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Designing public–centric forms of public engagement with research

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At a time when engagement initiatives are taking on a growing variety of forms and the public is increasingly difficult to conceptualise, this pamphlet introduces a new approach that will support public-centric forms of engagement with research.

The pamphlet shows how you can be public-centric in your engagement practice by considering: how the public will be represented; the public roles an initiative will support; possibilities that will be offered for forms of public self-organisation.

In the first part of this pamphlet this approach is introduced in more detail. The second part outlines how it can enable you to be more contextually responsive, theoretically informed and systematic when it comes to analysing the public and designing and evaluating engagement activities.

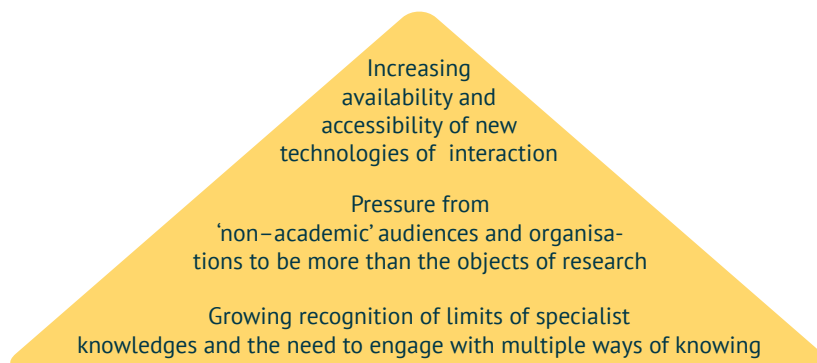
Conceptualising publics in three-dimensions

Across multiple domains – whether it’s the sciences or the arts, campaigning or journalism, media or government – new forms of public engagement and participation are being conceived of and experimented with as never before. In response to a wide variety of contemporary pressures, demands and developments there is now also a proliferation of public engagement with research initiatives (see fig 1) in Higher Education.

EXAMPLES OF TOP-DOWN PRESSURES FOR PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT WITH RESEARCH



TOP-DOWN AND BOTTOM-UP PRESSURES FOR PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT WITH ACADEMIC RESEARCH



EXAMPLES OF BOTTOM-UP DEMANDS FOR PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT WITH RESEARCH

Figure 1

Alongside the demands that now exist, researchers still face many barriers to engaging the public, including limited resources and the pressure to publish. Another important but less recognized barrier to effective engagement is that there is often vagueness and a lack of precision about what is meant by the public in public engagement today. The idea of the public can feel like it’s ubiquitous and retains a great deal of popular and academic currency; the public also has a

wide range of established meanings and constantly shifting set of contemporary associations. For these reasons the public is a challenging concept to comprehend but also a highly fertile idea for researchers to consider as part of their engagement work.

The research project from which this pamphlet derives investigated ideas and versions of the public linked to on-going developments in public engagement practice, both in Higher Education and elsewhere. The aim of this research was to assess the potential value of different perspectives on the public and how they might be utilized in contemporary settings of public engagement with academic research.

The research project had several strands. The first strand set out to make sense of how ‘publics’ were being explained in theory and in practice. We reviewed the theoretical literature. We also set up a website called Participation Now to showcase innovative examples of participatory engagement and to invite practitioners to share how they were eliciting the public. And we experimented with some new ways of evaluating engagement activities and prototyped a new framework for this. All of this work helped us – eventually – to identify three dimensions that seemed to capture key ways of making sense of the public in public engagement today.

Introducing the 3-dimensions



Dimension 1 – Targeting and representing publics

The first dimension of the public relates to how contemporary publics are targeted and represented. There is still a strong tendency amongst those who organise public engagement to see publics as real, empirical entities that somehow pre-exist ‘out there’ waiting to be targeted, represented and engaged.

Investigating the cross-section of 100 examples sampled from the Participation Now website it was possible to identify a variety of publics being targeted across these settings, ranging from small-scale local publics to particular segments of larger-scale national populations to transnational issue-based publics.

Different approaches to public representation were also came into view. Some engagement initiatives claimed they would help represent hitherto marginalized histories, voices or groups of the public. Others encouraged publics to represent themselves by creating or transforming pre-existing public spaces. Engagement initiatives were also set up with the aim of generating representations of public ‘consensus’.

