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Machineries for Making Publics

Inscribing and De-scribing Publics in Public Engagement¹

Ulrike Felt, Maximilian Fochler

This paper investigates the dynamic and performative construction of publics in public engagement exercises. In this investigation, we, on the one hand, analyze how public engagement settings as political machineries frame particular kinds of roles and identities for the participating publics in relation to 'the public at large'. On the other hand, we study how the participating citizens appropriate, resist and transform these roles and identities, and how they construct themselves and the participating group in relation to wider publics. The empirical basis of our argument is a discussion of four different kinds of participation events in Austria. Building on these observations we develop conclusions about the public up-take of public participation in technoscience and the role of public engagement in current technological cultures.

In contemporary democracies public participation is increasingly imagined and/or implemented as a central element in the governance of technoscientific development. This 'participatory turn' has been accompanied by, and in part also stimulated, new ways of re-enacting science/society relationships, nourishing the expectation that citizen involvement will lead to a broader support of technoscientific developments. Generally, the debate around public participation is characterised by a high density of promissory elements, which position participation as a remedy that can 'repair' science-society relations which are perceived as damaged. In this, the rhetorical performance of democratisation often seems to receive more attention than a reflection on the actual ways and means to arrive at the expected opening of debates concerning scientific and technological development (Irwin, 2006).

Over past years literature analysing and eventually critiquing this 'participatory turn' has been growing. A central tenet of the critical approaches is that participation

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exercises do not simply invite citizens and give voice to wider segments of society, and thus broaden democratic debate. Rather they were increasingly considered to be political machines (Barry, 2001), which construct, engineer or perform publics (e.g. Felt, Wynne et al., 2007; Irwin, 2001; Lezaun and Soneryd, 2007; Michael, 2009; Braun and Schultz, 2010). These criticisms point to an interesting paradox. While public participation was hailed for breaking from the well-entrenched linear model of science communication and its embedded values, it seems to fall in a similar trap. In a kind of linear model of participation “experts of community” (Rose, 1999), who claim to hold the expertise on how to create forums that give voice to publics, end up designing, operating and marketing techniques of citizen participation. Members of these publics, in turn, are expected to readily “do being a citizen” (Michael, 2009), to occupy the space offered and inhabit it according to pre-established rules.

Our argument in this paper is that even in the more critical debates about public engagement so far too much attention has been paid to the outcome of engagement exercises as well as to how publics are created and performed in their design. Comparatively little attention has been devoted to the question how participants actually inhabit and appropriate these discursive spaces ‘offered’ to them. Building on the metaphor of participation as a kind of political machinery, and of single designs as distinct machines for making publics, we will employ an approach from technology studies to arrive at a more symmetric analysis. In this context, Akrich (1992) has called for not only an analysis of how designers imagine and try to frame an object’s context of use and its users’ behaviour by inscribing their vision of the world in the artefact’s design, thus pre-scribing certain user roles and forms of use, but also how actual users divert from and subvert the designers’ vision. While the design of a technical object, or in our case of a technology of participation, “like a film script [...] defines a framework of action together with the actors and the space in which they are supposed to act” (208), users and participants might have very different ideas about the technology, the world inscribed in it, and their attributed roles. They might struggle with, attempt to shift, or to even reject the script – hence de-scribing the technology. Taking up Akrich’s argument, we propose that in order to fully grasp the performativity of participation events, we methodologically need to consider both their design and their actual uptake.

In this paper, we, on the one hand, analyze how public engagement settings as political machineries frame or pre-scribe particular kinds of roles and identities for the participating publics in relation to ‘the public at large’. On the other hand, we study how the participating citizens appropriate and transform these roles and identities, and how they construct themselves and the participating group in relation to wider publics.

We will start our argument by engaging with three major strands of STS debate: one debating the participatory turn, the second addressing the conceptualisation of publics, and a third discussing the role of specific techno-political cultures in framing citizenship. In the main part of the paper, we will present and analyse four Austrian participation events. Building on this we develop conclusions on the public up-take of public participation in technoscience and the role of public engagement in current techno-political cultures.

The Participatory Turn – Turning to which Publics?

Particularly in political discourse the ‘participatory turn’ is hailed as a key element of a new mode of governing science-society relations. In this, ‘governance’ is seen as a new way of arriving at collectively binding decisions, which does not imply top-down hierarchical relations between government and other societal actors, but rather involves stakeholders/citizens in more network-like constellations. Particularly in policy rhetoric in the European context, ‘the public’ or ‘society’, mostly in this rather general form, are seen as key actors in these processes. Here, the spectres of public resistance against technoscience (e.g. agricultural biotechnology) are lurking in the discursive background.

Increasingly, critical contributions in STS raise serious caveats against taking this rhetoric of a democratisation of science and technology policy at face value. First, several authors (e.g. Wynne, 2008; Irwin, 2006) have pointed to the hidden choreographies of what is put up for debate in these contexts, and what is not. Often, basic elements of a deficit-model approach remain alive in the rhetoric of dialogue, where dialogue is only seen as a different means to avoid societal dissent on techno-scientific issues believed to be of high economic potential. In this context, dialogue and participation may also be read as just another way of educating and pacifying unruly publics resistant to top-down information. Authors such as Goven (2006) have scrutinised the role of the public in these new constellations of governance on a more general level. In her argument, participation can also be read as a neoliberal concept, because it reduces the role of the general public from the final arbiter of democratic politics to a “mini-public” (Goodin and Dryzek, 2006) as just another stakeholder among many others. Hence the seemingly more inclusive involvement of the public might lead to a symbolic de-valuation of the public’s role in governance on a broader scale.

