Democratizing practices of public servants: five roles and a challenge

Wieke Blijleven
Merlijn van Hulst
Frank Hendriks
Tilburg School of Governance, Tilburg University

A new role for government

Increasingly, policy makers have embraced forms of interactive and participatory governance as an appropriate, effective response to present-day problems and also as instruments to increase the legitimacy of policies (Sørensen, 2016; Dzur, 2012). As a result, public authorities have invested in innovations that involve democratic experimentation (Smith, 2005; 2011). The ‘public-participation industry’ that has emerged over time and arrangements for stakeholder and citizen participation have become the standard in various local policy areas (Edelenbos, 2005; Escobar, 2015). Venues for ever increasing and deepening citizen participation in the political decision-making process include participatory budgeting, forms of collaborative governance, mini-publics and citizen initiatives (Warren, 2009, Smith, 2011).

These new modes of governance have reshaped the position and role of the formal democratic and bureaucratic institutions of the state. Government no longer is the core maker and implementer of public policies. Rather, government is expected to cooperate with a variety of actors in networks and communities (Osborne, 2010; Sørensen & Torfing, 2009) and becomes ‘a crucial instrument of the citizenry, providing leadership, resources, tools, and rules’ (Boyte, 2005, p. 537). Some detect a historical process, from citizen participation in the 1970s and beyond (government dominates policymaking and selectively gives citizens a say), to government-society coproduction in the 1990s and beyond (government develops policy involving civil society representatives from the outset), to government participation (government facilitates civic initiative), which might further develop under 21st century conditions. This development is more like a layer-upon-layer sedimentation process - with a different pace and presence in different democracies - than a universal, linear development (Van der Heijden et al., 2007).

Naturally, the new modes of governance reshape not just the role of local government and politics, but also that of the local civil service (Warren, 2009; 2014; Peters, 2010; Boyte, 2005; Bingham et al., 2005; Sørensen & Torfing, 2009; Osborne, 2010). Civil servants are increasingly expected to engage, empower and support active citizens and stakeholders, provide them with channels to participate and guide them through the bureaucratic procedures of local government. They need to manage complex networks, interpersonal and inter-organizational processes and develop skills such as negotiation, collaboration, mediation and consensus building (Hendriks & Van De Wijdeven, 2013; Kettl, 2002; Bingham et al., 2005). In addition, government actors are expected to be flexible and adaptive, and to act in response to specific situations, rather than applying general rules (Van De Wijdeven, de Graaf & Hendriks 2013; Warren, 2009). Laws and Forester (2015) have, moreover, shown how these officials also engage in innovative practices of ‘street level democratization’, more or less independent from the developments at the policy level. Civil servants at the street level are confronted just as well with the increasingly complex social and political reality as their colleagues in policy making.
Managing democratic values
Whatever may have changed, government still is responsible for the effectiveness and democratic legitimacy of the policy and public service system, and therefore remains playing a role in ensuring these values in the new collaborative processes (Osborne, 2010; Torfing & Sørensen, 2009). This responsibility is particularly relevant in light of the recent, heated debate among governance theorists regarding the democratic implications of the new modes of governance (Sørensen 2002; Klijn and Skelcher 2007; Pierre 2009).

On the side of the optimists, theorists believe the new forms of governance form a valuable addition to traditional democratic institutions, paving the way for innovative forms of inclusion and representation, deliberation and accountability and legitimacy. Mark Warren (2009, 2014) refers to this ‘rebirth of strongly democratic ideals’ in policy and policy making, as ‘governance-driven democratization’. Participatory and deliberative democrats believe that participatory governance and community engagement increases the inclusion of affected parties. Citizens and other stakeholders affected by a policy, are put in position to exert influence over these decisions (Fung, 2003; Warren, 2009; Sørensen & Torfing, 2009; Michels, 2011). In addition, democratic innovations, such as mini-publics and participatory budgeting, may provide new, or improved arenas and widen the scope for deliberation (Dryzek, 2000), decoupled from electoral politics’ strategic campaigns and party politics, and more focused on the subject matter (Warren, 2009). Finally, it is argued that the involvement of citizens and the direct contact between the actors involved leads to improved accountability as political elites are provided with a direct, unmediated opportunity to explain and account for their decisions towards stakeholders (Fung, 2004). In addition, direct citizen participation may increase the legitimacy of decisions as such, at least as perceived by the participants (Michels, 2011, p. 279).

On the other hand, there are more skeptical scholars, who argue that the informality of governance networks undermines representative democracy in terms of equality, due process, democratic accountability and transparency (Durose, 2011; Boyte, 2005; Sørensen & Torfing, 2009; Tonkens & Verhoeven, 2011). Here it is argued that networked governance may lead to systematic political inequalities among citizens, as in these forms of governance, citizens and affected organizations must often fight to be recognized as stakeholders and thus to be included and heard, because it favors those who are already strong and resourceful (Young, 2000). When it comes to deliberation, secondly, the sceptics feel that precisely the decoupling of innovations from politics, favored by the proponents, tends to nurture a ‘technocratic, managerial “getting things done” rhetoric’ that leaves no room for diverse and contesting views (Sørensen, 2013, p. 74, based on Bang, 2003 and Bevir, 2010). Finally, it is argued that interactive governance may undermine accountability, as the participants in networks and other forms of interactive governance are not elected, but (self)appointed. The worried scholars argue, in addition, that the informality, negotiated nature, and opaqueness of interactive governance reduces the overall transparency of these processes (Sørensen & Torfing, 2009; Sørensen, 2013; Sørensen, 2016).

Although this debate has not been resolved yet, it becomes clear that these opportunities for democratization will not fulfill themselves automatically, nor will the challenges for democracy automatically dissolve (Warren, 2009). An agreement seems to emerge, in addition, that the degree to which these democratic potentials of governance are realized and the democratic challenges proliferate, depends in part on how the democratic innovations are designed and managed (Sørensen & Torfing 2005; Warren, 2009; Sørensen, 2016). This implies that regulating the democratic implications of
interactive governance - without dominating the process - should be a key aspect of the new role of public servants we have discussed above.