When you publicly engage, you will be targeting and representing particular versions of the public and contemporary publics can potentially be targeted and represented in many different ways. Public segmentation techniques, rooted in the discipline of demography, offer certain ways of approaching these issues, but there are many other approaches too. If you are a researcher involved in designing a public engagement with research initiative it will be valuable for you to consider the possibilities and potential limitations of different approaches and techniques.



Dimension 2 – The role of publics in engagement initiatives

The second dimension of being a public relates to the roles that publics can potentially play in engagement initiatives.

In the wider academic literature on the topic of ‘the public sphere’ this issue of what role the public should play in public life has been subject of long-running and wide-ranging debate. Different views exist about what the capacities and virtues of publics are (or should be). There is also a lively debate in this literature about the nature of the conditions and forms of material support that are required for the public to play a productive role in public life.

Some of the disputes evident in this literature were visible in the analysis of the sample of 100 initiatives from the Participation Now collection. Particularly striking were distinctions between three types of roles that publics were offered.

The first of these was the role of the engaged-citizen, which was the role offered by the majority of the initiatives. The engaged-citizen is a figure assumed to be predisposed to the ideals of liberal democracy and participation in public life; is committed to contributing to public debates, taking an active role in their community, supporting existing public institutions or public projects, or doing voluntary work.

Another set of engagement initiatives offered people the role of activist. These initiatives were set up to appeal to people opposed to or marginalized from aspects of the status quo, and set out to challenge prevailing public discourses, imbalances of power or dominant social groups.

There were a third set of initiatives that offered people a creative role. Rather than working with a pre-existing public institution or focusing on opposing a particular public discourse, these initiatives utilized participatory arts activities to test out and 'pre-figure' new forms of social organization, knowledge generation or public collectivity.

There are many roles that publics can potentially be offered in settings of engagement with research. If you are a researcher involved in designing an engagement initiative it will be useful for you to reflect on the public roles you think could, or should, be supported in your setting. As part of your planning you should also try to imagine the effects that playing these public roles could have in your context and how likely people are to want to play these (or indeed other) roles.



Dimension 3 – Public self-organisation

The third dimension of the public relates to the public's capacity for forms of voluntary self-organisation. A number of scholars value this capacity as they link it with the public's potential for unpredictability and social innovation. Others also point to the social and political legitimacy that processes of public self-organisation can generate.

Rather than being seen as a real and pre-existing social formation, the public is viewed in these accounts as a socially constructed and emergent entity. The public convenes here through self-organising practices such as online interaction or forms of face-to-face assembly, supported by infrastructures such as the web or public spaces.

Investigating the 100 engagement initiatives from the Participation Now collection, patterns were identified in the ways that forms of self-organisation were offered across different contemporary settings. Some engagement initiatives looked to mediate forms of public self-organisation by encouraging people to actively contribute to the development of publicly accessible sources of information. Others were more specifically focused on providing infrastructures designed to support social interaction and the circulation of public discourse. A further set of engagement initiatives provided repertoires and formats people were invited to use collectively and elaborate on in autonomous and open-ended ways.

Rather than being merely shaped by predetermined targets or designs, this research illustrates how engagement initiatives can also support various types of voluntary public self-organisation. This can be valuable, as it can open out possibilities for the emergence of unforeseen interactions, decisions, innovations or even lead to the formation of new publics.

If you are a researcher planning an engagement initiative you should consider the forms of public self-organisation that could, or should, be supported in your setting. As part of the process of designing your engagement activity you should also reflect on how these forms of public self-organisation will be facilitated and managed and what will happen if public self-organisation generates unanticipated or even undesired effects.

Dimension 1

Targeting and representing publics

- Is the public self-selecting?
- Is the public segmented e.g. targeted according to particular needs, stakeholder types or motivations?
- Is the public addressed, targeted and represented in some other way?

- What capacities and desires is a public assumed to have?
- Will a public be invited into a relationship with an existing public organisation?
- Is the engagement initiative expected to contribute to local or national democratic public life or the wider public good?