This points to a crucial question about the identities of the publics to be involved in designing and attending participation exercises, and the publics excluded from them. Wynne (2008) distinguishes between invited and un-invited forms of participation. He points to the hegemonic propensity to silence and exclude other non-invited publics from the governance process by focussing on invited publics as the most authoritative and ‘true’ representation of public interests. Further, he argues that the relation of invited and uninvited publics to expert and political authority are different:

“Invited public involvement nearly always imposes a frame which already implicitly imposes normative commitments—an implicit politics—as to what is salient and what is not salient, and thus what kinds of knowledge are salient and not salient [...]. Uninvited forms of public engagement are usually about challenging just these unacknowledged normativities.” (Wynne, 2008: 107)

However, the importance of these arguments notwithstanding, this binary distinction is in danger of glossing over much of the complexity involved in the construction of publics, both invited and uninvited – and in particular the hermeneutical processes at work as e.g. invited publics construct themselves or are constructed in relation to and in boundary work against uninvited ones.

Conceptualising Publics

It is beyond the scope of this paper to address the role of publics in technoscientific societies in a broader manner. Our interest here focuses on the past decades and the shift in the way publics are 'invited' into the political arena via a wide spectrum of engagement exercises. After a first wave of studies on participatory settings as such and the broader models of governance they were part of, over the past years scholars have reflected on how these exercises of public engagement and participation are construction sites for publics and forms of citizenship. These analyses show

"how deeply encoded different constructions of the public are in these participatory events, highlighting that they are never simply an arena in which interactive deliberation takes place, but they perform a certain vision of the public without acknowledging that they are doing this." (Felt, Wynne et al., 2007: 57)

Here, we would like to draw particular attention to three lines of reflection. The first addresses why mini-publics are formed, how their relation to democratic decision-making is constructed and what this means for those participating in engagement exercises. As Goodin and Dryzek (2006) point out the construction of these publics as representative of some broader citizenry is a crucial issue in this. Yet representation in this context is by no means straight-forwardly constructed through any statistical claim, but generally points at some process of assembling a "diversity of social characteristics and plurality of initial points of view in the larger society." (op.cit.: 221) In that sense, the design of the engagements also has to be understood as an implicit classification machinery for "making up people" (Hacking, 1986), and publics. This opens up a challenge for policy makers to address who speaks in the name of whom, but also poses questions to the participants themselves, the position they speak from and the responsibility they carry for the outcome.

A second line of reflection deals with the relation of issues at stake and the (self-)construction of publics. We could use Marres' rule: "no issue, no politics, no public" (Marres, 2005) and turn our attention to what qualifies as a public issue, when and where such issue formation takes place and how this opens-up or closes-down the potential formation of publics to engage with it. If we read the single elements of Marres' proposal as a causal chain, we could argue that engagement exercises often start with a strong pre-definition of issues and that hence little room is left for the self-constitution of a public. This again might be seen as a severe limitation on the stakes and political issues up for deliberation in the framework of an event. If we however interpret Marres' proposal from a co-productionist (Jasanoff, 2004) perspective our attention needs to shift to participatory exercises as sites where publics, issues and indeed politics are co-produced.

Finally, it is useful to look at a third strand of analysis where we will reference work by Michael (2009) in order to address what he calls "doing being a public". He analyses the ways in which publics perform themselves in relation to the issue at stake and its technoscientific dimensions, to the institutional actors, and to their relation to other publics. These active constructions of what being a member of a public might mean is then not only dependent on the engagement design, but also on the cultural and social resources participants bring with them. Michael points out that participants enact 'publics in general' and 'publics in particular' to construct their own position. Drawing attention to the construction of differentiated publics-in-particular Michael

addresses the struggle over what is a reasonable concern and for whom, and how legitimacy is attributed to certain formations and not to others. While the way Michael uses these distinctions provides a general framework, he fails to consider the actual dynamics in which they play out in a concrete settings. Studying these processes seems of crucial importance in our perspective, particularly to understand which rhetorical constructs of publics (in general or particular) are accepted in a given setting, and for which cultural or social reasons.

Publics, Citizenship and Political and Technological Culture

While considerable parts of the literature have spent little room reflecting how cultural context inflects public participation, the argument that designs are not standardized packages that travel easily has gained force in recent critical writing (Felt, 2003). Analysing the relation of consensus conferences to the respective political context in three countries Dryzek and Tucker (2008) suggest that the specific relation of the design to the actual institutional political process matters, and that the role attributed to the respective mini-public is closely connected to the existing political culture – in particular to how inclusive it is toward citizen opinion.

