

Engaging in a World of Assemblages

Alan Irwin and Maja Horst

John Urry on climate change

'Shifting such path dependent patterns is not something that can be easily achieved. So while governments can make major differences almost certainly much of what has to happen is more localized, decentralised, happening at the margins.'

Julia Black on questions of regulation

'Complexity, fragmentation of knowledge and the exercise of power and control, autonomy, interactions and interdependencies, and the collapse of the public/private distinction are the central elements of the composite "decentred understanding" of regulation.

Together they suggest a diagnosis of regulatory failure which is based on the dynamics, complexity and diversity of economic and social life, and in the inherent ungovernability of social actors, systems and networks.'

The very notion of engagement seems to imply a traditional social and political structure with discrete and relatively fixed actors who can 'engage' with one another in a specific encounter and for a particular period of time, and then resume their separate business-as-usual existences: government, the public, industry, scientific advisors.

What happens to our understanding of 'engagement' once one begins to view social and political action in terms of fluidity, hybridity, fragmentation and sub-politics?

What is then being engaged with and by whom?

The **'Deficit'** Model of Science Communication – institutional assumptions

That there is a 'public for science'

That this public is ignorant and uninformed about science

That criticism/resistance is created by an absence of knowledge and understanding

That the purpose of science communication is to fill this 'knowledge gap'

The '**Democratic**' Model of Science Communication – institutional assumptions

That there are multiple publics engaging with science in different ways

That public groups can be highly knowledgeable within the contexts of everyday life

That criticism/resistance is often based on wider social and political assessments

That the purpose of science communication is to create/support active citizens

'... when uncertainties about the possible states of the world and the constitution of the collective are dominant, the procedures of delegative democracy are shown to be unable to take the measure of the overflows created by science and technology. Other procedures of consultation and mobilization must be devised; other modes of decision-making must be invented.'

Callon, M., Lascoumes, P. and Barthe, Y., Acting in an Uncertain World: an essay on technical democracy. (2009)

'Decision makers think that the parameters of the questions to be dealt with have been suitably and properly defined, from both a technical and a political viewpoint, and now overflows identified by the actors demonstrate the opposite...'

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-) Hybrid Forums

Do we need to re-think our ideas concerning the science-policy interface in order to take account of fluidity, hybridity and fragmentation?

Can current notions of representative/ delegative democracy cope with calls for increased public engagement?

What does all this mean for existing concepts of scientific governance?

The Kalundborg Citizen Summit

- Citizen opinions on local climate adaptation plan
- Danish Board of Technology
- 500 participants
- Let nature take its course in rural areas
- Focus resources on protecting the town

Rethinking engagement

- Citizen summit as hybrid assemblage
- The significance of the centre(s)
- The ambiguities and imperfections of democracy
- Performing rather than (necessarily) perfecting
- Fundamental issues for the relationship between public engagement and scientific governance: what, where, how?

'The notion of ambiguity must not be confused with that of absurdity. To declare that existence is absurd is to deny that it can ever be given meaning; to say that it is ambiguous is to assert that its meaning is never fixed, that it must be constantly won.'

Simone de Beauvoir, The Ethics of Ambiguity
(1948/1976)

'.. our particular emphasis is on public engagement as a process rather than a point of arrival and closure. Attention to the dynamics of centering and de-centering might be one crucial way in which our policy-maker can maintain this sense of process and improving rather than retreating into the greater simplicities and certainties of technocratic, fixed and formulaic approaches to engagement.'

Tentative conclusions:

Challenging the 'centred' model of public engagement

Democratic imperative overloading the centres – but also creating new opportunities

Challenges facing the 'universal policy-maker'

Expanding/transforming/questioning our notions of scientific governance