Following From the Front: Theorizing Deliberative Facilitation


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Abstract

This paper discusses the place of facilitation in deliberative democratic theory, and elaborates some of the choices, dilemmas and problems involved in the facilitation of deliberation. The central dilemma of facilitation comes from having to ‘follow from the front.’ The facilitator necessarily occupies a leadership position in the deliberating group, yet must follow the group as it unfolds its own discourse on the issue at hand. This paper will discuss the ways in which this tension is expressed through considerations of the framing of publics, the handling of expertise, the conduct of deliberation, and the crucial phase of bringing a deliberation to a conclusion. The various criticisms of deliberative practice in these dimensions are treated not as decisive objections, but rather as tensions to be negotiated at the level of practice, that is, as tensions that are felt - and should be felt - by those who organise and conduct deliberative public engagement. By framing the discussion in terms of the constitutive tension involved in ‘following from the front,’ this paper aims to show the value of critical empirical work on deliberative practices as describing potential dangers, which can be set against the normative ideals and democratic potentials involved in attempts to generate deliberation in minipublics.

Introduction

Over the last two decades or so a remarkable range of deliberative and participatory citizen panels, minipublics and public engagement exercises have appeared on the wider landscape of democratic theory. Following Fung (2003), I will refer to the various instances of self-consciously organised public deliberation as minipublics. These democratic institutional innovations have been particularly prominent in issues and controversies that involve technology and scientific knowledge. They have accordingly been the focus of a great deal of attention not only from deliberative democrats, but also from scholars interested in scientific governance. Some of the most important and prominent discussions have centred on their relation to the wider political system on the one hand and to the public sphere on the other (Goodin and Dryzek 2006). Thus, some have questioned the closeness of these new innovations to the institutions of the state (Dryzek 2000), and asked what influence minipublics actually have on policy discourse and policy decisions. Others have tried to work out whether and, if so, how deliberation

My concern is more general than just minipublics - I think this analysis has general relevance to any context of organised deliberation, but in this essay I draw on theoretical and empirical work on deliberative minipublics more specifically. Also, while this paper is focused on scientific governance, my point is a general one about the practical conduct of deliberation regardless of issue area.

The term ‘scientific governance’ encompasses both the steering and regulation of technoscientific development and the governance of science-society relations through the design of institutions and practices that mediate between science, publics and politics (see Braun and Kropp 2010; also Irwin 2006).
in minipublics might influence wider public spheres - this is often described as the problem of ‘scaling up’ deliberation (see Parkinson 2006; Levine et al. 2005). Another important discussion brackets out these macro questions in order to focus on institutional designs and the variety of ways of structuring deliberative minipublics (see Fung 2003; Rowe and Frewer 2005; Smith 2009). More recently, as attention has turned to the evaluation of deliberation, there has been a great deal of close study and theorizing about the internal quality of deliberation (see Steenbergen et al 2003; Stromer Galley 2007). However, while crucial to the achievement of ‘internal’ deliberative quality, the facilitator does not figure prominently in studies of discourse quality. Indeed, facilitation, while necessary in some form for the conduct of any organised deliberation, is rarely systematically discussed in reflections on deliberative minipublics.

The role of the facilitator in deliberative minipublics, then, is somewhat undertheorized. I will use the term ‘facilitator’ to describe those who lead discussions and continuously interact with the other participants in the conduct of discourse, including those who record discussion on a flip chart or computer screen during the event. There is a general acknowledgement that such a role is crucial if we are to generate instances of inclusive deliberation on complex issues that enables communication through persuasive influence. As Callon et al (2009) put it in the context of democratizing science and technology, ‘[t]o remedy these asymmetries [unequal resources and access] it may be useful to envisage the formation of new professional roles: translators, mediators, facilitators of debates and negotiations, and political organizers whose explicit task would be to make it easier for previously excluded actors to enter the public space’ (162). Facilitation in this sense is central to the possibility of developing ‘technologies of humility’ (Jasanoff 2003), and realizing the democratic potentials of minipublics in the domain of scientific governance. Yet there is also general recognition of a range of pitfalls in carrying out this role, which can frustrate those deliberative goals. Some of them have to do with the institutional context and the macro-issues of influence on policy discourses, political decisions and debates in the public sphere. But some of the concerns relate to narrower issues of the framing and conduct of the processes themselves. Some early critics, such as Iris Marion Young (2002), seemed to suggest that rational discourse was itself oppressive and exclusive, and that the attempt to realize deliberative ideals in an organised form was necessarily self-defeating. However, as Kadlec and Friedman (2007) point out, close attention to the empirical conduct of deliberation suggests that it is better viewed as a constitutive tension that has to be managed by reflexive facilitators from within their particular institutional designs. This essay treats these potentials and dangers as two poles in a tension. Achieving deliberative goals without undermining them in the ways that critics are concerned about is indeed difficult, but not impossible. Furthermore, this draws our focus to the practitioners, that is, to those who must develop ways of managing these

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3 Some use the term ‘moderator’ to describe this role (Stromer-Galley 2007; Mansbridge et al. 2006).

4 Jasanoff worries, for instance, that such public engagement innovations may amount to ‘end of pipe’ legitimation devices for technologically consequential decisions made ‘upstream’ (2003: 241).
tensions in practice. Indeed, I will conclude that good facilitators will keep these considerations in mind.

