consultants. Decision institutions were influential in commissioning dialogues but lacked internal expertise. The network was evolving across a range of science and technology related issues, with an emphasis on environmental risk issues such as nuclear power, waste, and GM crops. Key features of the network at the time were that it was:

- Highly fragmented into specific groupings of dialogue specialists (e.g. academics and practitioners; those advocating a 'stakeholder' or 'citizen' model of engagement),
- Highly competitive in terms of relations between actors, which was potentially limiting the exchange of ideas, practices and learning about dialogue,
- Exclusive, limited to professional dialogue experts, thus exposing tensions between the professionalisation of participation and the need to encourage more citizen-led processes.

The shifting public dialogue landscape

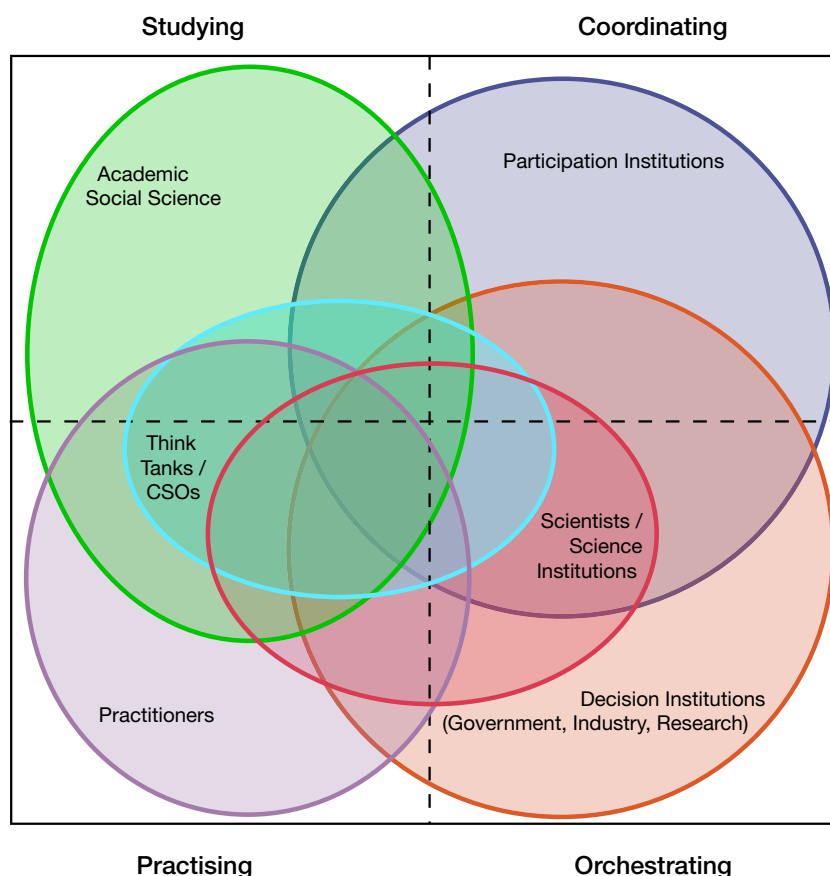
Moving forward to 2009, things have changed considerably but in some respects stayed the same. The UK dialogue field remains highly fragmented and competitive. A key trend is the way in which public dialogue has become much more institutionalised and widespread. Related to this is the increasing professionalisation and commercialisation of participation, which has led to the rapid growth of a burgeoning public engagement industry. Issues forming the focus of public dialogues have moved further 'upstream' to also include emerging science and innovation - nanotechnology, synthetic biology, new medical biotechnologies, and the like.

In summarising the most recent network analysis, the diagram below shows actor types mapped out in relation to four main areas of dialogue expertise. The situation is complex, with considerable overlap between actors' respective roles.

- Policy-oriented public dialogues are still mainly orchestrated by decision institutions. The default

position has been to 'outsource' dialogue expertise. Where it is internalised, organisations move beyond commissioning to take on other roles.

- Practitioners design, facilitate and evaluate dialogues but also extend into other areas of expertise. The increasing presence of market research companies is a key development.
- Academic social scientists are still viewed as core experts within the network. In many respects, their position has become more critical and distant, if anything exacerbating disconnects between academics and practitioners/policy-makers.
- Think tanks overcome these problems of translation to some extent. Scientists and NGOs are often viewed as expert witnesses, which underplays their full range of possible contributions.
- A new breed of actor - 'participation institutions' - has emerged to take on roles such as capacity building, knowledge exchange, oversight, networking and coordination of the field.



Extended meanings of public dialogue and participation

This analysis shows that notions of public dialogue expertise are being extended beyond the popular view of a 'facilitator' or 'mediator' to also include evaluation, critical social science, commissioning, networking, training, and so on.

In certain quarters, perspectives of who counts as an expert on public participation go even further, to also include non-professionals. This is evident from the different forms of dialogue acknowledged in interviews. The most common and dominant meaning is of invited-micro public dialogue (see the box below) mediated by professionals, be they practitioners or from host institutions. However, spaces of engagement that allow for non-professional forms of dialogue expertise, where citizens have more say in framing and mediating their participation, are increasingly recognised. These include:

- Deliberation occurring in the context of wider invited macro/informal engagement (e.g. extensive engagement events that initiate public debate and pro-environmental behaviour initiatives),
- Citizen-led participatory processes (e.g. DIY citizens' juries and Democs) which blur the boundaries between invited and uninvited spaces of engagement,
- Uninvited public engagement, including social movements, special interest groups, instances of citizen science including lay epidemiology, pro-am science, open source movements, and so on.

