

**Technologies of participation and deliberation:
new governmental power or a means of democratic renewal?**

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Janet Newman, Open University, Milton Keynes, UK
j.e.newman@open.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper traces the explosion of new technologies of participation – focusing in particular on deliberative forums through which citizens interact with state and quasi-state agencies. It addresses the increasing professionalisation of public participation through the exercise of managerial, consultancy and public relations techniques; and the development of new media forms that seek to popularise citizen participation. These developments are set in the context of assumptions about current politico-cultural features of modern states and the need for democratic renewal and citizen participation. Several key issues are drawn out, each of which might help shape our understanding of new technologies of participation as new forms of governmental power and/or as new spaces for social agency on the part of citizens.

Introduction

I want to begin by tracing the explosion of what might be called new 'technologies' of participation and setting these in the context of assumptions about the current politico-cultural features of modern states. The literature on participative governance and deliberative democracy traces a number of such features, each of which underpins the search for new ways of connecting states and citizens, politicians and people:

- A growing lack of trust in politicians

- The decline in citizen participation in formal elections (though this varies between nation states). Particular concern is expressed about the declining political participation by young people, though I would argue that the equation of ‘political participation’ with engagement in the mechanisms of representative democracy is itself a problem: the difficulty may be with how we define politics rather than with the behaviour of the young.
- The presumed problems of representative democracy, namely its incapacity to reflect the subtle and complex interests and identities in diverse societies (e.g. Benhabib, 1996; Young, 1990; Phillips 1996)
- Shifts in governance from strong state power to the ‘hollowed out’ state and the increasing significance of networks as a mode of coordination (Rhodes 1997). The shift to an increasingly ‘plural polity’ is produced by devolution and decentralisation, the shift of power to supra and sub national bodies, the rise of quasi-autonomous governmental agencies concerned with regulation and other functions, the introduction of markets and contracts, and other shifts that have multiplied and fragmented the points of connection between citizens and institutional power.. The extent of this shift from ‘hierarchy’ to ‘networks’ is contested (Newman 2001, 2005) but nevertheless creates questions about how and where democratic involvement can now take place
- Shifts in governance that increasingly seek to involve the citizen in their own self governance – for example in the regeneration of ‘deprived’ areas, in the management of health and illness, in the production of safe communities, and so on (Bevir 2005; Dwyer 2004; Finlayson, 2003; Newman 2005, ch 4; White 2004)
- The increasing focus on the search for legitimacy by national governments, increasingly taking place through a turn to populist politics, with a focus on the use of public relations techniques, struggles over the control of the media and the management of political messages, and what Steinberg and Johnson (2005) call, in relation to the Blair government, a ‘war of persuasion’.

- The increasing focus by municipalities and by service providers to secure the support and custom of citizens and consumers. This is in part, at least in the UK, a result of the shift to an increasingly competitive field in which local authorities, schools, hospitals and other agencies are ranked in league tables or awarded star ratings on the basis of their performance, coupled, in some cases, with the introduction of consumer choice.

All of this is familiar ground, though as I have argued elsewhere (Newman 2001) there is often a problem in accounts of sweeping social shifts or excitement about changing modes of governance. These often fail to adequately recognise the continuance of ‘old’ politico-cultural patterns. For example statements about the extent of individuation, the decline of class based social divisions and the rise of new forms of identity based politics, the shift to fluid and insecure social relationships, are often rooted in a rather poor grasp of historical processes of change; in the excitement about post modern social forms we may fail to recognise the resilience of modernity, rationality and hierarchy. Similarly the excitement about the workings of ‘multi-level’ governance, or about the increasing significance of networks as a mode of economic and political coordination, may fail to recognise important continuities in the extent and nature of governmental power: What we are faced with is an increasingly complex overlaying of old and emergent forms of governance: of networks and hierarchy, of self governance and managerial governance, of centralisation and decentralisation – and indeed of representative and participative democracy. The dynamics produced by this overlaying of different forms and modes of governance produces tensions and dilemmas for those attempting to steer administrative, professional or municipal systems, and for citizens seeking to find their way through the ‘plural polity’ of governmental power – to find, for example, who is responsible for what service or who is accountable when things go wrong.

The response: new technologies of participation

As a result of these shifts a number of developments have been taking place.