This central tension is captured in terms of ‘following from the front.’ The facilitator necessarily occupies a leadership position in the deliberating group, yet must follow the group as it unfolds its own discourse on the issue at hand. The facilitator is both part of the structure within which deliberation is supposed to emerge, and self-evidently a participant in the actual discourse itself. Yet the facilitator is a special kind of participant in the deliberative process - she is in a privileged position with respect to the other participants. Though this is unavoidable in any discourse that does not take the form of the spontaneous emergence of ‘those subjectless forms of communication that regulate the flow of discursive opinion- and will-formation’ in the public sphere (Habermas 1997: 58), it is nonetheless a source of tension within organised deliberation. This paper, then, sets out a central tension in this role of the facilitator, and explores several specific ways in which this tension is expressed in the light of empirical and theoretical accounts of deliberative practice. It combines theory with empirical research, attempting to draw some useful distinctions, while paying attention to some recent studies of deliberation in practice, which analyse what facilitators actually do, and not just what they say they do. This may highlight areas for further research, such as the process of concluding deliberations in minipublics, and thus help to ‘align[] normative and empirical inquiries in a way that allows the two to speak to each other in mutually interpretable terms’, as Neblo et al. (2010: 566) put it. This paper aims to straddle the theory / practice divide by focusing on the tensions faced by facilitators who are trying to realized deliberative ideals in contexts where they necessarily have to constitute, guide and constrain the discourse of the participants.

The paper will begin by outlining the problem of facilitation in deliberative democratic theory, and describing the main tension that frames the role of the facilitator in a deliberative minipublic. The paper will then discuss four considerations in doing deliberation. First, the question of constructing publics. Second, the handling of expertise. Both of these are dealt with at the level of the structuring of a deliberative event, but they also bear on the role of the facilitator. Then I will look at the conduct of deliberation itself, discussing one of the few studies of facilitator attitudes and practices. Finally, I will discuss the process of concluding deliberation, and suggest that there is room here for closer study of exactly what goes on when a deliberation is brought to a conclusion. I will draw on empirical and theoretical studies of deliberative practices, and I will also refer occasionally to aspect of my recent experience as an observer at a deliberative minipublic on the topic of explosives and the environment, held in British Columbia in April of 2010.5

Facilitation in Deliberative Democratic Theory and Practice

5 REF - O’Doherty and Burgess 2011 RDX report, acknowledgements.
Facilitation is indispensible to deliberative practice, yet it is largely absent from deliberative theory. This is not surprising. The work of Habermas (1994) and Cohen (1989), among others, was concerned not with minipublics or other institutional innovations, but rather with giving a deliberative democratic account of legitimate political authority. Such an account, they supposed, had to begin from the claim that political authority could only be justified if everybody under it had in some meaningful sense consented to be under it. In contrast to theories that emphasised some original moment of consent, or a tacit or hypothetical social contract, the deliberative theories of democracy attempted to root consent in ongoing processes of public deliberation. The major challenge faced by this sort of account was to explain how an obligation to obey would fall on all citizens. And the major solution was to say that certain principles would - or could - be the subject of a consensus. It is in this context that we must understand the emphasis in high deliberative theory on the possibility of rational consensus, or everybody agreeing to the same thing for the same reasons, and of the focus in deliberation of producing ‘generalizable reasons’ or ‘reasons that all can accept’ (Bohman and Richardson 2009). It is a matter of some dispute whether a deliberative account of democratic legitimacy even needs this sort of consensus (Manin 1987). But the point here is that in the classic accounts of deliberative democracy, the difficulties associated with actually enacting something approximating deliberative ideals in minipublics was very far from their central concerns.

Nonetheless, the central ideas of deliberative theory have inspired a great deal of middle-range theorizing and practice, concerned with ‘creating instances of more perfect public spheres’ (Fung 2003: 338). The rough idea is that while the broader public sphere is resistant to change and falls far short of deliberative ideals of uncoerced communication oriented to the question of a common good, it might be possible to engage in some ‘reformist tinkering’ (Unger 1987; from Fung 2003: 339) that can generate tangible improvements in the quality of public deliberation on some matters of common concern. The idea that minipublics can be ‘more perfect public spheres’ is sometimes understood in terms of the ‘regulative ideal’ of Habermas’s counterfactual ‘ideal speech situation’. Habermas emphasises the importance of protecting discourse from distortion through coercion, inequality, or repression. These norms include the demand that:

1. Every subject with the competence to speak and act is allowed to take part in the discourse.
2. a) Everyone is allowed to question any assertion whatsoever. b) Everyone is allowed to introduce any assertion whatsoever into the discourse. c) Everyone is allowed to express his attitudes, desires, and needs.
3. No speaker may be prevented, by internal or external coercion, from exercising his rights as laid down in (1) and (2) above. (Habermas 1995: 89)

While this is clearly unlikely to ever be fully realized, these norms seem to give us a clear direction of travel. As Dryzek (2000), among others, points out, these norms direct us to be more inclusive, more comprehensive, more careful to avoid deception, suppression and coercion. Yet it is clear that any organised discourse must involve
restriction and selection of the subjects who are allowed to take part in it, and must limit the introduction and questioning of assertions and the expression of attitudes, desires and needs. Thus, producing deliberation on a given topic under ordinary limits of time, motivation and pressure for conclusion, seems necessarily to violate Habermas's third demand in as much as it involves constraints on the first two. This is not to claim that there is an inherent contradiction in attempting to realize deliberation - far from it. But it suggests why accounts of deliberative ideals rarely include significant attention to the facilitator, even though some such role is obviously necessary for the production of any organised deliberation.