The work of Sheila Jasanoff (2005) is of crucial importance for situating these findings in a broader perspective on science governance. Dryzek and Tucker's (2008) findings go along with the concept of civic epistemologies she uses to account for the "tacit knowledge-ways through which [societies] assess the rationality and robustness of claims that seek to order their lives" (Jasanoff, 2005: 255). This points to an often-overlooked facet of contemporary political culture: the way different voices and claims to knowledge are weighed within a particular cultural context. In Denmark for example, as Horst and Irwin argue (2010), the particular "folkelig" tradition of defining and talking about the common good implies a certain basic notion of scepticism to elite expert argumentation. Hence their argument also implies that close attention needs to be paid to how travelling engagement designs hybridize with a particular political cultural context.

However, the political is not the only cultural dimension relevant to our argument in this paper. In her work on the inextricable relation of national identity and nuclear power in France, Hecht (2001) points to cultural relations to (particular) technologies as an important factor also inflecting the way science is governed. In her concept of "techno-political regimes", grasping how societal values, institutional political processes, and notions of technological progress are intertwined is of crucial importance for understanding science/society relations within a particular national context. Also recent comparative focus-group work (Felt et al., 2010) has shown that specific technological fields such as genetic testing and the challenges they pose are discussed very differently in different cultural contexts, and that these specificities also encompass very different roles attributed to the public.

While these studies show the importance of techno-political context, work on public engagement events hardly ever succeeds in analysing how cultural factors come into play in the execution of the design. Our argument is that paying close attention to how publics construct themselves and are constructed in the framework of these events is one of the most promising inroads to studying precisely these interactions between design and cultural context.

Material and Methods

Our argument in this paper is built on four public engagement events conducted in Austria: the “discourse day on genetic diagnosis” (2002), the citizen conference on genetic data (2003), a series of round tables on the topic of genomic research into lipid associated disorders (2004/2005), and focus groups on organ transplantation and genetic testing (2005).

Our selection of these events is guided by two sets of considerations. First, our aim is to cover a range of different formats of public engagement. Second, we chose events of which we had detailed empirical knowledge and data concerning the actual process and conduct of the engagement. This knowledge of the actual deliberation processes is essential in order to allow for a fine-grained analysis of the formation of publics within a particular setting.

This selection covers a good sample of the Austrian context, for the period 2002 to 2005, but also in more general terms. On the national level, the discourse day and the citizen conference actually have been the first efforts to stage public engagement with science and technology.² The selection further covers a more long-term engagement exercise involving both scientists and citizens as well as focus groups on technoscientific issues, which are probably the most frequent tool for organising debates. It seems feasible to argue that the events addressed in this paper are a good representation of the public engagement landscape in Austria in the first decade of the 21st century. However, our aim in this text is not to deliver a detailed description of ‘public engagement in Austria’. Rather, we will use the Austrian context as a laboratory for exploring the (self)articulation of publics in public engagement exercises in a specific techno-political culture. In the following, we will give a brief description of each event, its context, and the data relevant to our discussion.

The ‘discourse day’ on genetic diagnosis was an event initiated by the Austrian genome research program GEN-AU, with the explicit aim to initiate public debate on social and ethical issues connected to the topic of genomics. At this time, when compared to other countries, there had been rather little public debate on these issues in Austria at that time. The ‘discourse day’ took place on a weekday in October 2002, and was in principle open to any interested member of the public. The event did not involve any formal selection of a citizen group, but rather attempted to attract interested citizens and stakeholders to foster an open discussion. During the event, the main communication format used was that of a panel discussion between experts/stakeholders and the audience. There was no formal output of the day in the form of a concluding statement. Within our sample, the discourse day is an interesting example of a public event which featured little emphasis on output and no formal procedures of selecting the participating public. The authors did the evaluation of the event commissioned by the organizing research programme, which means that we did participant observation of the event, as well as quantitative and qualitative interviews with participants both during and after the event.³

² Up to this day, a second discourse day has been conducted in 2004, and a second citizen conference on energy politics in 2007, both of which we will not discuss here.

³ More concretely, our observations build on an analysis of structured observation protocols of the event, audio- and video recordings, 51 ten minute long structured interviews with participants at the event, 12 longer qualitative interviews with participants after the event, as well as two focus

The citizen conference on genetic data took place in June 2003. It was organised by a public relations company, as a 'dialogue-oriented science communication format' in the framework of a larger public campaign on innovation awareness for the Austrian council for scientific and technological development. In the conceptualisation of the actual event, the public relations company was supported by a group of social scientists, science communication experts and life-scientists. The topic of genetic data was chosen because the discourse day on genetic diagnosis had shown that this particular issue was not very present in the public debate, while the advising experts saw it as crucial. The event was conducted in the well-known format of citizen conferences. For this event, we will draw on our own experience as invited social science expert in the early conceptualisation process and participant observer of the public event respectively, as well as on the thorough evaluation done by Bogner (2004).

The Round Tables were an experimental public engagement project funded within the first ELSA-call of the Austrian genome research program. Adapting a design developed in the Swiss context, our idea was to build an engagement space which would allow for long-term interaction between citizens and a group of scientists working on a specific topic. We chose the concrete case of genomics of lipid-associated disorders which would also allow us to address the wider issue of obesity. A group of citizens recruited via a nation-wide call for participants met with researchers affiliated with one specific project consortium for six whole Saturdays to discuss their research and its social and ethical implications. Interviews were done with all participants before and after these Round Tables, and the citizens additionally met a seventh time without the scientists to reflect the discussion process as well as to debate the limits and possibilities of public engagement exercises. The Round Table design is strongly process-oriented, which means that citizens had considerable influence on the topics discussed and the form of the discussion. They also were given the choice to produce any kind of final statement – which they declined for reasons we will discuss below. For analysing this event, we will draw on our data, which consists of transcripts of all Round Tables and interviews⁴.