The search for new public service roles in the literature

Despite the observation that new modes of governance and democratic innovation reshape the role of public servants, and their involvement is crucial for realizing the democratic potential of these innovations, their role remains understudied in the governance literature. We do find an increased interest in the role of actors in new modes of governance (Rhodes 2002; Lowndes, 2005; Bingham et al., 2005; Sørensen 2006; Smith, 2009; Van Hulst et al., 2011; Moore, 2012; Hendriks & Van de Wijdeven, 2013; Escobar, 2013), but studies rarely give an overview of the roles and practices of public servants. In the overviews of democratic transformations and innovations (Saward, 2000; Held, 2006; Cain et al., 2008; Smith, 2009; Hendriks, 2010), a systematic appraisal of this role and related practices are also lacking.

The interest in actors in governance emerging in the literature, does offer a good starting point. In the literature, we encounter, for instance, the civic entrepreneur and the street level democrat engaged in participatory democracy, emerging from the front line work literature. In addition, there is literature on the democratic professional, taking a similarly action-oriented approach, however, rooted in deliberative democracy. Whereas for these officials participation is only part of their daily job, we are also witnessing the emergence of professional facilitators, reflecting the increasing professionalization and institutionalization of citizen participation. When looking at the literature on network governance, we also encounter public managers in the role of the boundary spanner. Whereas the boundary spanner may help realizing the potentials deliberative democracy, the same public managers may connect their networks to the realm of representative government in the role of the meta-governor.

These strands of literature, thus, without focusing on the role of public servants in new modes of governance and democratic innovation, are helpful in exploring it and in showing how democratic values may be realized. Directly or indirectly, they describe roles and practices of interest. This research that has so far ‘laid the groundwork’ for addressing the lacuna, however, seems to be fragmented across different strands of literature. These roles and practices are connected to different types of democratic innovations, different perspectives on democracy and/or different types of practitioners. They are grounded in different strands of literature that have not been brought together as we do here. Furthermore, some are grounded in theory, whereas others have emerged from empirical research. Yet all these strands shed light on the role public servants may take in the new contexts of governance and democratic innovation. We say may take, as some of these roles, such as the democratic professional and boundary spanner, were not originally fulfilled by (only) public servants. Finally, some of these literatures show how public servants engage in or bring about governance driven democratization, others focus on how they implement it.

This text, therefore, aims to bring together and compare these different strands of literature and the roles they envisage for the public official. Synthesis is sought in the form of returning, key democratic practices. To guide this overview, we pose the following question: What roles and practices do actors working for the formal institutions of the state (i.e. public servants) engage in and develop, in the context of new modes of governance (e.g., network-governance, deliberative and participatory community engagement) and how do these roles and practices relate to the democratic values these institutions are expected to stimulate, sustain and protect?
In the following sections we will present the results of our theoretical inquiry. Five roles and connected sets of practices that public servants take in new modes of governance and in democratic innovation will be discussed.

**Five strands of research**

Throughout the literature on democratic innovations and governance driven democratization we have come across five different roles for public servants. Although these roles differ in various ways, they were selected based on a shared set of characteristics. They have all been presented as a role for public servants in the context of democratic innovation, normatively or empirically. In addition, all literatures – some more than others – pay attention to the democratic aspects of these roles and have been connected, directly or indirectly, to the concept of governance-driven democratization.

The following roles will be elaborated on below. Section 1 describes the *civic entrepreneur and street level democrat* emerging from the front line work literature. Next, in sections 2 and 3, the *democratic professional* and the *official facilitator*, respectively, will be discussed. These will be followed by the discussion the *boundary spanner* and *meta-governor* in sections 4 and 5. For each role, we will shortly describe the literature it emerged from, the type of (interactive) governance this role has been applied to, and the type of practitioner that takes this role. This is followed a discussion of how this role connects to democracy and the democratic values discussed in section ... Each section will end with an overview of the key practices these officials engage in.

1. **Front-line work in governance**

A first strand of literature focuses on the role of front-line workers – the public servants who directly interact with citizens in their operational practice - on public policy. Front line workers who are charged with the daily policy implementation, include for example police officers, community workers, teachers, residential consultants, youth workers, contact officials or social counselors (Lipsky 1980; Maynard-Moody & Musheno 2003; Tops & Hartman, 2009; Tummers et al. 2015). The literature on front line work builds from Lipsky’s classical work on ‘street level bureaucracy’ (1980), that shows how front-line workers contribute significantly to public policy making by exercising discretion in their everyday work.

Since the 1980s, the working context of these officials has changed significantly and several scholars have pointed out that the shift from government to governance has reshaped the role of these officials (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000, 2003; Durose, 2007, 2009, 2011).

As policy implementation is no longer organized primarily as a top-down activity and takes place on multiple levels and multiple sites and through many varied actors, as ‘negotiated, non-hierarchical exchanges between institutions’, in response to diverse local needs, front line workers are increasingly expected to improvise, explore and experiment, rather than to simply follow rules (Goss, 2001; Durose, 2011; Laws & Forester, 2015). In other words, the discretionary space, and therefore the significance of these front line workers has been increased with the shift towards governance. In addition, front line workers in local government are increasingly expected to engage their clients and communities in decision making, in particular about local services and policy interventions they deliver. They do this both formally, for example through committees, and informally, through attending events and connecting with existing community groups (Durose, 2009; 2011; van Hulst et al. 2012). The literature on front line workers has thus been connected with forms of participation, such as community engagement and co-production. These forms have reshaped the role of the front line worker from street
level bureaucrat into ‘civic entrepreneur’ (Durose, 2009) or ‘street level democrat’ (Laws en Forester, 2015). In these roles, front line workers may contribute to the local democratic legitimacy of the policies they implement.