The empirical analysis of deliberation has a similar blind spot, as O'Doherty observes. Citing Ryfe (2005), he notes that the empirical literature focuses 'more on the effects of deliberation than on deliberation itself'. Attempts to empirically analyse the conditions of possibility of deliberation have focused on institutional design and structure (Smith 2009). The measurement of deliberation, meanwhile, has focused on the form and content of deliberation itself, with little attention to the role of the facilitator. Steenbergen et al's Discourse Quality Index, for instance, measures deliberation with little account of facilitation. Although rules of order, the speaker of the house, the chair of the meeting, are obviously crucial to the conduct of deliberation, the question whether good deliberation took place tends to remove the facilitator from the equation. Implicitly, the facilitator is bracketed with the design and structure: facilitation belongs to the conditions of possibility of the emergence of deliberation. While it is perhaps the most important condition, it is still viewed as something that, when successful, simply allows deliberation to emerge. In short, while facilitation is indispensible in deliberative practice, it remains undertheorised in ideal and empirical studies of deliberation.  

Some of the early critics of deliberative theory focused on exactly the tensions involved in realizing deliberative ideals in the context of existing societal and political structures, and it is worth briefly revisiting them because they set up a characteristic sort of tension involved in organizing and conducting public deliberation. The worry voiced by critics such as Lynn Sanders and Iris Marion Young was that the deliberative ideals of inclusion in a forum characterized by the exchange of reasons directed to the question of the common good were decisively undermined by the context within which 'micro' (Hendriks 2006) deliberative practices necessarily take place. In short, they suggested that inclusion in a rational discourse could itself amount to a new form of exclusion. Thus, in a society with pronounced economic inequalities, it is likely that the powerful elites who dominate within existing political and economic institutions will seek to limit the extent to which new innovations are genuinely empowering - for instance, by ensuring that they remain peripheral to core policy communities (see Salter and Jones 2006). Even without explicit intention on the part of particular elites, problems are likely to be framed conservatively so as to constrain the outcomes of deliberation to some minor amendment to the status quo that fails to address deeper inequalities - radical positions may be kept off the table. The most serious criticism from the point of view of deliberative ideals, however, is the notion that rationality itself is culturally specific. The

6 With the exception of Mansbridge et al 2006.
argument is that rationality in practice involves culturally specific norms of deliberation, such as reasonableness, calmness, moderation, dispassion and mutual respect, and that these norms just happen to be those most cherished by deliberative theorists themselves. Thus, argues Sanders, norms of deliberation serve to exclude, on democratic grounds, ‘the views of those who are less likely to present their arguments in ways that we recognize as characteristically deliberative’ (Sanders 1997: 349), and this means, in practice, the poor, the uneducated, women, and racial minorities.

These criticisms have been absorbed by subsequent deliberative theory. Kadlec and Friedman are good representatives of what Mansbridge et al. (2010) call the ‘working theory’ stage in deliberative democracy, in that they accept the critique of Young and Sanders, but suggest that their detachment from close empirical study of deliberative practice leads them to draw misleadingly sharp lines. In practice, they argue, the creation of genuinely inclusive and egalitarian deliberative forums in a context of structural inequalities and pervasive power relations is not self-contradictory or logically impossible: It’s just a big challenge. This challenge can in fact be more or less effectively addressed in the dimensions of control of the deliberative process, including the demand that ‘no single entity with a stake in the substantive outcome of the deliberation should be the main designer or guarantor of the process’ (Kadlec and Friedman 2007: 7), and in the design of the forum, including issue framing, recruitment, and the structuring and facilitation of the process. At this ‘working theory’ stage, which involves more modest accounts of deliberative aims derived at least in part from experience conducting organised deliberation, these major criticisms are addressed at the level of practice.

Rather than deliberation being inherently flawed, then, we might better think of it in terms of a tension. On the one hand, there is a desire, set against the context of inequality, de facto exclusion, and distorted public debate, to ‘create instances of more perfect public spheres’. In scientific governance in particular we have seen a proliferation of such minipublics, which offer the hope of becoming viable ‘technologies of humility’ (Jasanoff), in which citizens can deliberate meaningfully on consequential aspects of science and technology. This is also found in Callon et al’s (2009) call for ‘hybrid forums’. On the other hand, there is the standing danger that the asymmetries of power and knowledge that characterise the ‘real world’ context of deliberation would in various ways be reproduced in minipublics. It is this fear that led John Dryzek to suggest that deliberative innovations be kept as far as possible from the institutions of the state, which would inevitably instrumentalise and co-opt them. In the context of scientific governance it has led to constant anxiety that such new institution might be mere ‘end of pipe legitimation devices’ (Jasanoff 2003), or perhaps themselves become sites of new and worrisome ‘oligarchic tendencies’ of public ‘discourse managers’ (Tucker 2008). The tension, then, is between minipublics as one possible site for informed discussion by citizens oriented to persuasion and in the absence of coercion, and the danger that such sites themselves might amount to a new and more subtle form of coercion.
Constructing Publics