As a fourth context of engagement, we are including focus groups, which are perhaps the most commonly used method of assembling mini-publics on issues of science and technology. Here, we are drawing on focus groups we have conducted in 2005 in the framework of a comparative European research project "Challenges of Biomedicine". Concretely, two medical technologies, genetic testing and organ transplantation, were discussed in separate focus groups, three on genetic testing and two on organ transplantation. For each topic there was one group of participants who self-reported to be affected by the issue discussed, and one or two groups with 'non-affected' participants. Particular emphasis was put on recruiting different religious perspectives and members of migrant communities. The groups were two hours each,

groups with participants which were also conducted after the event. A comprehensive German analysis of this data can be downloaded from http://sciencestudies.univie.ac.at/fileadmin/user_upload/dep_sciencestudies/pdf_files/evaluierung_diskurstag.pdf

⁴ In detail, our analysis builds on the transcripts of six whole-day Round-Table discussions between citizens and scientists, one reflection Round Table of the citizens without the scientists, as well as 14 semi-structured qualitative interviews with the citizens before and 14 similar interviews after the series of Round Table debates.

and were comprised of both a discussion of ethical and social implications of the respective technologies, as well as a discussion on the possibilities and limits of public engagement in the respective field. Both because participants reflected on issues of public engagement and governance, and because they dealt with topics similar to the other events, these particular focus groups seem a good case of comparison to the other methods more formally labelled 'public engagement'.

Our analysis in this paper builds on and continues published work on the single projects. Where appropriate in our empirical section, we will refer the reader to available publications, which allow more detailed empirical insights into the arguments presented in this paper.

The (Self)construction of Publics in the Different Engagement Settings

Our empirical analysis will proceed in five steps, each of which touches upon a crucial aspect of citizens' (self-)construction in the respective design. First, we will discuss the selection and self-selection processes. Second, we will analyse how designers and participants made sense of the event in a broader (political) context. Third, we will sketch the relation of the objects and topics discussed to the (self-)construction of publics and citizenship. Fourth, we will address how temporalities, both of the design itself and the context it takes place in, influence these issues. Fifth, we will discuss how the respective mini-publics in the four cases constituted themselves socially and rhetorically in relation to the issues raised in the prior sections.

Being Selected, Selecting Oneself – Constructing the Mini-publics of Public Engagement

The first step in the construction of a mini-public for any public engagement exercise entails a call for participants, and a self-selection of the members of the public who are contacted based on the implicit participant role sketched in the call. Whether approached by a polling company as part of a random sample as was the case for the citizen conference, or reacting to an open call for participants made via flyers and bulk mail as in the case of the focus groups or the Round Tables, or even by simply showing up at an event such as the discourse day – deciding to declare one's readiness to take part implies the ability to position oneself as a citizen able to contribute to the respective participation design and topic. This again requires the ability to build a sense-making story which connects one's own life-world to a role in the framework of a process that most prospective participants probably had neither heard of nor thought about. It seems a plausible hypothesis that the resources to do so are not distributed evenly in a society, and that they are much more likely to be found with members of cultural elites. For all four discussed designs, the response as a result of these self-selection processes showed a very strong bias towards people with high formal education and belonging to the cultural Austrian majority (i.e. people with migrant backgrounds are hardly found either in the response or the final group) – regardless of whether explicit efforts were made to reduce this bias (as in the case of the focus groups) or whether this effect was augmented by an elitist mode of invitation (as in

the case of the discourse day whose invitation closely resembled a scientific conference call).

The formal selection of participants out of the respondents then mostly sought to 'correct' this bias by assembling a group featuring heterogeneous positions from different sectors of society. In all of the cases also some kind of check of 'basic discursive competences' took place, which, particularly for more long-term settings, was seen as crucial to ensure a balanced discussion dynamic. Evidently such rituals presuppose a specific set of citizenly competences, such as articulateness and the aforementioned ability to construct a meaningful relation to the design.

Our hypothesis is that all of this strongly affects the final participants' self-perception as a group 'in the design' in relation to other assumed publics 'out there'. In both of the designs we organised, the selected participants showed intense interest in why it was them who had been selected, and out of how many applicants they had been chosen. This interest was connected to a debate seeking to position those present in relation to an assumed general public 'out there', which silently was equated with those who had not applied. In the focus groups for example, this general public was often sketched as disinterested in the matters discussed. This was seen as the reason for their failure to apply and as a problem for broader forms of public participation. After having learnt that the organisers had received less than one hundred responses out of a total 15.000 flyers sent out in the Vienna region, a participant for example concluded that "this shows that relatively few citizens want to take responsibility and be politically mature". In a similar vein, in another group a senior citizen stated that "you first have to get people out of the soccer stadiums and discotheques to discuss [the ethics of organ transplantation]", also alluding that a broader public lacks interest in contributing to a political debate on these issues, as opposed to those present around the table. In doing boundary work against this disinterested general public, the citizen groups constructed an ambivalent relation between themselves as the interested mini-public and the general public at large. Thus they strongly constructed themselves as an interested elite not representative of this public at large, while simultaneously they partially were framed by the design and at times also framed themselves in the discussion as mirroring the interests, sentiments and concerns of an imagined general public.