Dimension 2

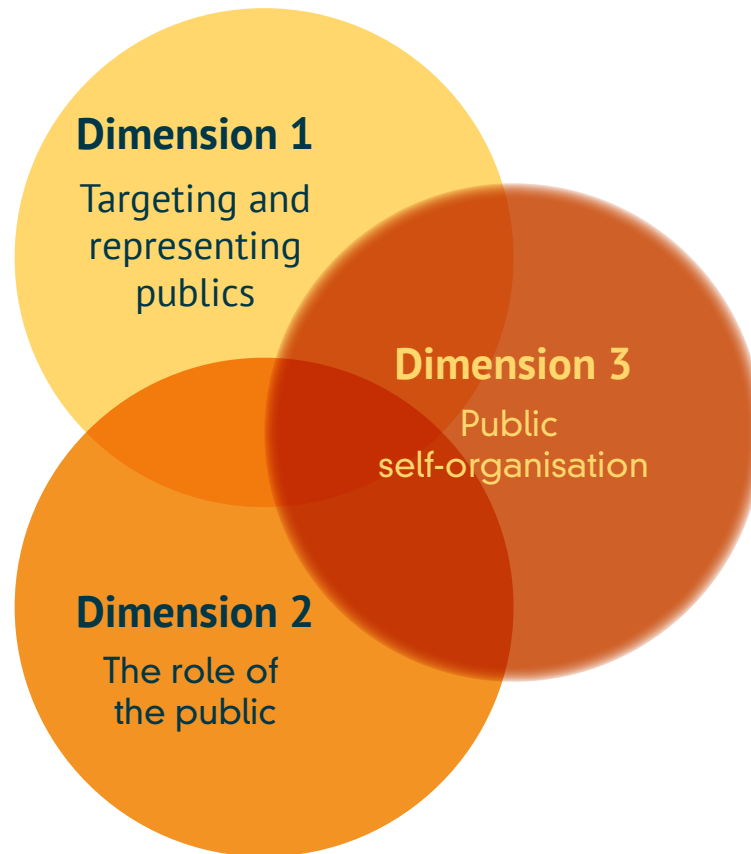
The role of the public

- What forms of voluntary public self-organisation are supported?
- Will it be possible for a research project to be influenced or shaped by the public interactions that take place?
- How will the engagement initiative negotiate the unpredictability that public self-organisation can generate?

Dimension 3

Public self-organisation

Figure 3



When it comes to assessing what the public in public engagement means today each of these three dimensions and associated ways of understanding the public are *differently useful*.

Looking at how publics are represented will allow you to reflect on something different than you will be able to consider by looking at how public roles are offered, or how forms of voluntary public self-organisation are supported.

Emerging from this research is therefore the idea that each of these three understandings could – and perhaps should – be used together. Doing so, we suggest, is likely to provide a richer view of the public than the view seen from any one of these perspectives in isolation.

The next section outlines ways this 3-dimensional (3-D) approach can be used in practice in contemporary conditions, to help public engagement with research initiatives be public-centric.

Using the 3-D approach to be public-centric in practice

When it comes to considering the versions of the public that will (and will not) be supported by a particular engagement initiative, there are choices you will inevitably need to make. To be public-centric these choices need to be negotiated and accounted for. The 3-D approach can support these choices in a variety of ways:

1. Planning and designing public-centric engagement activities

At the planning and design stage of your engagement activity there are at least three ways you can use the 3-D approach. Firstly, to think about how your initiative will be situated in the settings it will be working in; secondly, to reflect on your existing identifications and project-related commitments to the public; and, thirdly, to support an analysis of how your preferred engagement design compares to alternative designs.

In each case the 3-D approach calls on you to address the following questions:

- I. How will publics be targeted? How will publics be represented?
- II. What public roles will an engagement initiative support?
- III. What forms of public self-organisation will be offered?

By addressing these questions you can move through a process that prompts you to actively and systematically consider three key dimensions of what it means to be publicly engaged.

A long line of work already exists that encourages researchers to reflect on the specificities of their research situation, their social or public commitments and the assumptions that underpin their methodological choices. Used in conjunction with this work the questions above invite you to explore the versions of the public already being supported in your research setting. They can also be used to reflect on your own pre-existing identifications and project related commitments to particular versions of the public.

The 3-D approach can be valuable in one further way when you are planning your engagement initiative. It can help you identify how your ideas about how the public should be engaged may relate to those being supported elsewhere by other engagement initiatives.

In each of these three cases the 3-D approach will assist with the process of negotiating and making choices about the versions of the public that your engagement initiative will support.

To design public-centric forms of engagement these choices will need to be negotiated in critical, reflective and creative ways. Being public-centric also means being as open and transparent as possible about these design decisions and the thinking that underpins them.



