

Democratizing expertise: Implications for policy advice.

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Democratizing Expertise: Policy Advice Implications

Introduction**Background**

The debate surrounding, ideas behind, and experiments with democratizing expertise have a decades-long historical background spanning many nations. The use of scientific knowledge as a resource for policy makers has a long history, and though the receptiveness of different nations to that fact has varied; throughout the early- and up until the mid-20th century a common and unchallenged concept of scientific knowledge existed in which that knowledge was considered dependable and objective truth (Maasen & Weingart, 2005). During this time period, scientific “experts” advised policy makers, their academic and occupational credentials lending them the legitimacy to function in this role, and subsequently lending policy makers that legitimacy for their expertly-advised policies (Lengwiler, 2008). Thus, there was no perceived need, no call for, and no participation in this process by citizens, or “lay persons.”

Since the mid-20th century, this concept of scientific expertise has changed somewhat drastically. During this time, several issues entered the public sphere, starkly outlining both conflicts within the scientific community and conflicts between the values of “experts” and the values of citizens or lay persons. Specifically, movements such as the feminist, anti-nuclear, and environmental movements outside of the policy-science nexus highlighted these conflicts and began exerting pressure to “democratize” this advice structure (Maasen and Weingart 2005). Further developments such as those in biotechnology and the debates over genetic testing and stem-cell research further highlight these public-science-politics battlegrounds (Blok 2007). In contrast to earlier views on scientific expertise, citizens have become more critical, and more distrustful of the validity and usefulness of expertise given as policy advice (Maasen and Weingart 2005; Lengwiler 2008).

Interestingly, and somewhat counter-intuitively, despite the loss of trust in science the public has experienced and among calls for increased participation, accountability, and transparency of the policy-advice process, there has been a steady and dramatic increase in the demand for expert advice in the policy-making process, as well as a proliferation in such

expertise through specialization (Maasen and Weingart, 2005; Nowotny 2003). With the inexorable increase in use of technologies, and technology-related problems such as the myriad resulting from global climate change, there is no chance or possibility of reducing the use of expert knowledge to advise policy decisions—scientific advice has and will continue to expand even as concerns over such knowledge and its use expand (Lynn, Cunningham, and Flanagan 2003). Therefore, participatory approaches and the idea of democratizing expertise can only become more relevant as time moves on.

A final historical trend worth noting is the decline of traditional forms of citizen participation in representative democracies across the board (Boussaguet and Dehousse 2009). Some, such as Steve Raynor go so far as contributing the decline in participation to the increase in use of expert advice (Liberator and Funtowicz 2003).

Cons/Problems

The cons, or problems associated with democratizing expertise can generally be found to spring from a policy “trilemma”; that is, the tensions between political legitimacy, political effectiveness, and scientific accuracy, though the way these tensions are interpreted and expanded in this analysis may not be exactly how they are intended by their author (Radaelli, 2002).

Starting from the last aspect of the trilemma, that of scientific accuracy, roots of this conflict can be traced back as far as Plato and Socrates—the idea that expert knowledge is superior to and should be valued over any knowledge put forth by the “mob,” that is, the citizens (in Nowotny 2003). The idea, or fear, is that including lay persons and their perspectives in the knowledge-production process will reduce the quality of that knowledge, leading to inferior policy advice. “Quality”, in this view, “...can be assessed only by a specialised social group, the scientists and, more broadly, the 'experts'” (Liberatore and Funtowicz 2003). This is an elitist at worst, and politically unpopular at best, proposition; and though it is part of the subtext of this tension, it is not usually how the problem is framed. Instead, this often plays out as tension between what Helga Nowotny (2003) refers to as “moral expertise” versus the market-related expertise provided predominantly by economists (p. 154). As Claudio Radaelli frames it, “...are we asking politicians to accept the language of science (based on truth and evidence instead of the language of politics (based on values,

identity, and fairness)? Are we asking politicians to respect scientific accuracy even when there is considerable divergence among scientists?” (p. 203).

The leg of the trilemma referred to as “political effectiveness” refers to the logistical problems associated with participatory approaches. This particularly true when it is imperative that policy decisions are made in a timely manner, as is the case with risk-management related decisions (Radaelli 2002). Additionally, it is difficult to account for intangible values such as the well-being of future generations, and “...the NIMBY (Not-In-My-Backyard) syndrome shows how participation may hamper effective policy implementation (ibid, p. 203). That is, citizens generally will not support something that will inconvenience them personally regardless of whether it is a decision that will benefit society as a whole.