The rise of consumerism

I don't want to say much about this here, though it is an increasingly important discourse used to capture – or to promote – shifts in the relationship between service providers and users. In the case of the UK a strongly consumerist orientation has been promoted both by government rhetoric, and through legislation extending the power of consumers to choose their preferred school or hospital. This weakens the power of the NHS to plan and manage its resources; and limits the power of municipal governments to shape the pattern of education provision in their area. The impact on relationships between service providers and service users, and on shifting patterns of identification, has been traced in a recent research programme in which I have been involved¹ (Clarke, Smith and Vidler, 2005; Newman and Vidler 2005). Its significance in the context of this paper is the difficult boundary between citizen participation and consumer consultation. What sets out to be the former often ends up as the latter: or the slow, expensive and often frustrating processes of citizen engagement and dialogue become subordinated to the 'quick fix' technologies of market research.

The deliberative turn

In another research project² we have surveyed and studied a number of deliberative forums through which citizens and serviced users have been brought into dialogue with state or quasi state institutions. To give you a feel of the project I have listed the particular publics and specific institutions that were involved in some of the deliberative forums we selected as case studies in two UK cities:

publics	institutions
Neighbourhood forums	Municipalities (officials and elected politicians)
Senior citizens forums	Municipalities, Health Authorities,

¹ *Creating citizen-consumers: changing relationships and identifications*, funded by ESRC and ASRC as part of the Cultures of Consumption Programme. The research team comprised John Clarke, Janet Newman, Nick Smith, Elizabeth Vidler and Louise Westmarland, all at the Open University, UK. See www.oopen.ac.uk/socialsciences/citizenconsumers.

² *Power, participation and political renewal*, funded by the ESRC as part of the Democracy and Participation Programme. The research team comprised Marian Barnes, Janet Newman and Helen Sullivan.

	Parliament
Lesbian and gay forum	Police service
Women's centre	Local multi-agency policy forums on, for example, crime and domestic violence; EU regional forum on poverty
Youth forum	Local regeneration initiative
Tenants organisation	Housing Association, Local Authority
Local action group formed around planned closure of health centre	Health authority; funding bodies
Muslim group campaigning on health issue	Health authority
Parents, grandparents, children	'Sure Start' partnership bodies

Several things stand out from this list. First, the range of 'publics' that are engaged with state and quasi-state agencies. Some – for example the neighbourhood forums, or the parents and others involved in Sure Start – were formed by state/quasi state agencies specifically for the purposes of participation. That is, they are constituted in ways that suit official purposes. Others had their origins in social movements, voluntary organisations or community action groups. These potentially present a more troubling presence for officials, acting in some cases on the lines of what Nancy Fraser calls 'counter publics'. But this boundary is problematic; the groups that are officially constituted may well be equally troubling for officials, while autonomous groups may, by virtue of being drawn into institutional fields of power, have to adopt ways of working that conflict with their espoused values. And, perhaps more interestingly, several straddled the boundary between 'autonomous' and 'officially constituted' during the course of the research. For example the senior citizens forum in one of the cities we studied, a forum that had an established role as the main body that the municipality used for consultation on issues concerning older people, was about to be displaced by a new body set up by the municipality itself. And the youth forum, with a strong autonomous foundations in a local Kashmiri population, was drawn into a municipal initiative which required a 'representative' group of young people. Participation in this official initiative compromised the independence and identity of the original forum and drew it into open conflict with officials.

A second point I want to draw out of the list is the nature of the boundary between 'publics' and the institutions with which they engage when invited to deliberate on policy or service issues. This boundary is not as clear as it might appear from the table above. Citizens, as they get drawn into the fields of institutional power, learn the norms and skills that make them what Bang (2005) terms 'expert citizens', citizens who become detached from the 'everyday makers' whose participation is rooted in daily experience. And officials may in turn bring prior experience of trades union, voluntary or community action, or wider commitments to extra-institutional values, identities and politics. For example the police representatives on the lesbian and gay forum comprised mainly 'out' lesbian and gay police officers strongly networked into the gay community; while the municipal equalities officers with whom the members of the women's centre frequently interacted brought their own experience of feminist, community and other forms of activism to those interactions. I do not, here, mean to suggest that the ambiguities of the boundary between official and lay perspectives produced a cosy world of agreement and harmony; rather, I want to point to the ways in which both lay members and officials each had to negotiate multiple allegiances and identities. For officials, having one foot in an organisation, with its performance targets, funding constraints and career ladders, and another in an activist group, with its distinct values, ethos and goals, tended not to be a comfortable experience.