Figure 4

2. Tracking, evaluating and accounting for public engagement in public-centric ways

The 3-D approach can also be useful when tracking and evaluating the public impacts of a given initiative and when it comes to generating a written account of an initiative's public effects.

In terms of tracking and evaluating engagements public effects, you can use the 3-D approach to assess whether the versions of the public an engagement initiative has been set up to support have been elicited in practice. It can also be used to analyse and account for any unanticipated public effects an engagement activity may have had.

To undertake these public-centric forms of assessment, a similar set of questions will need to be addressed to those already introduced above:

- I. Is there evidence that the publics originally targeted have been engaged in practice? What forms of public representation have been realised?
- II. What evidence is there that the public has played the roles that have been offered?
- III. What forms of public self-organisation emerged as a result of the engagement initiative? Are these similar or different from those that were originally planned for and anticipated?

The 3-D approach has been developed in response to some of the complications and challenges of the present. It provides a framework you can use to design, evaluate and report on your engagement work in public-centric ways. The approach is contextually responsive, theoretically informed and systematic. The 3-D approach is also pragmatic, as it isn't obscured by any one pre-existing set of ideas about of what a public is or should be.

In contemporary conditions where meanings and qualities of the public are multiple and in flux the 3-D approach is therefore a resource; a resource you can use to support critical reflection and creative practice and to open out new horizons for public engagement with research.

Further information

This pamphlet has outlined a selection of the ideas and findings generated by two interconnected research projects: the Open University-funded Creating Publics Project and the Creating Publics strand of the Open University's RCUK-funded Public Engagement with Research Catalyst. These projects were led by Dr. Nick Mahony between 2012-2015 in his role as Research Fellow at The Open University's Centre for Citizenship, Identities and Governance.

Between 2013-2014 and funded by the RCUK Public Engagement with Research Catalyst grant Dr. Hilde C. Stephansen (University of Westminster) was also deeply involved in the development of this work.

A detailed account of these projects is presented in the following set of papers:

Mahony, N. & Stephansen, H.C. (2015 in press) 'The frontiers of participatory public engagement' *European Journal of Cultural Studies*

Stephansen, H.C. & Mahony, N. (2015 forthcoming) 'Locating "the public" in public engagement: a framework for conceptualising and assessing engaged research' *Sociological Review*

Mahony, N. (2013) 'The work of public engagement' *Comunicazione sociali* (3) 349-358.

Alongside the important contribution made by Dr. Hilde C. Stephansen, this research would not have been possible without the encouragement, friendship and critical insight of Professors John Clarke, Janet Newman, Clive Barnett, Jef Huysmans and other colleagues based in the Faculty of Social Sciences at The Open University. Dr. Richard Holliman and the rest of The Open University's RCUK-funded Public Engagement with Research Catalyst also provided valuable support for this research.

The research drawn on in this pamphlet builds on a longer line of work undertaken under the auspices of The Publics Research Programme, located in the Open University's Centre for Citizenship, Identities and Governance. This research programme involved a larger and more diverse group of early career and more senior scholars in collaborative projects including: the 2008-2010 ESRC Seminar Series 'Emergent Publics'; a project supported by the NCCPE and ESRC about the theory and practice of public segmentation; the 'Publics then now and beyond' travelling seminar series; and the 2013-2014 ESRC International Networking and Partnership project 'Making publics across time and space'. Published outcomes of this work include:

Barnett, C. & Mahony, N. (2015 in press) 'Marketing technologies and the reconfiguration of public action' *Policy and Politics*

Mahony, N. & Clarke, J. 'Public crises, public futures' (2013) *Cultural Studies*, 27 (4) 933-54.

Barnett, C. and Mahony, N. (2012) 'Segmenting Publics' (2012) NCCPE/ESRC Research Synthesis Report.

Mahony, N., Newman, J. & Barnett, C. (Eds.) (2010) 'Rethinking the Public: innovations in research, theory and politics' Bristol, Policy Press.

[Further information connected to this research](#)

The Open University's Engaging Research blog:

<http://www.open.ac.uk/blogs/per>

Nick Mahony's Creating Publics blog:

<https://creatingpublics.wordpress.com/>

Participation Now:

<http://www.open.edu/openlearn/society/politics-policy-people/participation-now>

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