Making Sense of and Situating an Engagement Exercise

A crucial but seldom analysed work both designers and participants have to do in participation events is to make sense of the design in a wider context, its relation to addressees such as the public, and its connection to the political machine at large. All our examples except the focus groups were seen as a historic first in the Austrian context by both the organisers and the participants, and were often implicitly or explicitly labelled as experiments. This also implies that the citizens could not draw on any other role models, tradition or prior experiences other than those from other national contexts related to them by the organisers. For instance, in the context of the citizen conference the organisers would stress that this design had been successfully implemented in many other national contexts, and that Austria would be lagging behind in this broader democratic trend. Contrary to the spirit with which they were probably intended, the participants did not see these remarks as an encouragement, but rather implicitly expressed the feeling of being burdened to 'prove' that Austrian citizens

actually are 'capable' of successfully conducting this engagement exercise. This had important consequences for the dynamics of both the design and its particular construction of publics, as citizens strongly focussed on producing a consensual final statement. Because they did not want to endanger the successful completion of the design, the citizen group excluded possibly more controversial topics such as pre-implantation genetic diagnosis during the issue definition process,

Participants in all events frequently voiced that they were unclear what the precise context and intent of the engagement exercise would be. They, at a certain stage, scrutinised the 'intent' of the organisers to assemble such a mini-public, and almost always suggested that there would be some kind of hidden agenda at work. In the context of the discourse day, a number of actors would voice the suspicion that the organising research funder would not be truly interested in stimulating public discourse, but in surveying and assessing potential critical voices – "probing the market to prepare future strategies", as one participant expressed it. Similar attributions were made in the focus groups, in which the broader public was often portrayed as likely to be instrumentalized by powerful but opaque corporate or political interests. Hence, their vision of the context of the engagement corresponded to their broader political vision. (Felt et al., 2008)

The perceived experimental character of all the events also made it difficult for participants to imagine their relation to broader political processes and the political system. In the context of the Round Tables, participants, given the choice, opted not to produce a final statement on the grounds that they were unclear about the actual actors and processes governing the respective area of genomics, and hence did not know whom to meaningfully address their concerns (Felt and Fochler, 2008). As one citizen expressed it in the concluding Round Table in relation to the question whether certain forms of anti-obesity medication with controversial societal effects will be developed from the project being discussed:

"Somehow there was no one who would have said it's our fault that this is being done, or we are the ones to prevent that this will be done. But everyone pointed to someone else. And for me actually the answer is that in essence we are unable to prevent such a development."

These dynamics resulted in a strong inward orientation of group processes in virtually all cases. Even those attending the public discourse day thought of themselves as members of a specific sub-public concerned with the issue of genetic diagnosis, who had very little or no connection to the 'general public' at large. Also the participants of the other events hardly ever conceptualised the general public or any other sub-public as potential addressees they wanted to relate to. This perception was reinforced by the fact that none of the discussed events attracted any broader media attention – even the 'public' parts of the citizen conference were conducted in front of a very small and exclusive audience of involved or interested professionals such as the authors of this paper. This inward orientation and the general lack of clarity concerning the relation of the invited publics to both the political sphere and the public at large could be interpreted as an important factor in accounting for each group's particular construction as mini-publics.

Constructing Relationships to Objects and Issues

Public debates (or lack of debate) about the issues discussed in the engagement exercises are a further crucial factor for the construction of mini-publics. Because generally there is little critical public discussion on issues of science and technology in Austria, in a number of the discussed cases participants were previously unaware of or only vaguely familiar with the topics they were expected to discuss. Hence, they had very little prior experiences to draw on or previous social positions to assume.⁵ Both for the discourse day and the citizen conference, the respective topics were actually chosen because the organisers intended to raise broader public debate on an issue. Hence, implicitly the public was constructed as needing to construct a relation to a specific topic, a topic that was staged as being on the agenda in other (national) contexts. Accordingly, the participants in the citizen conference attempted to 'map' and 'comprehend' experts' framing of a topic much more than trying to openly shape the issue in relation to their own knowledge and life world experiences. Accordingly, the public part of the conference's communication pattern was far better described by 'citizen asks, expert answers' than as a critical dialogue. Also in writing the final statement, citizens very strongly focussed on gathering facts that would quasi-automatically lead to certain normative conclusions. Thus indirectly the very reason for performing a citizen conference was thwarted.