A further problematic aspect of participatory approaches to knowledge advice relates to the political effectiveness leg of the trilemma, and concerns the use of varied approaches—the fear here is that these methods may become just another tool for policy makers. That is, these approaches may be used for political reasons *other* than empowering citizens or improving the quality and robustness of policy advice (Liberatore and Funtowicz 2003). This is especially true when such approaches have no requirements that policy makers heed the advice they receive, as was the case with the recent citizen conferences held by the EU (Boussaguet and Dehoussé 2009). This also holds true in a case study conducted on a May 2003 Danish consensus conference (Blok 2007).

An issue that can be easily obscured in the simplistic and uncritical support of participatory approaches is whether or not such approaches are actually democratic at all (Liberatore and Funtowicz 2003). The answer to this question depends on the participation process itself. For example, what are the limitations on participation? What is the selection process for participants? For example, the first citizens' conferences were arranged in part “...in an attempt to respond to the recurrent criticism of the lack of democracy in the EU decision-making” (Boussaguet and Dehoussé 2009, p. 778). However, findings about the selection process for the first conference show results similar to other such direct-democracy processes; that the procedure had “...the effect of 'over-selecting' candidates and accentuating the elitist nature of the panel” (Boussaguet and Dehoussé 2009, p. 783). Subsequent attempts to randomize the process for the second conference should have the same effect, unfortunately, as random-selection in effect becomes self-selection as

candidates who do not feel capable or who have other factors inhibiting their participation decline to participate.

Additionally, political and hierarchical realities do not disappear, but translate themselves into the participatory settings, further complicating and perhaps tainting the outcomes of such methods (Lengwiler 2008; Blok 2007; Boussaguet and Dehousse 2009). Anders Blok (2007) refers to this as the “politics of expert authority permeating practices of public participation (p. 163). In the case study on the Danish consensus conference, these politics can be inferred from the results of the conference—the citizens' statement does not reject the theoretical arguments of the experts, in this case environmental economists, but instead offers a caveat to their arguments (Blok 2007).

Pros/Benefits

Despite the varied and numerous problems associated with the idea of a participatory processes and the democratization of expertise, even the most critical authors tend to be proponents of the basic ideas. Angela Liberatore and Silvio Funtowicz (2003) support the approach through the use of an expanded definition of democracy beyond majority voting, highlighting “...the importance of procedures for safeguarding due process and allowing citizens' involvement in deliberation...[and] fulfilling citizens' political and social rights—and human rights and needs more broadly” (p. 147). Instead of reducing the quality of expertise, they further argue, participatory approaches instead increase the quality of knowledge “through pluralistic cross-checks in an extended peer-review mode” (Liberatore and Funtowicz 2003, p. 147).

Though participatory methods are often based on or brought about by conflict within the scientific community and between the scientific and lay communities, the purpose of such methods are not necessarily to eliminate such conflict. There is an alternative to seeing the general trend that methods such as consensus conferences are unable to reach or experience great difficulty in reaching actual consensus as a failure, as do Laurie Boussaguet and Renaud Dehousse (2009) in their analysis of the first EU citizens' conferences (p. 787). Rather, it can be seen that such approaches often serve to clarify such conflicts, which is an important function in and of itself (Liberatore and Funtowicz 2003; Blok 2007).

As mentioned earlier, democracies have witnessed a decline in traditional methods. One function of democratizing expertise and using participatory approaches to policy advice may be to counterbalance to some extent this trend, though this cannot be guaranteed or relied upon at this point—there is only the potential, (Liberatore and Funtowicz 2003). At the very least, however, participatory methods may ameliorate some chronic problems in public policy, “...lack of public trust in technical work, lack of empowerment of citizens, and access to reliable data” (Maasen and Weingart 2005, p. 10).

As the specialization of experts and the possibility of if not the tendency to create knowledge for the purpose of legitimating a preconceived policy positions increases, the meaningfulness of expertise can be interpreted as diminishing. However, this can also be framed as a positive outcome. As Sabine Maasen and Peter Weingart (2005) point out, “...objectivity qua neutrality may not be a major concern anymore, having ceded its place to the exploitation of the realm of interpretability of knowledge” (p. 6). This may be positive in that it is not a new phenomenon, only newly brought to light. Understanding that knowledge is not objective rather than accepting it as self-evident truth leads to more honest and legitimate debates about controversial topics. This argument is demonstrated in Sabrina McCormick's (2003) case study of the Brazilian anti-dam movement: “The anti-dam movement uses the post-modern dependence on expertise to its advantage in order to counter research conducted by industry. The use of knowledge is central to their contestation tactics” (p. 22). By using knowledge to increase their own power, the anti-dam movement also help to further institutionalize the democratization of knowledge, by motivating funding for further research projects which include activists (McCormick 2003).