**Democracy on the frontlines**

Recent research has altered our knowledge of how these practitioners use their discretion to shape policy in practice. Whereas Lipsky’s bureaucrats used their discretionary space to protect themselves from work pressure, more recent studies show how discretion may be used on behalf of client or community, for example by ‘bending the rules’ (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000; Durose, 2009, 2011; Tummers et al. 2015). Instead of undermining democratic decision making, the discretionary space of front line workers can thus be used to ‘reinforce or reclaim political legitimacy’ within the particular situation (Tops & Hartman, 2009). They generate legitimacy and relevance for the target community, by having them participate in problem solving. In the process, the new front line workers may seek such legitimacy through ‘forms of inclusion and representation that are at hand or that they invent’ (Laws & Forester, 2015, p.354). Durose (2011) speaks of a ‘reconstitution of local democracy that relies less on overhead democracy and more on pluralism and participation, with ... “building legitimacy” with the community as the end goal’ (p. 993). Laws and Forester (2015) make the connection with democracy even more explicit. Building on and refining Durose’s work, they ask if front line workers ‘implement, and so shape, de facto policy, what are the democratic implications of such work?’ (p. 354). They view the improvisations of the front line workers they studied as practices of governance-driven democratization at the street level. At the same time, questions can be posed about transparency and accountability of the work of present-day frontline workers (Durose, 2011). Indeed, how do we know what frontline do when they improvise? On what grounds do they tailor to the situation at hand? To whom do they account for the fact that, for instance, a situation needed more attention than another? Below, we will discuss through what concrete practices the front line workers, as civic entrepreneurs or street level democrats contribute to democracy.

**Practices of civic entrepreneurship and street level democracy**

Durose (2009; 2011) calls her front line workers ‘civic entrepreneurs’, as they interpret policies and may even bend the rules - like institutional entrepreneurs - on behalf of the community. She describes three practices that these civic entrepreneurs apply in order to engage the community: ‘reaching’, ‘enabling’ and ‘fixing’. First, the front line workers ‘reach out’ to marginalized and excluded groups increase awareness of the resources and services that are available to them. Next, they may use ‘enabling’ strategies to help these groups build skills, capacity and confidence. Finally, the front line workers often used the strategy of ‘fixing’, to satisfy the identified needs of the community by bringing together ‘the objectives of government policies with the organizational opportunities available to, and the priorities and concerns articulated by the community’ (Durose, 2011, p. 989). These strategies may be used both when developing projects, together with local partners, as well as within these projects.

Laws and Forester (2015), too, emphasize community engagement and a degree of opportunism. Yet they encountered three more practices: appreciating value through listening and diagnosis (cf. Forester 1999), assessing fact via leveraging knowledge and expertise and generating action via dispute resolution and negotiating. The key purpose of listening and diagnosis, and leveraging knowledge and expertise is to use both local knowledge and professional expertise, in ways that are relevant to the
particular situation and citizens within that situation. This is necessary in order to come to a shared problem definition and ‘design actions that draw on the features of the case’ (p. 348). This can be achieved, according to Laws and Forester, by listening carefully to the community and diagnosing the problem in its particular context. Hereby they engage, challenge where needed, develop and draw on the insights, knowledge, and practical judgment of stakeholders. Expert knowledge then, can be added in a relevant and accountable way, and comes into play successfully ‘rather than being contested, frustrated, discarded, or marginalized’ or being experienced as threatening to participants (p. 349).

With their conception of diagnosis, Laws and Forester aim to move beyond Durose and other scholars’ idea of local knowledge as front line workers simply ‘reading’ a situation and responding accordingly. Laws and Forester’s front line workers not only read the situation, but ‘test’ their readings with the citizens involved and develop solutions in cooperation with them (2015, p. 353-54; Schön 1983). Like the democratic professional, as we will see in the following sections, these front line workers determine the public good with, rather than for the citizens and co-produce the solutions with members of the communities involved. Finally then, such co-produced action is generated via dispute resolution and negotiating. This requires frontline workers to show leadership (Vinzant & Crothers, 1996), the kind that ‘is not limited to having the big idea or the compelling vision and the authority to push it through. When problems are complex and are experienced in different ways by different groups, when solutions are not clear but must be created, leadership may need to sponsor authorship and agency among the groups that share a stake in a problem or a place’ (Laws & Forester, 2015, p. 161). Examples of such leadership include a public servant developing and supporting community think tanks, and a coach working at a community center that helps to see opportunities and concrete possibilities to make a difference (p. 179).

2. Democratic professionalism

Whereas professionalism is addressed indirectly and remains a point of discussion in the literature on front-line work, it forms the starting point for the second strand of literature, revolving around the concept of ‘democratic professionalism’. This concept was introduced by Albert Dzur (2002, 2004, 2008), in response to the ‘deliberative turn’ in political discourse in the US. Dzur, a proponent of deliberative democracy, worried that the American political culture ‘which to most accounts is only nominally participatory and deliberative’ would not foster real deliberation. In order to bridge this gap between discourse and practice, Dzur proposes that professionals should ‘enhance and enable broader public engagement and deliberation about major social issues, by sharing previously professionalized tasks and encouraging lay participation’ – in other words, they should practice ‘democratic professionalism’ (2008, p. 130).

Theoretically, Dzur’s conception of the democratic professionalism builds on debates on the societal responsibilities and political implications of professionalism. In his publications on the topic, Dzur (2008) also drew on Dewey’s and De Tocqueville’s interpretations of the roles of teachers and judges, and on Sullivan’s ‘civic professional’ and Fishers’ ‘dialogical professional’. Empirically, Dzur starts from three developments in professional fields: reforms in restorative justice, public journalism and bioethics (Dzur, 2002; 2008; Olson & Dzur, 2004). In these reforms, community members are involved in victim-offender mediation, community boards or family group conferences. They participate in public debates about current affairs and determining newspapers’ contents; or they engage in or are represented in ethical
debates in the hospital. They then participate in deliberative democratic innovations that are closely connected to the daily work practice of the professionals involved. Others have applied the concept of democratic professionalism to teaching (e.g. Saltmarsch & Hartley, 2011), nursing (e.g. Thompson, 2014) and social work (Tonkens, Hoijtink & Gulikers, 2013). Tonkens and Verhoeven (2011), in addition, also advocate the use of the concept to public servants involved in citizen participation in the Netherlands. This is no impossible combination, as Dzur emphasizes that it is the ‘features that potentially impact the public culture of democracy’ that allow these practitioners to be democratic professionals, rather than the core features of professionalism stressed by sociologists’ (2008, p. 249).