If the participants perceive that the broader public has a pre-existing relation to a specific topic, this might shape their perception of the public's influence in the political processes related to the issue. This in turn affects their self-perception and positioning within an engagement design. In the focus groups on organ transplantation, most participants were unaware of the actual legal situation in Austria rendering anyone who has not formally objected a potential organ donor. After 'discovering' this, most participants immediately concluded that their own lack of knowledge would point to a general deliberate exclusion of the public from the governance of and debate over this issue. This policy was quickly placed back within the context of maximising donation rates. Still, they would conceptualise the public as at least a potentially influential actor in the governance of the issue at hand, because it could protest against this national regulation at any time if it became aware of it. In the focus groups around genetic testing however, the public was seen as a powerless and malleable actor mostly manipulated by global actors and interests. One citizen expressed this as follows, constructing himself as representative of broader publics:

„The information that I am provided with shapes my opinion, because [...] I am not an expert. And therefore I am incredibly easily manipulated ... Hence if we allow for a broad public to have a say, and then they may be manipulated again with a lot of money ... – it is actually wasted money.“

The difference between these two debates and their diverging constructions of the public are linked to the framing of the topic as a national vs. a global issue. This again is both related to the materiality of the objects to be governed, as well as to the ideas that participants hold about innovation in that particular sector. While organ transplantation was seen as linked to the governance of the local procurement and transfer of organs as tangible material objects, genetic testing was linked to fluid flows

⁵ For the case of the focus groups we have discussed this in detail in comparison to focus groups in other national contexts (Felt et al. 2010)

of data that may not be governed – according to the participants– in national frameworks. Hence, focus group participants conceptualised publics and, in turn, themselves as much less influential in the latter case than in the former (Felt et al., 2008).

Moments of Change and Windows of Opportunity – Temporalities

Temporalities inflected the (self-)construction of (mini)publics on three levels: first, concerning the temporal structure of the design itself, second concerning the perceived temporality of its context, and third concerning the assumed position of the discussed topic or techno-scientific object in the innovation stream.

The temporality of the engagement exercise itself has two crucial dimensions. Its overall length influences the degree of reflexive deliberation possible, as well as if and how participants constitute and see themselves as a collective. In the focus groups, time for interaction was so short that the participants did not even try to develop any identity as a group, and hence did not even assume that they as a group could have a position, which could be taken to be in any relation to that of the Austrian public. They mostly voiced, exchanged and criticised their individual positions, but did not attempt to synthesize or even relate these positions so as to arrive at any common group position. In settings where group formation is possible (e.g. the Round Tables), a second dimension becomes crucial: whether the available time is seen as scarce resource and thus to be devoted to working towards a clearly defined output, or whether it is seen as time available for reflection without having to close down issues to arrive at a product. The participants of the citizen conference were so clearly devoted to working towards a specific aim that they even perceived dissent and debate on ethical issues as ineffective use of their time, as opposed to ‘gathering facts’ to be used in the final statement.

On a second level, the perceived speed of change of the institutional context in which the deliberation takes place strongly shapes participants’ assessments of their opportunity to impact on actual governance processes. Particularly for genomics, in each focus group as well as at the Round Tables, participants would refer to the field as well as to the constellation of actors giving shape to it as changing at rapid speed – for example as a “machine in motion, in which there are incredibly many gears in motion. To stop that again, that is pretty difficult or impossible.” Hence, they saw their own role in this context as particularly problematic, on the one hand because they were uncertain which precise context their statements would refer to, and on the other hand because they argued that such fluid processes would require continuous and accompanying forms of public engagement rather than for one statement issued at a particular moment in the innovation process.

Finally, the stage that an issue or project was at in the innovation process generally had considerable influence on participants’ conceptualisation of the design and their role in it. At the Round Tables for example, which seem to be the engagement exercise situated most upstream as it was related to a (basic) research project, participants would ponder different models of innovation ranging from linear to more network oriented notions in order to construct arguments about windows of opportunity where governance might set in. Yet they found it very hard to develop a concrete idea of the role of the public in a framework of upstream governance, especially as they were lacking a concrete ‘object’ – such as genetic test or a given set of genetic data –

and specific related problems to talk about. Hence, they discursively 'invented' a product they named the 'fat pill', to which they related when thinking about possible problems. While this allowed them to discuss potential societal implications of the research debated, they did not manage to sketch a clear role for any public in such innovation processes – they were lacking cultural reference points and models of thought to imagine this (Felt and Fochler, forthcoming).

The perceptions of the position of the participatory exercise in the innovation stream also strongly influenced participants' imagination of themselves as a mini-public and their capacity to act. While in more upstream engagement, such as the Round Tables, 'affectedness' was only a marginal issue, the publics at more downstream events such as the discourse day seemed to neatly divide their respective 'roles' in different categories of their personal and professional 'affectedness' by the issue at hand. As we will discuss below, this has strong consequences for the cultural resources participants could draw on.

Constructing a Discussion Space – The Social and Rhetorical Constitution of the Engagement Publics

How did the issues discussed above affect the construction of the respective participant groups as well as on their implicit and explicit conceptualisation of their identity as a group in relation to other publics? Which rhetorical resources did the participants use in these construction processes?

The most characteristic feature of the focus groups is that the assembled groups did not develop any common identity or self-understanding as a group, let alone as a mini-public that would represent any collective position. This is mainly linked to two factors. First, the short-term nature of the event does not allow for any process of group formation. Second, the individual participants saw themselves as distinguished from a more general public, because they had shown 'interest' and selected themselves to apply for participation. Hence, they implicitly constructed themselves as non-representative of any wider public. For these reasons, individual positioning prevailed in the debate, which actually led to the most controversial debates we witnessed during the four events. Controversies were only curtailed if the discussed issue was seen as too closely related to the personal affectedness of a participant present in the group. Due to the aforementioned downstream nature of the topics discussed, a higher authority to speak on these issues was attributed to people directly affected. As a consequence, their statements on these issues would not be openly criticised or questioned even if these were strongly raising a different viewpoint than the majority of other group members, which however often led to them remaining simply without any direct follow-up in the conversation.