As we move from theory to practice, or more accurately, from conceiving deliberation in terms of disembodied flows of communication in the public sphere, to the self-conscious creation of deliberation in minipublics and other public engagement processes, we have to face a new set of problems to do with the structuring and conduct of deliberation. These problems come from the general tension outlined above, namely, that any organised deliberation must involve some sorts of constraints on deliberation that are necessary to realize those ideals but which perpetually risk undermining them. The first and most obvious expression of this tension comes in the decisions about how to construct your public. Minipublics are quite obviously, as Archon Fung points out, ‘highly artifactual’ (2003: 338). Alan Irwin, in a similar vein, observes that public opinion is best conceived not simply as an input to public engagement processes, but also as its product (Irwin 2006). Such exercises construct a public at the same time as they report its views. One recent study has distinguished four types of publics constructed through formal participatory arrangements, which they identify with different practices and settings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construction of Public</th>
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<tr>
<td>General public</td>
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<td>Pure public</td>
<td>Citizen conferences, citizen juries, consensus conferences</td>
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<td>Affected public</td>
<td>The consultative panel</td>
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<td>Partisan public</td>
<td>Stakeholder consultations</td>
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(From Braun and Schultz 2010: 414)

The most common construction they find within minipublics is the ‘pure’ public. They note two key features of pure publics. First, ‘participants are conceptualised as citizens or laypeople, meaning that they are interpellated as individuals, not as members of an organisation or an interest group.’ And second ‘their main qualification is exactly their ignorance concerning the issue at stake and, at the same time, their amenability to education’ (Braun et al. 2010: 409). Similarly, Lezaun and Soneryd, in their analysis of the UK’s GM Nation debate on genetically modified crops and a Swedish ‘Transparency Forum for Mobile Phone Communication’, find a strong preference for citizens who do not already have firm opinions on the issue at hand, or even any awareness at all (Lezaun et al. 2007: 280). Alan Irwin, examining UK government reports on public engagement in science policy, as well as the UK’s GM Nation consultation, describes a preference for ‘innocent’ and ‘open minded’ publics, motivated by the fear of capture of

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7 This approach to the construction of publics can be supported by a reading of Dewey’s pragmatism (Brown 2009; Marres 2007).

8 They derive these types from a study of participatory governance innovations in biotechnology policy in the UK.
the process by those with fixed opinions of by members of advocacy and campaign
groups (Irwin 2006: 315). Kleinman et al. (2011) also identify a preference for ‘blank
slate’ citizens in the construction of publics in two consensus conferences on
nanotechnology in Wisconsin.

While most of the analyses mentioned here are descriptive analyses of existing public
engagement practices, there is often an undertone of scepticism about the appeal to
policymakers of ‘blank slate’ publics. Kleinman et al. argue against the aim of recruiting
what they call ‘blank slate’ participants for deliberative democratic forums. They claim
that people with prior interests and commitments should not be excluded in recruitment
because (i) they are still capable of good deliberation, given a good structure and
facilitation, and (ii) such prior interests are an important motivation to participate, without
which recruitment is really hard. While the participants in their two cohorts did not have
an instrumental interest in a particular policy recommendation, they observed that
neither individually nor collectively were their participants - in a broader sense of the
term - ‘blank slates’. While the first group had ‘no firm positions on nano-technology
among them, [they] did have deeply held views about citizen voice, the truthfulness of
The second group ‘entered the process viewing it as a learning opportunity and feeling
collectively positive about the prospects for the use of nano-technology in human
enhancement’ (ibid). The two groups roughly embody what Braun has called ‘techno-
optimist’ and ‘techno-sceptic’ profiles. They then found that the two groups arrived at
similar conclusions. They take from this the lesson that ‘a well-facilitated process in
which participants have prior perspectives (although not clear instrumental interests) on
the issues at stake might still produce a fair and reasonable outcome’ (Kleinman et al
2011: 235). So firstly, participants unavoidably bring ideological baggage to the event
that is relevant to the judgments they will reach, and secondly, in a well-facilitated
process, this makes little difference to the deliberative outcomes.

These arguments over the conceptions of publics and the selection of participants in
minipublics are clearly important. On the one hand, there are good democratic reasons
to try to include ‘hard to hear’ (Lezaun et al) publics in deliberative processes, such as
the over-representation of stakeholders and other motivated groups in public debates
on policy issues. And there are good reasons to exclude partisans, stakeholders and
indeed experts from such events, because their familiarity with the subject matter and
terms of debate - and their sharpened ‘skills of political combat’ - would be likely to
introduce a considerable communicative inequality into the room (Kadlec and Friedman
2007: 10). On the other hand, the construction of pure publics involves both inclusion
and exclusion. The general danger here is that, as Warren puts it, without mechanisms
of electoral accountability and often with unclear mandates, ‘elites have discretion in
how they define relevant constituents when they devise ‘public engagement
processes’ (2009: 9). Furthermore, the construction of publics involves more than just
the selection of participants, because it also implies making certain speaking positions
available and unavailable to participants in the discourse (see O’Doherty and Davidson
2010; Bora and Hausendorf 2006; Braun et al. 2010). Thus, when we first set up a pure
public, we face a range of problems that do not appear from the idealized view of
deliberation as ‘unconstrained communication,’ and we set ourselves the problem of practically negotiating the tensions involved in actively constituting a site for public deliberation.