The ‘democratic’ in democratic professionalism

As mentioned above, the democratic professionalism literature builds on the ideal of deliberative democracy. The deliberative procedures experts advocate, can be understood as examples of governance-driven democracy (Dzur, 2012, p. 107). Following the deliberative perspective, the key democratic values in the democratic professionalism literature are increasing citizen influence through lay participation and task sharing, and deliberation (Dzur, 2004, p. 41). With lay participation and task sharing clients get ‘voice’ and ‘choice’ (Tonkens, Hoijtink & Gulikers, 2013). In line with what Laws and Forester found (2015), this voice is of ‘diagnostic relevance’ (Dzur, 2008, p. 26). As mentioned above, democratic professionalism thus is about ‘seeking the public good with and not merely for the public’ (Dzur, 2008, p. 129). Participation and deliberation help understanding public problems in ways that are relevant to the people involved (Dzur, 2004, p. 10). Through task sharing and by connecting deliberation to the daily work of professionals, the results of these deliberations are translated directly into practical applications and real influence, providing the participants with choice.

In this process of collectively seeking the public good, deliberation provides a ‘more substantive, reflective and critical form of politics removed from mere vote counting’, and ‘the shallowness of official discourse’ (Dzur, 2008, p. 26-29). Such a reasonable public dialogue, however, requires some democratic norms. At the systems level and the design of the dialogue, these are the values of inclusion and equality. At the level of the individual, the norms refer to rationality, respect and integrity (16-17). These norms reflect the criteria for democratic decision making in the model of democratic professionalism the democratic professional needs to protect. Finally, Tonkens et al. (2013) add that practices of democratic professionalism may contribute to ‘direct professional accountability towards citizens’, moving accountability ‘from output measurement towards democratic practice’ (p. 2).

Practices of democratic professionalism

What practices should be used to achieve these democratic values? In short, in order to enable deliberation, democratic professionalism involves two central practices: task sharing and encouraging participation. These tasks, firstly, require the democratic professional to take a step back and lead, facilitate or engage in public debate, rather than dominate it. The democratic professional performs a facilitative role, taking public leadership in shared problem solving without taking over (Dzur, 2008). Sharing tasks can take very different forms in practice, even within professions. Furthermore, it can involve the individual, group, and collective level. These different forms should have in common, however, that they are rooted in dialogue. In the case of restorative justice, for example, tasks are shared by organizing projects such as victim offender mediation, community boards and family group conferences, in which community members participate (Dzur, 2008, p. 177).
Secondly, it requires sharing knowledge, not just with colleagues, but with clients and participants. Professionals need to ‘explain their views and procedures, acknowledge the knowledge that clients possess themselves and come to a shared view of problems and solutions’ (Tonkens, Hoijtink & Gulikers, 2013, p. 12). Citizen participation and deliberation, then, increases the ‘flow of experiential knowledge through the system’ (Wagenaar, 2007, p. 18). In the restorative justice case, described by Dzur, for example, the democratic professionals involved shared their knowledge by providing training and guidelines for participants (Dzur, 2008, p. 177). This may not be an easy task, as democratic professionals cannot and do not function without professional authority and are supposed to take the lead. They need to both exercise authority and share it (Dzur, 2004).

Finally, another task of the democratic professional is to connect the informal democratic practices and interactions to formal democratic procedures, such as client councils and accountability system (Dzur, 2008, p. 13). This is essentially different in the third type of official that will be discussed below.

3. Professional process facilitation

A third strand of literature providing insights into the role of public servants in new modes of governance and in democratic innovation, is the literature on facilitation. With the increasing experimentation with new modes of citizen engagement in public policy making, and the ‘mainstreaming’ of participatory policy making, participation processes are becoming increasingly professionalized and institutionalized across Europe and the United States. As a result, we also are witnessing a rise of professional ‘deliberation’ or ‘participation practitioners’ or official ‘public engagers’ (Mansbridge, Hartz-Karp, Amengual & Gastil, 2006; Escobar, 2011; Cooper & Smith, 2012). The primary job of these officials is to ‘facilitate’, that is, to structure participation processes and helping groups work together productively (Bryson et al., 2013), and meaningfully (Escobar, 2011). This task has mainly been connected to forms of deliberative citizen participation, such as citizen panels, citizens’ juries, planning cells and deliberative polling, and in particular, mini-publics (Moore, 2012; Cooper & Smith, 2012).

While some of the other literatures included in this text also include facilitation as one of the tasks for the public servants, the ‘facilitation literature’ is distinctive in the sense that facilitation, in here, is the primary role of the officials described. Unlike the civic entrepreneurs, street level democrats and democratic professionals, facilitators are process experts (Schwartz et al., 2005). Within the facilitation literature, researchers tend to agree that facilitators should restrict themselves to matters of group process, rather than content and remain some degree of neutrality towards the outcomes (Mansbridge et al., 2006; Moore, 2012; Escobar, 2013). This is reflected in the fact that the practitioners in this literature, often are professional facilitators. Forester’s (1999) ‘deliberative practitioners’, who are professional planners, are an exception. Whereas this task has been outsourced in some contexts (Cooper & Smith, 2012; Mansbridge et al., 2006), these official facilitators or ‘engagers’ may as well be public servants employed by local government (Escobar, 2013).
Democracy and the professional facilitator

Like democratic professionalism, the facilitation literature is closely connected to theories of deliberative democracy, and the introduction of experiments with, and institutions for public deliberation in policy.

Within these new institutions, the facilitators are charged with translating democratic values of the deliberative democracy into workable practices (Escobar, 2013). In other words, facilitators implement governance-driven democratization (Cooper & Smith, 2012). Democratic values in need of practical translation include effective deliberation and political equality – in terms of equal participation in the discussion, a degree of self-organization and fair representation of views in the outcomes. These values can be derived from deliberative theory, but they have also been identified as values guiding the practitioners in practice (Mansbridge et al., 2006; Cooper and Smith, 2012).