The discourse day on genetic diagnosis also did not assemble a group of people that perceived itself as a coherent entity. While the participants in the event clearly differentiated themselves from the general public by being either professionally or personally concerned by this issue, they also constituted clearly discernable sub-groups according to the nature of their concern. This fragmentation process was reinforced by a design, which, though in principle open to a wider public, featured strong organisational and semantic barriers for the 'non-concerned'. The event took place on a regular working day, and was announced and conducted in formats closely

resembling those of an academic conference. A main motivation voiced by many participants was to learn about other publics connected to the issue at hand. This led to a discussion dynamic in which participants would mostly refer to discursive resources specific to the respective group they belonged to, either to a professional or academic background, or to an (often organised) form of personal affectedness (e.g. representatives of self-help groups).

The most characteristic description of the participants' self-perception at the citizens' conference is that of a mini-public assembled to bring a 'proof of principle' of the capacity of the Austrian public to perform as participant-citizens: they wanted to show their capacity to successfully produce a citizen statement on the issue of genetic data. This was related to the lack of any clear connection between political decision-making and the output of the event, and to the organisers' framing of the event as an experiment in a field in which Austria was positioned as lagging behind. Further, the conference topic chosen was rather broad, and participants lacked any external points of reference or discursive framing provided by an ongoing public debate or policy process. This resulted in participants opting to show that they could master the complexity of the topic and reach a consensus grounded in facts rather than opening up controversial ethical issues, not least because they thought that controversy might endanger the successful conclusion of the design. They defined their role as a 'self-educating mini-public' that was to gather facts from the experts. These facts were expected to 'point' to certain normative conclusions, which in the final statement however remained very general and strongly reflected the expert opinions. Citizens would hardly ever refer to their own experiential background or opinion, but would remain in a 'citizens ask, experts answer' mode. In all of this, the relation of themselves as mini-public to the broader Austrian public remained ambivalent. On the one hand, the idea of a 'proof of principle' of the citizen conference in Austria implies a specific relation of representation between the citizen group and the Austrian public. On the other hand, the group argued for their distinct character as they had received a problem-related education which 'simple citizens' would need to acquire before being able to contribute to decisions on science and technology.

Among the discussed events, the formation of citizens as a group was probably strongest at the Round Tables, due to the long-term character of the engagement. However, the fact that there was another already constituted social group – the scientists – at the table, played an important role. Citizens would debate their positions in relation to these 'others' at the table, hence indirectly creating an identity as a citizen group. The positions within the citizen group could also accommodate a certain amount of dissent, not least because the design did not pressure them to work towards any collective output. The long-term nature of the engagement exercise also had other consequences for the discussion dynamics. It led to a process of mutual taming, as both sides got to know (and appreciate) each other over time. In scientists' presence, citizens would not voice as critical arguments as they would among themselves and generally discussion was rather 'civilised', i.e. non-controversial. In the presence of scientists, citizen participants also had no 'exclusive right' to talk about public opinion, but rather had to argue with the scientists who deployed their own projections of 'what society wants'. In these exchanges, citizens used far fewer arguments derived from direct personal experience compared to the focus groups. Rather, they would resort to stressing their own professional experience, or to construct analogies

to the issue discussed. They attempted to deploy similarly 'professional' registers as the scientists, implicitly ascribing less epistemic and discursive authority to positions based on other sources of experience (Felt et al., 2009). Also (potential) affectedness was hardly referred to, due to the upstream nature of the topic discussed. This specific constellation, as well as their difficulties of positioning their role in a wider governance context led participants to consider themselves as a very particular mini-public. They were reluctant to make any kind of public statement, which they implicitly considered as making a hegemonic move to represent complex public constellations.

Discussion and Conclusion

We have tried to show how publics are inscribed and de-scribed, formed and are performed in different public engagement formats in Austria. In conclusion we would like to address five major points.

First, we have to understand engagement participants not only as active in struggling with the technoscientific issues at stake but also as deeply engaged in dealing with their own role in the setting. They would work on *differentiating* their own position, experience and knowledge from diverse forms of 'others' in order to valorise their position; they would *collectivize* – drawing on other members of the group, but also on communities beyond the table – to stabilise certain perspectives. A particularly powerful variant of collectivisation was not to refer to any defined collective, but rather to position one's own statement as something which 'anyone would know anyway', thus framing it as implicit knowledge of an ultimate 'public in general'. Further, we could see them personalising the issues by bringing in a more or less powerful experiential perspective. Participants would also shift between *expertising* and *constructing themselves as uninformed or unknowledgable* for a diverse sets of reasons. The former was meant to construct their own or their group's position as an expert position, sometimes even claiming more authority than any scientist could bring to the table. Being uninformed or unknowledgable was then used as a way to withdraw from a debate or to not take part in a positioning exercise. Finally, they would *silence* other arguments by undermining the influence that an argument could claim in this specific social setting.