**Doing Deliberation**

The problems faced by those who would conduct minipublics according to deliberative ideals come from the central tension of having to actively produce and manage a kind of discourse that is ideally conceived as an unconstrained exchange of reasons. It’s an important tension because there is great potential democratic value in creating new ways of including ‘hard to hear’ publics and enabling access to debates on esoteric and complex policy issues, yet it clearly presents dangers of capture by policy elites (Warren 2010). The rest of the paper specifies these concerns and frames them in terms of the decisions and conduct of those people who actually have to manage those tensions. In this section I will discuss some of the specific forms taken by this general tension, and outline some of the possible solutions and responses. There is a lot of analysis of those structural conditions (some of which I refer to below), and a great deal of analysis of internal deliberative quality, but in both these analyses the role of the facilitator receives scant attention. This is perhaps because the facilitator is both part of the structure of deliberation and part of the deliberation itself, playing a crucial and difficult role in both the conduct and conclusion of deliberation. I will point in the following to three groups of problems, choices and decisions that cannot be avoided in doing deliberation, and which appear as tensions felt in the role of the facilitator.

**Handling Expertise**

The handling of expertise is an institutional design choice that has particular relevance to minipublics concerned with issues of science and technology. Critical observers of public engagement exercises in the area of scientific governance have pointed to two areas of concern. The first is the role of technical experts in the deliberative process itself. On the one hand it is important to inform participants about the issues they will be discussing. This reflects the idea that a good deliberative exchange of reasons should not depend on falsehoods. And while we might imagine that a well-structured deliberation would weed out false claims put forward by one participant and recognized by all the others, when we are discussing an issue that is quite technical and in which none of the participants are experts, this internal constraint can’t be expected to work. Informing participants is thus an important aspect of minipublics on science and technology issues. This often involves the selection of expert witnesses who will be questioned by the group, and also the compilation of written materials. This process usually involves the facilitators acquiring a limited degree of expertise themselves. Jason Chilvers observes from interviews with professional facilitators that they report a level of independence that comes from grasping the subject matter, but not actually being an expert themselves in the sense of being commitmented to or interested in the practice in question. Their commitment is rather to the practices of deliberation and
public engagement themselves (Chilvers 2010). Facilitation, then, involves the challenge of introducing a level of informational equality and a constraint in terms of ruling out obvious falsehoods, without introducing deliberative actors who have way more epistemic authority than the other participants, and without having a vested interest.

The danger is that this involves a powerful framing role. As one of the participants in the RDX deliberation commented, ‘throughout this discussion I’ve been assuming that the science said that this was a dangerous thing, but that may not be the case.’ The fact that he questioned this implicit framing of the problem of RDX was a good indicator of deliberative quality, but it highlights the danger of implicitly framing the problem under discussion. One critic of ‘micro’ deliberation has highlighted this role as one of the key ‘oligarchic tendencies’ in deliberative democracy: ‘The institutional design [of the Danish Board of Technology’s consensus conference] allows the steering committee to manipulate the results by choosing issues and questions and to control the flow of information to the deliberators through the selection of readings and expert witnesses’ (Tucker 2008: 136). While this criticism may be overstated, the danger is real, and quite well recognized.9 Furthermore, there are a range of possible responses, which often have to do with structuring deliberative events,10 and thus not directly the concern of this paper.

The second problem of expertise in deliberation has to do with processual rather than substantive expertise, that is, the expertise of facilitators in conducting deliberations. While such expertise would seem highly desirable, some critics worry about the professionalization of facilitation.11 In several recent studies inspired by Foucaultian critiques of ‘governmentality’ we find public engagement exercises described as ‘technologies of community’ (Rose 1999: 188), ‘technologies of elicitation’ (Lezaun et al 2007), and ‘technologies of democracy’ (Laurent 2009). The claim, roughly, is that they are nascent technologies for producing new kinds of truth to serve the purposes of government. Nikolas Rose asserts that communities have become ‘subject to truth claims by expertise’ and thereby made ‘the object of political technologies for governing through community’ (Rose 1999: 189). His comment refers to processes ranging from opinion and attitude surveys through opinion polls and focus groups to citizen's juries and other participatory and deliberative exercises, which all, he says, bring certain kinds of publics into being and 'inject... them into the deliberations of authorities' (Rose 1999: 189). From this perspective the organisers of such events appear as ‘experts of community’, who 'invent, operate and market these techniques' to governments, political parties, advertisers and pressure groups (Rose 1999: 189). In a similar vein, Lezaun and Soneryd analyse ‘technologies of elicitation’, which are defined as ‘instruments,

9 See Amy Lang (2008) for an account of the related problem of agenda setting in deliberative minipublics - a crucial aspect of structure in which the facilitator plays a key role.

10 see MacLean and Burgess 2010 for an account of the influence of experts and established stakeholders in deliberative public engagement processes.