Although there seems to be an agreement on the central democratic values to be incorporated in the deliberative process, there may be some tensions between, or deriving from these values. The central tension strongly resembles the challenge democratic professionals face, when they need to both exercise and share authority. Moore (2012) characterizes this tension as the challenge of ‘following from the front’, meaning that ‘organized deliberative practice seems to require the presence of actors who intervene to make the discourse happen, yet deliberative theory treats ideal deliberation in terms of the absence of coercion repression and inequality’ (Moore, 2012, p. 149). This challenge has also been recognized empirically (Escobar, 2013; Mansbridge et al., 2006). While this challenge is located within the deliberative process, Cooper and Smith (2012) also recognize constraints in the culture and practices of public authorities on the realization and institutionalization of the democratic ideals. One might even say that public authorities sometimes fail ‘to fully understand the demands of participation’ (Cooper & Smith 2012, p. 22).

Practices of democratic facilitation

What practices does facilitation entail? Above, we have established that it is the facilitator’s job is to design, structure and implement engagement strategies (Cooper & Smith, 2012). Cooper and Smith here focus on the choice for the overall model of deliberation, including the number and selection of participants and mode of deliberation. They find, for example, that designs with small groups are preferred for fostering an intimate atmosphere promoting equality of voice, whereas larger groups are more democratic in terms of representativeness. Most other authors in the facilitation literature, however, seem to focus on how the facilitator structures the process within the chosen institutional design. For a large part, this takes place during the deliberative process itself ‘live, in public, testing the engagers’ knowledge-in-action as they converse with the situation at hand (Escobar, 2013, p. 153, based on Schön, 1983). Improvisation is an inevitable part of facilitation, simply because every group and context is different.

Structuring these processes at hand, in the first place, means shaping communications patterns (Escobar, 2013), or ‘managing discourse’ (Moore, 2012). The facilitators believe that maintaining a positive group atmosphere is key in order to create ‘safe spaces’ for deliberation, fostering a free flow of speech (Escobar, 2013; Mansbridge et al, 2006). They do this primarily through discursive interventions referred to as ‘process talk’. Such process talk can be aimed both fostering inclusion and equality, as well as on time management and bringing the group process forward, towards a conclusion. Process talk
aimed at equality, for example, includes including quiet participants in the discussion, systematically bringing out the views and ideas of each individual, intervening in case of confrontation and curtailing excessive contributions, but also rapport building with ‘difficult’ participants (Mansbridge et al., 2006; Moore, 2012; Escobar, 2013).

Secondly, material interventions may be used, for example to stage the setting of the meeting, writing on flipcharts, sticky notes and wall paper or using artifacts like a talking stick (Escobar, 2011). Thirdly, like the democratic professional and the street level bureaucrat, facilitators bring in expertise in order to create ‘a level of informational equality’ and to rule out obvious falsehoods. Again, the challenge is to do this without dominating the discussion (Moore, 2012, p. 152).

Finally, it should be mentioned that the facilitator, responding to the challenge of the institutional barriers identified by Cooper and Smith (2012), in practice may also need to spend a considerable amount of time ‘backstage’ to embed the participatory process within the government organization, aligning agendas and overcoming resistance (Escobar, 2013, p. 37). This operating ‘in between’, however, is the key activity of the next character that will be discussed, namely, the boundary spanner.

### 4. Boundary spanning

A fourth strand of literature that needs to be included in this overview, is the literature on boundary spanning. The idea of boundary spanning was developed in the organizational literature, in research on inter-organizational cooperation. Boundary spanners are positioned at the edges of their organization (Thompson, 1962). They connect with other organizations, or even systems, and negotiate the interaction with other organizations in their environment (Miles, 1980; Steadman, 1992). Although the role of the boundary spanner is not tied to a specific job title, position or organization, (competent) boundary spanners share some key characteristics. They are entrepreneurial, skilled networkers, able to develop interpersonal relationships and skilled in understanding and bridging different interests, organizations and professions (Williams, 2002; Steadman, 1992).

Unsurprisingly, the notion of ‘wicked’ problems and shift from government to governance has also increased the popularity of the concept of boundary spanning in the context of public policy. When it comes to democratic innovations, the role of the boundary spanner can be found in forms of collaborative governance such as networks and partnerships (Williams, 2002; Sullivan and Skelcher, 2002; Torfing et al., 2012; Van Meerkerk, 2014). Within government organizations that are involved in these networks and partnerships, the role of the boundary spanner is generally taken by lower level (strategic) public managers, ranging from project managers in water management, crime and community safety coordinators to health promotions specialists and city planners (Noble & Jones, 2006, Torfing et al., 2012, Williams, 2002; Van Meerkerk et al.;, 2015; Shrum, 1990).

**Boundary spanning and democracy**

Although democracy does not lie at the heart of this literature, the role of the boundary spanner, like the democratic professional and the facilitator, has been connected to deliberative democracy. Governance networks have been viewed as a supplement to representative democracy that provide the opportunity for the inclusion of and deliberation between relevant and affected actors, and the development of common conceptions of problems, solutions, and decision-making premises between
these actors. Public servants, in the role of boundary spanner, may play an important role in realizing this potential (Sørensen & Torfing, 2009; Torfing et al., 2012; Van Meerkerk et al., 2015).

A survey by Van Meerkerk and colleagues (2015) among members of inter-organizational water management initiatives in the Netherlands showed a strong effect of the boundary spanning activities on the level of inclusion, deliberation and transparency in governance networks. They conclude that ‘network managers who have an eye for the diversity of perceptions and interests involved in governance networks, and who aim to create a constructive interaction between these stakeholders, positively affect the throughput legitimacy of governance networks’ (2015, p.15). In addition, a study by Noble and Jones (2006) of boundary spanners in public private partnerships shows that public servants in this role ‘essentially have the public interest at heart, and are motivated more by the pursuit of the public good’, and worried about values such as openness, transparency, democracy, probity and accountability (p. 901). On the other hand, Williams (2002; 2012) warns for the informal nature of boundary spanning activities, in which personal and professional relationships may be blurred. As a result, networks may be closed and exclusive.