Our point in analysing how participants performed 'being a participant' is to argue that rather than simply pointing at the performative character of engagement exercises, we should understand them as **laboratories – as delimited spaces, with selective access as well as certain rules and power relations – where participants imagine, test and experiment with their own role in society in general and with their position towards techno-scientific developments in particular**. Citizens partially comply to but also resist the framing that participatory designs give to them. The 'making of publics' we observed is much more complex than often analysed and cannot be captured by identifying and describing distinct stable categories. Participants switched from "I" positions, to constructing "we"s of various kinds, which empowered them to think and take actions supported by other members of a community – imagined or present in the setting. At times they based their identity as a community on certain shared characteristics, e.g. on being affected by a certain condition, or in more exclusionary terms by differentiating themselves from a less educated public.

Second, regarding the **public up-take and understanding of participatory governance** several observations seem essential. None of the settings allowed participants to develop a clear vision of what success would actually mean in regard to each participatory undertaking. Participants did not manage to imagine how any outcome of such a collective effort could make a political difference, and even were uncertain if it should. Thus they saw the engagement exercises in a political vacuum with no connection to wider political debates, while at the same time they feared that the outcome could be strategically (mis)used by policy-makers. As a consequence participants mostly constructed taking-part as an individual learning exercise, both on the subject matter, but also in how to articulate a position about something – hence as ‘learning’ to be a citizen in a knowledge society. Furthermore, not only did participation take place in a political quasi-vacuum, but broader public debate on the issue existed in virtually none of the cases, either before, during or after the event. Not that the topics were not somehow present in media, but there was no critical discussion which allowed participants to draw on an established ‘vocabulary’ or shared imaginaries to express their own position. Also, participants’ relation to expertise was rather uncritical, at least in some of the designs. This supports Wynne’s (2008) argument that invited publics more easily tend to buy into classical expert models than uninvited publics. Indeed only very rarely if at all would participants construct themselves as holding counter expertise- personal affectedness by a medical condition or other forms of professional experiences being only very partial exceptions.

This leads to our third point, which concerns the **importance of the broader context in which deliberative exercises take place**. Different techno-political cultures frame participation and citizenship in relation to techno-scientific issues in fundamentally different ways. This means that the participating citizens drew on shared implicit resources reflecting the techno-political culture they are part of: a specific vision of the general public as disinterested, reluctant to accept technoscientific innovations or as easily manipulable; a quite authoritarian relation with the state as central technoscientific actor and with classical forms of expertise; and a non-culture of public dispute. This opens up the question how imaginaries such as the shared cultural vision of ‘the Austrian public’ are created and maintained. However, we do not buy into the well-rehearsed analysis of Austria’s attitude towards science and technology as particularly techno-phobic and reluctant about innovation, an argument which is mainly built on the public discourse against nuclear power and genetically modified organisms. It does not consider that attitudes towards technology in general and towards particular technologies, as well as between different technologies, might differ quite fundamentally. Still these continuous rehearsals that the public is a problem for science and technology itself become part of a techno-political culture, and also are implicitly present in the framing of events such as the citizen conference discussed above. These views also influence participants’ positioning, because they feel that they are at risk of being set equal to a stereotypical technophobic and irrational Austrian when raising a critical voice concerning technoscientific innovation. Beyond the specific Austrian case, these observations point to important lines for future comparative inquiry, such as looking at examples of different conceptualisations of citizenship and their relation to expertise⁶, as well as into different ways of

⁶ See Horst and Irwin 2010 for an interesting contrasting case in a different national context.

conceptualising publics in relation to technoscientific issues in different technological cultures (Felt et al., 2010).

This leads to our fourth point which is concerned with **the role of participation within a broader technoscientific economy of promises** (Felt, Wynne et al., 2007). This notion stresses that ever more strongly both in scientific and political discourse, promises of future applications have become a central currency in both attaining funding and in legitimising public expenditures for technoscience. In these contexts, it often seems that the rhetorical quality of the promises and their capacity to project convincing future techno-social orders is paramount, while the actual path to realising these futures seems only of secondary importance. Our argument is that participation is currently subject to and part of a similar economy of promises, of promises for a 'democratisation of democracy'. As in, for example, Irwin's (2006) criticism of "talk about talk", often just doing engagement as an implicit promise of a more democratic form of doing politics seems enough, regardless of whether the exercise has any tangible effect. Also our examples were in one way or another framed as experiments, and as a promised starting point for democratisation processes. In some cases participants would even openly address this and question if the political uptake of their engagement would remain a mirage.

As our fifth point, we would like to conclude by stressing that it would indeed be **essential to look at the very processes of deliberation and participation as reflecting societal orders and to use them as broader learning exercises in the policy realm**. It would hence be crucial not only to focus on their outcome, but rather to understand them as micro-laboratories in which a form of collective experimentation can and probably should go on. Seen in such a way, engagement designs could become true laboratories for experimenting with different forms of ordering the relations between science and society, as well as with different techno-social orders produced by techno-scientific innovation. This spirit of experimentation however would also pre-suppose that how access to these laboratories is defined is carefully considered, that the protocol of how participants do their experiments can never be seen as stable and fixed in advance, and that the resistance of participants to the imaginaries and framings of the "experts of community" should be interpreted as a creative resource rather than as a problem. This also implies that policy makers should be ready to actually engage in such an open process, rather than seeing engagement exercises as machineries for manufacturing consensus on what have already been labelled 'necessary innovations'.

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