Dialogue occurring in the context of informal or uninvited engagement is often not heavily facilitated in an attempt to ensure inclusive deliberation. Compared with invited-micro dialogue it opens up alternative framings and perspectives, however, and needs to be understood and learned from.

Public dialogue expertise

The notion of public dialogue expertise has received relatively little scholarly and practical attention and yet it has become an established category in the science and society arena. According to interview participants, it tends to exhibit the following qualities, but remains dependant on context and the ends to which expertise is directed.

- Experience and learning by doing.
- Translational and interactional expertise.
- Understanding of the vagaries of science.
- Understanding and transforming institutions.
- Acknowledging the purposes and politics of participation.
- Humility and openness with respect to one's own expertise and that of others.

Meanings of public dialogue and participation in science and technology

'Invited' micro public dialogue - where members of the public are invited to participate in highly managed dialogue organised by a host decision-making institution.

'Invited' macro/informal public engagement - open, unstructured engagement that occurs in wider public arenas beyond formal decision-making institutions but is initiated by them.

'Uninvited' public engagement - organic, spontaneous forms of public engagement initiated and organised by citizens themselves rather than decision institutions.

Professionalise or democratise democracy?

The continuing professionalisation of public dialogue along with extended notions of dialogue expertise creates tensions within the field.

- Some view professionalisation as necessary and essential for: building capacity, culture change, ensuring good practice, and ‘scaling up’ public engagement.
- Others have serious concerns that professionalisation (and commercialisation) of public dialogue: is exclusive and elitist; narrows down possible forms of dialogue expertise; decontextualises and disembeds dialogue; and makes actors and institutions lose sight of the politics and purposes of science and participation.
- Most concede, however, that there is a dual need for professional leadership and the democratisation of public dialogue expertise.

Learning and reflection

A central claim of public dialogue on science and technology is that it enhances learning. A major finding of this research shows that the UK public engagement field is not learning from and learning about participation as much as it could or should. A widespread learning infrastructure that has grown in recent years is advancing learning at an instrumental level, framed in terms of ‘capacity building’ and ‘best practice’.

Reflection and reflective learning is largely absent from the UK public dialogue network and related institutional contexts, however. In terms of *learning from public dialogues*, science and policy institutions are not seen to be responding in potentially changing the way that they frame and think about science and technology related issues. In terms of *learning about participation* there is currently a lack of reflection on the impacts and effects as well as the underlying assumptions, motives, and politics of different models of public participation.

Actors are often highly reflective about public dialogue at an individual level. The problem more often lies with

the unreflective institutional settings and discourses in which they are situated. The challenge is to bring to life current forms of learning in making them more: *interactive* through building closer connections and exchange between actors; *situated* by creating time and space for reflection; *anticipatory* through considering upstream questions about emerging public participation technologies; and open to the *public*.

Dialogue futures

UK public engagement with science has come a long way in a relatively short space of time, with many successes but also important matters of concern. In many ways, public dialogue on science and technology has reached a critical moment in more ways than one. The current situation - where perspectives range from actors being against public dialogue, to actively promoting it, to being overly critical - makes it difficult to progress the field without evidence of its value. Continuing professionalisation and commercialisation stands to greatly expand the reach of public dialogue but may compromise its ethical integrity if left unchecked. Furthermore, past experience tells us that dialogue futures will be conditioned by the prevailing economic and political climate. Whatever the future holds, the following **recommendations and challenges** are important to the sustainability of the field.

- Notions of ‘dialogue expertise’ are extending to include a wider range of actors, roles and responsibilities that need to be mutually acknowledged and understood.
- The democratisation of dialogue expertise to non-professionals is an emerging trend that looks set to continue. There is increasing recognition of informal and uninvited spaces of engagement, which need to be understood and learned from.
- This calls for approaches capable of mapping divergent perspectives and new governance structures able to map framings and social concerns across the many different contexts of public deliberation, dialogue and debate.

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- Greater appreciation of the full range of dialogue expertise is needed, including qualities such as: humility and openness, acknowledging the politics and purposes of participation, translational expertise, and understanding science and institutions.
 - The UK dialogue field has innovated along a rather narrow pathway. More possibilities for democratic engagement in science would be opened up if the resourcing and control of dialogues were more distributed in science and society.
 - More reflective and relational forms of learning in the UK dialogue network are urgently needed through making it more: *situated* by creating time and space for individual and institutional reflection; *anticipatory* through considering upstream questions about emerging public participation technologies; and *public* by making it more open to those it seeks to empower.
 - Learning also needs to become more interactive by building closer connections and exchange between actors in the UK public dialogue field, through a new initiative or body (or, perhaps more appropriately, partnerships between existing ones).
 - Building constructive relations at the social science - policy/practitioner interface is a major challenge requiring multiple strategies of knowledge exchange, perhaps orchestrated by a network or centre funded by the Research Councils and others.
 - Meeting many of these challenges will depend on a continuing programme of critical social science research into the participatory governance of science and technology related issues.