**Boundary spanning practices**

Boundary spanners engage in two key practices in network or partnership governance. Firstly, they connect stakeholders or potential partners across organizational boundaries. They bring them into dialogue with one another around a shared interest or ‘policy narrative’ (Williams, 2002; Torfing et al., 2012). Providing stakeholders with the opportunity to engage and having an eye for ‘the diversity of interests, for what is relevant for the different involved stakeholders’ (Van Meerkerk, 2014, p. 38), boundary spanners may secure inclusion and deliberation. Secondly, they connect the process in the network with the processes within their own organization. They select relevant information from both sides of the boundary, and translate this information to the other side (Van Meerkerk, 2014, p. 36; Steadman 1992; van Hulst et al. 2012). In other words, they represent the organization towards the environment, and represent the environment towards their organization aiming to realize a better ‘fit’ between the two (Tushman & Scanlan, 1981). Connecting informal governance networks to formal decision-making structures and policy processes, boundary spanners may increase both the transparency as well as the influence of these networks (Van Meerkerk, 2014, p. 38).

An extensive study by Williams (2002) of health promotion specialists, crime and community safety coordinators and coordinators of a sustainability projects in the UK and Wales sheds light on how these tasks can be performed. Williams shows that boundary spanners build sustainable relationships through networking, communicating and listening, understanding, empathizing and resolving conflict and building trust. Here, the boundary spanner resembles Laws and Forester’s picture of the street level democrat. In addition, they need to manage complexity and interdependencies. This requires strategic, bigger picture thinking and an understanding of the systems they operate in, in terms of informal and formal norms, and organizational operations and politics (Williams, 2002; 2012; Steadman, 1992). Another similarity between the boundary spanner, the civic entrepreneur and street level democrat is the entrepreneurial nature of their work. Boundary spanning requires a share of creativity and opportunism, in order to form new alliances, collaboratively develop new solutions and act in response opening ‘policy windows’ (Williams, 2002).

Finally, it should be noted that the role of the boundary spanner is not an independent one. Boundary spanning involves active influencing and negotiating and stakeholders are brought together around a
particular policy narrative (Williams, 2002; Torfing et al., 2012). The role of boundary spanner may call public managers ‘to push interactive governance arenas in a direction desired by politicians and executive public managers’ (Torfing et al., 2012, p. 159). This may undermine the democratic opportunities of these networks described above. Torfing and colleagues (2012), however, have found that these public managers deal with this tension by bringing the actors involved in the networks and partnerships in contact with executive managers and politicians in the role of ‘hands off meta-governors’. It is to the role of meta-governors that we now turn.

5. Meta-governance

A fifth and final relevant line of inquiry when exploring practices of governance democratization, is the literature on meta-governance. The concept of meta-governance stems from the research on network governance, or interactive governance (Torfing, Peters, Pierre & Sorensen, 2012), and describes the role that public managers and politicians should take in these contexts in order to enhance or protect the effectiveness and democratic legitimacy of public policy. Meta-governors may be the same people as the boundary spanners described above, taking another role to realize another (democratic) purpose (Torfing et al., 2012).

This other role entails the ‘conscious and deliberate attempts by public authorities to regulate self-governing networks’ (Haveri, Nyholm, Roiselands & Vabo, 2009). Other than sovereign rule, meta-governance is not based on direct top-down control, rather, it involves ‘a plurality of indirect ways of influencing or coordinating the actions of self-governing actors’ (Sørensen, 2006, p. 102). Meta-governance, therefore, is also known as the ‘governance of governance’, or the ‘organization of self-organization’ (Jessop, 2002). This role can be fulfilled by both executive, as well as lower ranking managers (Torfing et al., 2012).

Meta-governance and democracy

Like the street level democracy, facilitation and boundary spanning literature, meta-governance takes the shift from government to governance - the emergence of governance networks in particular - as its starting point for re-conceptualizing the role of the public servant. The meta-governance literature, in addition, explicitly focuses on managing the democratic implications of these new forms of governance. Meta-governance promises to be an instrument to realize some of the democratic opportunities described as ‘governance-driven democratization’ by ensuring networks’ democratic anchorage (Sørensen & Torfing, 2009, Sørensen, 2016).

By democratic anchorage, the authors in this strand of research mean that the organizations participating in the networks and policy process should be held accountable by those groups and interests they claim to represent. In addition, the network as a whole should be accountable to the citizens that are affected by their decisions. Finally, the network and its participants should submit to ‘commonly accepted democratic rules and norms,’ ensuring the inclusion of relevant and affected stakeholders, procedural fairness and respect among participants (Sørensen & Torfing, 2009, p. 244). The meta-governance literature, however, focuses primarily on anchoring governance networks in representative democracy. The policy processes in the networks should be monitored by elected politicians or public managers, and influenced where necessary (Sørensen & Torfing, 2009).

By increasing public officials’ control over network governance, meta-governance, in part, is a coping strategy responding to the challenges for representative democracy that governance networks pose.
This is needed because of the fragmentation and informality of governance networks leads to the decline of control of elected politicians over governance in itself and a diminishing public influence on decision making on public issues (Sørensen, 2006).

**Meta-governance practices**

In order to meet these criteria for democratic anchorage, the meta-governance scholars describe four practices (in that literature called ‘strategies’) that can be used by public authorities. Sørensen (2006) and Sørensen and Torfing (2009) distinguish between hands-on and hands-off forms of meta-governance. In the hands-on form of meta-governance, government actively interacts with the self-organizing networks that it meta-governs, whereas in the hands-off form, government is not part of the network. In addition, the authors differentiate between the level of influence the meta-governor has over the outcome of the self-governing process – in other words: the degree to which the meta-governor steers normatively. The strategies to steer normatively can be related to the democratic value of representative democratic control. The strategies in which the meta-governor is not concerned with the content of the debate, but with its context and design, can be used to strive for other democratic values such as transparency, inclusion and equality.