11 See Chilvers 2010 for an account of professionalization of deliberation in the UK
such as the discussion group, the counseling meeting, or the citizen jury, designed to generate lay views on the issues at hand, and feed those opinions into the policy process' (Lezaun et al. 2007: 279). They characterise these technologies as 'extractive industries', managed by 'social science and psychology professionals', with the aim of 'generat[ing] certified “public opinion” with the ultimate goal of increasing the productivity of government' (Lezaun et al. 2007: 280). These studies are valuable for the close empirical and often ethnographic attention that they pay to the actual process of conducting deliberation. Yet, despite the pejorative tone of their descriptions, they are coy about saying what exactly might be dangerous about the emergence of deliberative expertise. One could point to the potential conflict between the need of ‘discourse managers’ to satisfy their patrons - often governments or funding agencies - and the deliberative ideals which nominally guide their practice. However, while this danger may be plausible, I would interpret it as one more expression of a general tension involved in creating deliberation in the real world, a tension that ultimately has to be managed by practitioners themselves.

**Conducting Deliberation**

Facilitators, and specifically moderators, generate internal constraints on discourse. That is, they intervene in the course of discussion in order to make it a discourse in the sense of reflective speech that aims at mutual understanding, by such means as:

- Prompting comments from quiet participants;
- Articulating a position and reflecting it back for approval;
- Asking speakers to sum up or clarify points;
- Summarising the discussion;
- Asking who agrees or disagrees with a particular position;
- Curtailing excessive contributions;
- Bringing the discussion back to the given topic if necessary;
- Intervening in the case of conflict between participants.

Jennifer Stromer-Galley finds that approximately 30% of the moderator’s contribution to one deliberative event consisted in such ‘process talk’ (Stromer-Galley 2007: 13). It is important to note the value of material factors in this internal constraining of discussion. Comments and positions were written down by the facilitator on a flip-chart. Such techniques served to preserve and remind participants of key points in the discussion, so that they could comment on, amend and perhaps reject them. The small group facilitator would sometimes 'park' questions by writing them down on a white board, thereby curtailing discussion on them and moving on to other topics. The writing of questions, topics, positions and objections on flip charts, white boards or a computer screen was valuable as a technique for keeping a discussion moving.

**Norms of Facilitation**

How do facilitators in practice manage the tension between necessarily initiating and eliciting discourse, and yet not directing or dominating it? One of the very few studies of
facilitation in practice identifies ‘participant satisfaction’ and ‘group productivity’ as the key overarching standards by which facilitators and participants judge the success of deliberation. Furthermore, for the practitioners ‘maintaining a positive atmosphere and making progress are inextricably interconnected’ (Mansbridge et al. 2006: 1). These norms are interestingly different from the usual accounts of ideal deliberation in terms of rationality, consensus, freedom and equality. They ascribe this difference to the different aims of normative philosophers and deliberative practitioners. Ideal deliberative theory seeks criteria for legitimacy, which is to say, ‘criteria that help citizens decide the depth of their obligation to obey the law resulting from such a deliberation’. Facilitators, by contrast, ‘sought a kind of deliberation that best accomplished the tasks that groups had set themselves’ (Mansbridge et al. 2006: 2). These are processual norms, but they nonetheless involve the central tension between necessarily directing the process (keeping it moving towards its goal) and the theoretical value of non-directiveness and non-domination by the facilitators. This tension seems to be constitutive of organised deliberation as such.

The productive group atmosphere was described by one coder in their study as a good ‘foundation’ - that is, a condition conducive to the emergence of discourse. Impediments to speech are likely to be reduced, and comfort and warmth thus ‘facilitate... the free flow of frank speech, which is itself both intrinsically and instrumentally valuable’ (Mansbridge et al. 2006: 13). Humor also played a key role here, creating a ‘lightness’ that puts people at ease. Creating a positive atmosphere was associated with good deliberation because they thought it made participants feel ‘safe enough to be humble, change their minds, and speak freely’ (Mansbridge et al. 2006: 15). Making progress on the group’s task was the single largest category of coder responses to the tapes of deliberation. Setting ground rules and making explicit the goals of the group were widely considered essential. The facilitator-observers thought deliberation was good when the facilitators kept the group ‘focused on task’, and approved of interventions that ‘moved the process along’, thus emphasising the effective use of time. In this context, one coder used ‘flip-charting’ as a verb, indicating its use as a technique to keep discussion moving. ‘Posting the instructions, recording questions, and writing down statements on which people agreed were all noted as essential tasks for good deliberation’ (Mansbridge et al. 2006: 15-16). Thus, we can think of conversational techniques, structural features of the deliberation, and material features (such as flip-charts, computer screens, and so on), that play this role of generating foundations and keeping conversation moving. The value of ‘getting out of the way’ seems to operate in the understanding of norms of facilitation by facilitators. To quote from Mansbridge et al.s analysis again, ‘in the view of these coders, free flow seemed to work best when the facilitator took no visible part. In the best situation, participants needed “no prompting.”’ They continue: ‘for one coder, a deliberation improved when it began to include “exchanges between group members (as opposed to everything going back and forth with the front of the room)”’ (Mansbridge et al. 2006: 30).