Recommendations/Analysis

Despite challenges and problematic aspects of regulation, it is clear that regulation of participatory approaches for the democratization of expertise are necessary in order to avoid and counteract some of the pitfalls of the process. As Liberatore and Funtowicz (2003) note, “Developing guidelines in the collection and use of expertise can be seen as a way of responding to the quest for both good process and effective outcome...” (p. 149). Clair Weill suggests “making the relation between experts and the public 'sponsor' clear through

contracts...” which can contribute to preventing participatory approaches from becoming just another political management tool (ibid, p. 150). Regulation is also important to ensure the use of democratic mechanisms within the participatory methods used, although it is important to continue analyzing and experimenting with such methods before regulation becomes entrenched. For example, the selection process of the EU improved from the first to the second conference, but it is by no means without flaws. To entrench that process with regulation at this point would be to solidify a flawed and as yet undemocratic method.

Regulations can also help further not just an idea but a reality where, “...the democratization of knowledge [is] the process through which local, lay perspectives become legitimate in science and/or expert knowledge to the point that they affect political decision-making” (Sabrina McCormick 2003, p. 2). However, regulation, in terms of negotiating a contract to require policy makers heed citizen's advice, is not necessary for this purpose—there are other ways to ensure policy makers heed the advice of citizens participating in the democratization of expertise. Media coverage of this process can put pressure on policy makers to actually allow their decisions to be influenced (Blok 2007). A contract stating that the media be informed of and have access to the proceedings of participatory approaches can have this affect without (unrealistically) necessitating that politicians be bound by outcomes.

Realistically, the power making policy decisions will and should remain the domain of policy makers, and to that end I agree with Sandra Nutley, Huw Davies, and Isabel Walter (2003) when they take objection with the term “evidence-based when applied to policy: “Yet such glib terms can obscure the sometimes limited role that evidence can, does, or even should play. In recognition of this, we would prefer 'evidence-influenced', or even just 'evidence-aware', to reflect a more realistic view of what can be achieved” (p. 30).

Conclusion

The history of democratizing expertise is a historical account of the tensions and subsequent negotiations of the relationships between politics, science, and citizens. 20th century developments led the citizenry to reject the notion that scientific expertise was reliable, objective truth, and led them to question and contest the use of such expertise in advising the decisions of policy makers. Because of these developments, policy makers

across nations have begun using various participatory methods to balance and shape the expert knowledge they use to make policy decisions.

These participatory methods are the process behind the idea of democratization of expertise. Despite many flaws and challenges, they are supported by politicians, policy makers, policy advisors, the citizenry, and those engaged in the analysis of the policy process pretty much across the board.

Problematic aspects of participatory methods are varied and numerous. One concern is that participatory methods may dilute and reduce the quality of the advice itself. Another problem relates to the democratic validity of the methods. In particular, participants selection methods have proven to be difficult to manage in order to ensure a random selection and to prevent only participation by the elite. In addition, there is serious danger that participatory methods may be used by policy makers to gain legitimacy without engaging in any true empowerment of citizens. Logistically, there is a danger that the use of participatory methods may bog down the already-complicated policy-making process, preventing policy makers from responding to critical issues in a timely manner. Additionally, the political and social conditions that exist do not disappear, rather they translate into the processes themselves, thereby reinforcing the hierarchies they are employed to overcome.

On the positive side, participatory methods offer new hope for the engagement and empowerment of citizens. They add legitimacy to the actions of policy makers, when used properly. They can help to clarify contention about new technologies, thereby theoretically helping policy makers address critical issues in a way that satisfies the needs of the citizenry while still heeding the advice of experts.

In order to truly bring to fruition the potential of the democratization of expertise, and that of participatory methods, it becomes crucial that these processes are regulated. The challenges must be fully explored and pitfalls mapped out and mapped around. Participatory processes should be used when citizenry demands it, and/or when controversies within the scientific community cannot be resolved, so that the risks taken by policy makers are fully understood and agreed upon by all stakeholders. Especially when there are unknowable unknowns, each citizen has the right to help shape the future for which we will all be forced to endure the consequences.

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