Firstly, there is **hands-off framing of self-governance**, which involves adjusting the political, financial, and organizational context within which self-governance takes place. These activities, given their formal political nature, however, are in the hands of the meta-governing politician, rather than the public servant (Torfing et al., 2012, p. 156). The second practice that Sørensen (2006) describes, **hands-on support and facilitation**, is a role for public managers. Through this strategy, meta-governors supports self-governance by providing actors with necessary resources and knowledge. Executive public managers, here, tend to be the designers of the interactive arenas, whereas lower ranking public managers are designated to facilitate the processes within the arenas (Torfing et al., 2012, p. 156). This strategy is called hands-on because it involves direct contact between the meta-governor and the self-governing network. This strategy, hereby, strongly resembles the work of the professional facilitator discussed above. Facilitation, in context of meta-governance, though, should be interpreted more broadly, as creating conditions for effective self-organization and network governance. Here facilitation is not restricted to the discursive deliberative process, it may also include networks with resources, knowledge or contacts (Sørensen, 2006). Like the professional facilitator, however, the meta-governor, when applying this strategy, does not try to steer the self-governing process normatively. This is different in a third practice, which is named **hands-off storytelling**. This practice involves shaping the interests of the self-governing actors ‘through the formation of the meanings and identities that constitute the self-governing actors’. This may for example involve influencing the actors’ perspectives on friend-enemy relations and on possible future situations, or providing ‘rational’ options for action given the interests of the actors. Finally, through **hands-on participation** in networks, meta-governors aim to obtain influence on the outcome of self-governance. Here, meta-governors actively negotiate with the other network participants (Sørensen, 2006).

The meta-governance practices Sørensen and Torfing present, are more prescriptive than descriptive in nature. Empirical studies in Finland and Norway, in addition, conclude that ‘governing collaboration is experienced as challenging ... and the tools of meta-governance are still immature and under development’ (Haveri et al., 2009, p. 551).
Conclusion

In this text we have set out to explore the roles and practices public servants engage in and develop, in the context of new modes of governance and democratic innovation, and examined how these roles and practices relate to the democratic values these institutions are expected to stimulate, sustain and protect. Five literatures with their specific roles and practices have been identified. Public servants involved in new modes of governance might be active as front line workers, democratic professionals, professional facilitators, boundary spanners or meta-governors.

All roles we explored relate and contribute to forms of interactive or participatory governance. They bring together interested parties and citizens, or facilitate the dialogue that follows. Frontline workers, democratic professionals and facilitators have been connected to forms of participation in which individual citizens (or clients) are involved. Boundary spanners and meta-governors appear more often in collaborative governance, engaging in networks and partnerships with stakeholder organizations. The former forms of participation may be formal and deliberative in nature, such as mini-publics or participatory budgeting, guided by a process facilitator, but they may also be more informal and practical. For frontline workers and democratic professionals, citizen participation is connected to their daily work practice. The roles of frontline worker and democratic professional, therefore are more often performed by actors involved in policy implementation and service delivery, whereas boundary spanning and meta-governance has been attributed more often to officials working in more strategic positions, such as project managers and coordinators. Although frontline workers and democratic professionals typically engage citizens directly, all roles involve direct interaction with stakeholders. An exception might be some of the meta-governance tasks performed by politicians and executive managers – hands-off framing and hands-off story telling – that focus on shaping the institutional contexts – the rules, policies and budgets – in which interactive governance takes place.

For most of these public servants, these interactions have become embedded in their pre-existing jobs. For the professional facilitator democratic handwork is more than just a part of their work. Indeed, they are experts with a total dedication to the participatory process itself. In addition, it should be remarked that a public servants may perform multiple roles at once. This will become clearer when discussing the overlapping practices below. First, however, we will look at how these roles relate to different democratic values.

The five literatures included in this text can be connected to, and some are even rooted in, theories of democracy; the democratic values discussed in section [..] are clearly a part of the job descriptions these theories envision for public servants. Whereas, the facilitator and democratic professional for example focus on realizing the potential of deliberative democracy, the meta-governance literature focuses on mitigating the challenges for representative democracy. At the same time, there is an interesting point of overlap: all strands of literature pay attention to inclusion or equality. For the boundary spanner, civic entrepreneur and street level democrat, this involves creating opportunities for participation for a broad range of stakeholders or even actively reaching out to marginalized groups. For the roles rooted in deliberative democracy, the democratic professional and facilitator, equality not only means equal participation, but also equal voice. The practitioners in these roles thus also seek equality within the participatory process.

Another returning value is accountability. This value is interpreted differently in different strands of literature, or located in different places. For frontline workers, accountability means direct
accountability towards the participants or stakeholders involved, sought within the situation at hand. For other practitioners, the meta-governor in particular, accountability means representative accountability towards government or constituents. Transparency, in addition, may also be found within the collaborative, participatory process – are the goals of a process, for example, clear to the participants? – as well as located outside of it. Is the collaboration within the governance networks, for example, being communicated clearly towards citizens and politicians? Overall, we see that there are actors who take a position and seek democratic values within democratic processes of deliberation and participation – the facilitator, democratic professional and frontline worker. In contrast, boundary spanner and meta-governor are roles that are located primarily between processes of participatory and deliberative democracy and representative democracy. In the end, however, it seems that all of these officials, even the facilitator and the frontline worker, need to make a connection between the participatory process and the local bureaucracy.

When comparing the practices mentioned in the five streams of literature, the need for making connections and translations between institutions, organizations and/or processes is a first reoccurring theme. For the boundary spanner, this is the main activity, but the frontline worker also connects municipals goals with the needs of local communities ('fixing') and the democratic professional connects informal task sharing and dialogue with formal institutions for participation. Even the professional facilitator needs to align agendas and overcome resistance within their organization, for the participatory process to have an impact. For these practitioners, this means increasing the influence of inclusive, deliberative and participatory trajectories on public decision making, and thereby realizing their innovative democratic potential. For the meta-governor, by contrast, the connection contributes to the anchorage of the collaborative processes in representative democracy. This task of connecting and translating, in addition, requires networking activities and a share of entrepreneurship, improvisation and opportunism.