A third set of issues that cut across the case studies was that of representation. Where public agencies engage with 'already constituted' publics – the youth forum, the women's centre, the tenants group – the legitimacy of their voices tended to be problematised in terms of their lack of representativeness. Where public bodies could control membership of deliberative forums, by seeking to elicit representatives from different communities of locality or of identity, there was a much stronger legitimacy claim. However the voice of any particular 'community' was thereby weaker since membership was on the basis of individual characteristics (defined in terms of age, ethnicity, gender, residence of a locality and so on) rather than collective allegiance to a particular public. There were of course exceptions. The senior citizens forum had sought to ensure its own representativeness through a process of election to a management group, and was careful to present itself as non-political. In contrast the lesbian and gay forum, although not having any formal process of representation,

retained its autonomy while succeeding in its claims for legitimacy – at least in terms of its negotiations with the police service (it was less successful in relation to the municipality).

It might be argued, then, that the process of constituting publics for the purposes of participation tends to have the effect of depoliticising the process of dialogue between lay publics and officials. Other tendencies feed in to this effect: for example the process of using such publics to ‘manage’ issues or deal with problems on behalf of the agency. This may be done in the name of empowerment but may also be understood as a process of shifting responsibility from state agencies to the publics themselves. And of course the process of drawing publics into the norms and values of institutions may threaten their capacity to work in ways that might challenge those same institutions. Finally, for now, ensuring that publics understand the constraints within which municipalities or other agencies work, and make recommendations for change only within an agenda already set, may limit the capacity for contestation or the shaping of alternative agendas. It is here that some attempts at participative budgeting fail to engage the public on its own terms – a point I return to below. First, however, I want to open up a discussion of some of the new ‘populist’ technologies of participation.

Technologies of participation: professionalisation and mediatisation

Here my focus is on some of the new technologies that have been emerging in response to the needs of public agencies to find ways of engaging publics as well as in response to wider social and political aspirations to engage citizens- especially younger citizens – in the political process. I want to introduce three such technologies.

(Here I want, if possible, to show images four websites: www.demgames.org; www.democracy.gov.uk; www.delib.co.uk; www.harrowopenbudget.org.

The last of these is a site linking citizens and stakeholder groups to a recent (October 2005) initiative on participative budgeting at Harrow in London. This exercise was attended by a ph d student that I am supervising, Nick Mahony, and the visuals I want to show you were recorded by him as part of a case study for his doctorate. I do not

want to anticipate or pre-empt Nick's own analysis here, but want to highlight some of his early observations. These include:

- The management of the process by consultants, comprising a number of experts in public relations, design and management as well as facilitators of the event itself
- The explicit links made with the Puerto Allegro participative budgeting exercise as part of the public relations surrounding the event
- Careful preparation by involving stakeholder groups in the planning process; and follow up through a citizen panel. But this did not effectively address imbalances between citizen and institutional power, nor ensure that the municipality was more directly accountable to the citizens involved in the exercise.
- The steering of the debate through the presentation of pre defined options on which those attending could vote; and the closeness of the options presented to the existing manifesto of the ruling party of the municipality.
- The explicit promises that it would 'make a difference' – but in practice the results have only an advisory status.
- The way in which, in Nick's words, it was 'overloaded with the right words and phrases' but the reality fell somewhat short in terms of actual process

This was a glossy and highly professional event, skilfully facilitated and expertly managed. And it mimicked some of the new media techniques: for example it had something of the flavour of reality TV programmes in which viewers vote on preferences based on relatively superficial judgements within a limited time. But here the judgements were about policy options rather than who should leave the Big Brother house. It also seemed to accord with the spirit of mediatized events in that participants were encouraged to assess their feelings about an issue before making judgements – that is it elicited an emotional, affective response. This might be viewed as a counter to the critiques of Habermasian rationality in more formal processes of deliberation. However the turn to feelings and emotions here is part of what Nick terms a *search for authenticity* in both the process of conducting the forum and in the response of individual participants.

Should we worry about these developments or not? Clearly it is better to be professional rather than amateurish; to plan an initiative carefully rather than to go in ill prepared. But the Harrow experience produces a sense of unease. To capture what that unease might be about, in my conclusion I want to return to the issues raised at the end of the previous section and raise some questions that I think we need to consider.