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12 They present a set of explicit and implicit norms of deliberation acquired by induction from facilitators’ observations of other facilitators of small group deliberations on public issues.
Thus the earlier theoretical tension in deliberative theory about facilitation is reproduced again in a more subtle way: A great value is placed on the goal of group control and ‘ownership’ of the process, and facilitator interventions were viewed negatively when they were seen to imply facilitator ownership - ‘when one participant suggested adding a word to a question that the group was writing, then looked to the facilitator rather than the group for approval, that look, a coder noted, gave ownership of the process to the facilitator, not the members of the group’ (Mansbridge et al. 2006: 31) - yet full self-facilitation seems obviously impossible. A footnote elaborates on the ‘delicate role’ of the facilitator: ‘On all these matters, the facilitator had a delicate role. The facilitator had the responsibility for maintaining a modicum of equality and inclusion within the group, but at the same time could not intervene too much in the discussion to enforce that equality or inclusion. Many coders indicated that it was important for the members of the group to be in control of their mission, but at the same time almost unanimously held the facilitator responsible for keeping the mission of the group well focused. Giving the group control can mean taking the risks that the mission will become ill defined or even that the task of deciding the mission will dominate the deliberation. The facilitator has to bring out representative viewpoints while not imposing his or her own view as to what fair representation would be. The facilitator had constantly to walk a fine line, helping the group toward clarity and group progress while maintaining its ownership.’ (Mansbridge et al. 2006: 31).

**Concluding Deliberation**

The paradox of actively conducting a deliberation such that it seems to emerge naturally is nowhere more acutely felt than at those moments when deliberation comes to a conclusion. It is commonly assumed that for a minipublic to conclude its deliberation it must (i) reach a consensus, (ii) hold a vote, or (iii) simply stop deliberating without reaching any collective decision, recommendation or concluding statement.

The first option, reaching a substantive consensus, has often seemed the gold standard outcome of deliberation. Much of the early literature on deliberative democracy emphasised a Rousseauean ideal that deliberation would reveal an implicit ethical unity and thereby result in consensus. However, more recent work in deliberative theory shows the extent to which the aim of consensus, in the sense of everybody assenting to the same proposition for the same reasons, has been downplayed or even eliminated from accounts of deliberation in favour of moral pluralism and the achievement of mutual understanding (Mansbridge et al 2010; Bohman 1996; Gutmann and Thompson 1996). While, as I noted above, the purpose of the consensus requirement was principally to show how a deliberative theory of democracy could meet the demand for universal consent that is often thought essential for any account of political authority, the ideal of consensus has sometimes found itself the goal of deliberative minipublics. When the goal of a deliberative minipublic is to produce a consensus, however, it generates a strong temptation for facilitators to press for consensus, and to prioritise the achievement of substantive agreement over the exploration and development of points
of disagreement. If the goal of a deliberative minipublic is to reach a consensus there is a strong temptation for facilitators to move too quickly to a position that all can agree on. A more general version of this danger is described by Burgess in terms of ‘premature closure’ of deliberation. Premature closure involves ‘securing understanding or agreement on a policy choice or conclusion without exploring the conflicts in moral perspectives with a mind to finding common practical ground while acknowledging and respecting moral difference and disagreement’ (personal communication 2011; see also Burgess 2004 and Burgess et al. 2008: 285).

It is now widely recognised that rational consensus - convergence on the same position for the same reasons - is highly improbable on most political and policy issues. Expectations might then be scaled back to the task of clarifying and exploring different positions. Carolyn Hendriks (2006) captures this shift away from the ideal of consensus when she advocates institutional designs that expose participants to a ‘diverse discursive landscape’, in contrast to the ‘deliberative enclaves’ found both in the public sphere and in state institutions (Hendriks 2006: 502). The role for the facilitator, then, can be positively defined in terms of exposing deliberators to a maximal diversity of ‘discourses associated with an issue’ (Hendriks 2006: 502). This is analogous to the ‘preparatory’ role that Dodds and Thompson advocate for facilitators in bioethics deliberation, which involves cultivating a discursive ‘modus vivendi’ by exposing participants to a range of reasonable ethical positions (Dodds et al. 2006). On this view, the aim of reaching consensus is subordinated to the aim of cultivating the development of competing viewpoints. Indeed, this view regards consensus as a loss of information about difference (see Sunstein 2003). In the RDX event, when one participant proposed to present a small-group consensus to the large group, the facilitator intervened: ‘we don’t want to lose opinions... we’re trying to understand each others’ perspectives’. Indeed, it can be taken as a sign of good deliberation when participants resist consensus and provide reasons (Walmsley 2010). As Mansbridge et al. confirm, ‘the criterion of getting as many relevant and useful ideas as possible out of the group’ (2006: 36) was common to many of the facilitators they studied, and indicates the practical rejection of the aim of substantive consensus in favour of a form of pluralism.