A second recurring practice, is facilitation. For the facilitator, unsurprisingly, facilitating the deliberative process is his or her primary task, but the democratic professional, boundary spanner and meta-governor also engage in such an activity. For these practitioners, however, facilitating may be understood as enabling dialogue or cooperation in the broader sense, for example by bringing together stakeholders and providing them with the necessary resources. The centrality of facilitating, in the literature reflects the broader development in the role of government, from sole implementer of policies, to facilitator of or participant in collaborative processes of implementation. There are however, different views on the position and degree of independence of the government actors involved in these processes should obtain. Independence is a key theme in the facilitation literature, and the meta-governance literature deliberatively distinguishes between facilitation and participation. On a related note, while facilitation for the professional facilitator is their primary task, the other practitioners included in this overview incorporate it in or add it to their other, daily activities. As a result, the democratizing work of for example the front line worker and democratic professional is claimed to be essentially practical in nature (Tonkens, Hoijtink & Gulikers, 2013).

Third, we have found that knowledge and expertise are still important resources public officials have to offer. Interactive and participatory governance, however, requires them to use these resources in a different way than before. A key feature of democratic professionals is that they share their knowledge with the public, enabling them to develop an informed opinion. The facilitator, in addition, aims to ensure ‘informational equality’ among participants. Knowledge should thus be shared instead of simply
applied. And this sharing of knowledge, as is emphasized in both the literature on democratic professionalism as well as frontline work and facilitation, should be done in a non-intimidating, non-damnating way, in order to truly empower participants. In addition, the professional’s knowledge of the public servants should be complemented with ‘local knowledge’, of the specific situation and those involved in it. A local diagnosis, based on multiple knowledges (expert and local or lay) may be the starting point for planning concrete front line actions. The democratic professionalism and frontline work literature, however, suggest that these actions themselves might also be developed together with the citizens. Transcending the specific roles, we could ask various questions about the way they relate to another. Could we envision, for instance, many public servants using multiple roles in their daily work? The work of Torfing et al. (2012) suggests that this is possible; some public managers seem to alternate between boundary spanning, facilitating and meta-governance roles. Is this a recurring situation, and if so, what tensions may then arise between the different roles? We may also wonder: (how) do public servants, engaged in different roles, work together? Do they align their practices? Do they come into conflict? A recent study we did on people who ‘make a difference’ in urban neighborhoods (Durose et al. 2016), suggests that various roles might strengthen one another, but how does that work in practice? These are questions we will seek to answer in the future.

In the end, the five roles – of the frontline worker, democratic professional, process facilitator, boundary spanner and meta-governor – might be analytically distinguished and understood in terms of their peculiar characteristics, but in doing so we should keep in mind that they all share one fundamental challenge. As we have discussed, civil servants taking these roles need to be responsive to innovative forms of democracy beyond city hall, while also being tied to the responsibilities within city hall – a metaphorical shorthand for the formal democracy of municipal boards, councils, legitimizing elections, political accountability mechanisms, et cetera. Public servants, in any of the five roles discussed, are forced to be fundamentally janus-faced, facing informal-societal democracy as well as formal-political democracy, while being able to negotiate between the two. As (wo)man in the middle, these public servants occupy a challenging field, surely, but also a theoretically relevant and potentially salient position that is not always recognized in democratic theory, preoccupied as it traditionally is with either politicians or citizens. Under the mainstream of democratic theory there are, however, pockets of literature recognizing the democracy-enhancing public servants, in themselves worthy of reconstruction and comparison as provided here.

Table 1: Five strands of literature compared

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Front-line work</th>
<th>Democratic professionalism</th>
<th>Facilitating</th>
<th>Boundary spanning</th>
<th>Meta-governance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mode of governance</td>
<td>Collaborative governance (coproduction of public services)</td>
<td>Deliberative innovations (e.g. mini-publics)</td>
<td>Deliberative innovations (e.g. mini-publics)</td>
<td>Collaborative governance (partnerships &amp; networks)</td>
<td>Collaborative governance (partnerships &amp; networks)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generic role</td>
<td>Frontline worker (as entrepreneur, street-level democrat)</td>
<td>Professional with public impact</td>
<td>Professional facilitator</td>
<td>Public manager (lower ranking) e.g. project managers &amp; specialists</td>
<td>(executive &amp; lower level) Public manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic perspective &amp; values</td>
<td>Participatory democracy: Focus on inclusiveness; situated accountability &amp; legitimacy</td>
<td>Deliberative &amp; participatory democracy: Focus on citizen influence through lay participation; deliberation; equality of voice</td>
<td>Deliberative democracy: Focus on deliberation &amp; equality of voice</td>
<td>Deliberative democracy: Focus on inclusiveness, deliberation &amp; transparency</td>
<td>Representative democracy: Focus on accountability &amp; transparency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practices</td>
<td>- Reaching - Enabling - <strong>Connecting</strong> community needs and policy (‘fixing’) - Listening &amp; local diagnosis; - <strong>Knowledge</strong> leveraging - Generating action via dispute resolution &amp; negotiating</td>
<td>- Task sharing by stepping back &amp; <strong>facilitating</strong> public debate around the task; - <strong>Knowledge</strong> sharing - <strong>Connecting</strong> informal and formal participation</td>
<td><strong>Facilitation:</strong> - Designing &amp; structuring process - Shaping communication patterns - Staging meetings - Bringing in <strong>knowledge</strong> to generate informational equality - <strong>Connecting</strong> participation to internal government organization</td>
<td>- <strong>Connecting</strong> stakeholders &amp; connecting networks with the municipal organization &amp; decision making. Through influencing &amp; negotiating - <strong>Facilitating</strong> dialogue. By networking, communicating &amp; listening, understanding, empathizing &amp; resolving conflict &amp; building trust</td>
<td><strong>Connecting</strong> representative government and networks through: - Hands-off framing - Hands-off storytelling; - Hands-on <strong>facilitation</strong> (broad, including financial and expertise) - Hands-on participation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References