Conclusion: issues and questions

1. *How is the public constituted for the purpose of public participation?* By ‘constituted’ I mean the ways in which officials construct categories of public: the general public, hard to reach groups, black and ethnic minority groups, local communities, residents, consumers, service users, customers, parents, young people, older people and so on. This has enormous implications for how we understand identity, and for assumptions we make about communities of identity (there is a vast literature on the problems about the term ‘community’ that I don’t want to try to summarise here; but I do want to draw attention to its associations with commonality and consensus and the marginalisation of contradiction and conflict).
2. Then, having categorised them, *how do they draw publics in to the process of engagement?* This might be on the basis of a ‘representative sample’, on the basis of specially constituted groups, or by reaching out to already existing – and potentially more difficult – groups and networks. Here there are implications for the extent to which the publics of public participation are drawn into institutional fields of power; the extent to which they can be successfully assimilated or managed; and the extent to which the voices of counter publics or ‘difficult’ publics can be heard.
3. *What are the conditions of engagement?* Do the publics have to learn the rules and norms of institutional decisionmaking or are they invited to express their feelings and emotions about an issue? These open up different kinds of danger: the danger of incorporation into institutional regimes of power; or the dangers of populist politics, based on ideas about participation as an arena in which the authentic self should be expressed.

4. *What is the nature of the boundary between citizens and officials?* In the deliberative forums research we can see, in some cases, how the boundary is fairly blurred. This opens up the possibility of citizen incorporation (citizens learn the ‘rules of the game’ and their oppositional voices may become more muted as they come to understand the constraints under which decisions get made), But it also creates the potential of new alliances that create the possibility of social agency. However the process of mediatisation and professionalisation reasserts and strengthens the boundary: citizens are positioned more firmly ‘outside’ the spaces within which decisions get made, at the same time as the use of public relations techniques makes them appear to be closer to where power is exercised.

5. *Does it make a difference?*

This is the most difficult question. It tends, in the literature, to be answered in one of two ways. Many analysts point to the lack of impact on institutional power: that is, participation tends to not have much impact on the decisions that are taken by officials and/or politicians. Here the interface with representative democracy might be viewed as one of the difficulties: accountability, and therefore decision making power, still works through bureaucratic channels connected – however loosely – to elected politicians. And these may well dismiss the results of more direct forms of participation as ‘unrepresentative’. Even the Harrow event was only ‘advisory’, and although a citizen group was nominated to see the process through, there was no formal accountability back to them.

However decision-making impact is not the only possible outcome, and many commentators have highlighted the *process* effects of participation; the effects in terms of citizen education, the building of social capital and skills, and indeed its impact on the culture of state and quasi-state institutions as they open up to closer citizen engagement. It is these process effects, it is argued, that have the most potential to produce forms of democratic renewal, by re-engaging citizens with the democratic processes and by opening up institutions to new forms of scrutiny and accountability.

I want to raise a rather different question in relation to impact, however. And this question centres on a paradox. On the one hand, there is more and more participation, deliberation, stakeholder involvement and other forms of public engagement in the public realm. On the other hand, the public realm itself is being curtailed and fragmented as services are contracted out, marketised, localised or returned to the private sphere of personal, rather than state, responsibility. Overlaid on this is what I term 'disorganised' governance, a process in which a proliferation of agencies and new forms of partnership obscures what is and what is not a public matter, and who might be responsible and accountable for what. The sphere of influence of municipalities in the UK has been successively weakened over the last three decades. Authorities such as Harrow might be engaging in participative budgeting but the budget has been seriously curtailed as they have lost responsibility for responsibilities for schooling, housing, the provision of social care and other services, and as more and more of their work has come to take place through complex and interlocking partnerships with other agencies and with the private sector. Many argue that they are now little more than the agents of central government, charged with delivering government policy locally and assessed through central government performance targets. So, one might argue, there is more and more participation about less and less. And to the extent that the aim of participation is to reconnect citizens with governance, the outcome of that engagement at local level is likely to be disappointment leading perhaps to further disconnection.

And yet – this is not a field in which such sweeping statements do justice to the energies and enthusiasm of citizens, local politicians and officials to bring about change by developing new forms of participation and engagement. My final question then, is not 'is it worth doing'? – the answer here is certainly 'yes', whatever the limitations – but rather whether the twin processes of professionalisation and popularisation help or hinder the process of democratic renewal and open up the possibility of new forms of social and political agency.

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