While the generation of discursive diversity is now increasingly displacing the goal of consensus as an outcome of deliberative minipublics, it comes with at least two characteristic dangers. The first is that facilitators may be tempted to ‘sabotage consensus,’ where ‘a facilitator enhances a difference in articulations or introduces a critical perspective that alters a previous group decision without discussion of the merit of the reasons’ (Burgess 2011, personal communication). This bears on the more general related danger that the participants’ discourse will be encouraged to mirror the discursive diversity imagined in advance by the facilitators. As Mansbridge et al. note: ‘The coders seemed to have had in mind pre-existing “sides” that for fairness should be balanced in any deliberation on a particular subject, presumably sides set by prior instances of deliberation on that subject’ (Mansbridge et al. 2006: 33). And similarly, one study of deliberation in governmental bioethics suggested that there was a prior ordering of positions (Braun et al 2009; Moore 2010) by ‘ethics experts’ against which citizen contributions were effectively measured and filtered. The danger is that
deliberation may be judged successful or unsuccessful in part to the extent to which it produces a diversity of opinions that matches that arrived at in a prior discussion by the facilitators.

There is another important but more subtle way that the facilitator is unavoidably involved in bringing the process of deliberation to a conclusion. Typically, when a small group reaches a decision it is not by holding a vote. Rather, after the group has discussed an issue for a while, one member or another will advance a proposal that sums up what the proposer takes to be the opinion of the group from the preceding discussion. If the proposal is not rejected, then that proposal becomes the collective decision. This process, commonly observed in meetings, is what Philippe Urfalino calls decision-making by ‘apparent consensus,’ whereby ‘what follows on discussion is not a vote but the stating of a proposal or a series of proposals understood to correspond to what the consensus is. And consensus is attested to not by counting preferences but by noting that there has been no opposition to the last proposal made’ (Urfalino 2006: 7).

Urfalino finds this decision process in deliberations in expert committees, and even in assemblies or committees that use other decision rules, such as a vote. In the latter case, even though a deliberating group might reach a decision by majority or some other voting rule, the ‘second order’ decision to put the matter to a vote must be reached by apparent consensus. The section president (from his example of a committee charged with evaluating scientific research) might declare after a long discussion: ‘Dear colleagues, it seems to me we've debated long enough. I propose to put the matter to a vote’. If no one contested that invitation, it became the decision and we proceeded to vote’ (Urfalino 2006: 10). And if the length and value of discussion itself became an issue, the president would call a vote on whether to keep going with deliberation. This third order decision to vote on whether to have a vote was made by apparent consensus, and it is clear that that ‘to escape infinite regression and be able to decide collectively whether or not to move to a vote, the group needs a decision-making mode other than voting’ (10-11). This description of decision-making by apparent consensus seems to capture some central features of decision-making in a deliberative minipublic, in which the facilitator has something like the role of the chair of a committee. When we reflect on the processes by which a deliberation among a group of citizens is brought to a stop, it seems Urfalino is right that this must involve something like apparent consensus.

Thus, the other two ways to conclude a deliberation - voting, or just ending the deliberation with no collective decision or recommendation13 - each involve first stopping the deliberation. Here I want to emphasize the unavoidable role of the facilitator in the process of bringing a deliberation to a conclusion. One of the crucial points about making collective decisions by apparent consensus is that ‘silence means consent’ (Urfalino, 20). That is, the absence of objections to a consensus proposal is what marks its acceptance by the group. Cass Sunstein also recognizes the importance of silence in achieving agreement in a deliberating group. His ‘incompletely theorized

13 James Fishkin’s method of deliberative polling, for instance, produces not a collective position, but rather a representation of the distribution of considered opinions (Fishkin 1995).
agreements’ crucially involve everybody letting a collective position stand (not exercising their de facto veto power) while enlisting ‘silence, on certain basic questions, as a device for producing convergence despite disagreement, uncertainty, limits of time and capacity, and heterogeneity’ (Sunstein 1999: 124). And as with the ‘absence of dissent’ or ‘silent consensus’ that Urfalino invokes, Sunstein’s silence means that ‘what accounts for the outcome... is left unexplained’ (Sunstein 1999: 125). This brings a danger, from a deliberative point of view, that the reasons for silence may not be deliberatively sound. How can one tell the difference between an agreement generated by undesirable social pressures from one generated by the desirable social pressure of the ‘force of the better argument’? Given the central role of the facilitator in both formulating consensus proposals and identifying the points where a deliberation might be concluded, more attention needs to be paid to this process in the context of deliberative minipublics.

**Conclusion**

While ideal accounts of deliberation focus on the absence of coercion and constraint, this paper has focused on the delicate and difficult practical work of creating a kind of deliberation that approximates the ideal without exercising power in a way that undermines it. Rather than see this as a purely theoretical contradiction, I have framed this as a tension experienced in the organisation and conduct of deliberative minipublics and public engagement processes. The overarching point is that these tensions cannot ultimately be avoided, though careful structuring of the deliberative event may mitigate the worst of the problems. The tensions involved in ‘following from the front’ thus have to be managed, and we might conclude that a good facilitator should be conscious of these tensions while making the many decisions that go into the initiation, conduct and conclusion of deliberation. If we think of these concerns in terms of the central tension involved in ‘following from the front’, we can identify normative and empirical lines of inquiry that may lead us to a richer account of the democratic potentials and pitfalls involved in conducting deliberative minipublics. These tensions can be managed with more or less awareness and more or less mindfulness of the potential dangers, some of which I have elaborated here, and some of which will no doubt emerge from future research on this topic.

**References**


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