



Government by Elicitation: Engaging Stakeholders or Listening to the Idiots?

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Contents

Introduction: technologies of elicitation and processes of articulation	2
Public engagement and the eventfulness of justice.....	4
Consulting the public on controversial technologies	6
Designing the debate: stakeholders versus the public.....	8
<i>Conducting the debate: dealing with the eventfulness of consultation.....</i>	11
<i>Consultation outcomes and de-mobilisation.....</i>	16
Discussion: malleable ‘public’ and the political value of mobility	21
References.....	25

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Abstract

There is a new centrality of the public to science and technology policy, and a variety of public consultation mechanisms are being widely applied to elicit opinions from citizens on matters concerning novel technologies. In this context, the paper explores how legitimate constituencies of science and technology are configured and managed in public consultation exercises. We build our analysis on two recent examples: the ‘GM Nation? Public Debate’ on the future of food biotechnology in the UK, and a Transparency Forum recently carried out in Sweden on the risks of mobile telephony. We consider the paradoxical combination in these exercises of a tendency to produce static images of the public, with a valuation of mobility – of citizens, of their opinions, and of the issues at hand – as a key outcome of deliberation. Through a particular attention to the drawing of distinction between ‘stakeholders’ and the ‘general public’, we argue for the need to reflect on the politics of consultation, and to develop a new vocabulary to evaluate their worth. In this regard, the discussion concludes with a reflection on our changed views of the citizen *vis-à-vis* the idiot – understanding the latter, in the classical sense of the term, as the individual who minds exclusively his or her private affairs.

Introduction: technologies of elicitation and processes of articulation

‘The public is always right’, or, at the very least, it is always right to *listen* to what the public has to say when devising new policies. And it is the opinions of reticent publics and ‘hard to hear’ constituencies that have become the most valuable commodities in the policy-making process; listening attentively to the *silent* majorities is a main occupation and preoccupation of governments. This ambition is today most intense, maybe paradoxically so, in policy areas, such as scientific research or novel technologies that have long been the exclusive domain of experts and unaccountable professionals. In many countries, the need to seek lay views that could inform complex technical and scientific decisions has become almost a new orthodoxy, and it is to increase public participation in science and technology policies that the most innovative instruments of consultation are being devised today, at a time when citizen engagement in other spheres of policy-making is waning.¹

From the point of view of the governments involved, two premises seem to underlie this increased heedfulness to lay public views. Firstly, the assumption that lay publics can contribute useful insights, knowledge and, especially, ‘valuable *values*,’ to decisions on science and technology policy (Wynne 2001). Secondly, that extending participation and consultation throughout the policy process, all the way to the very inception of policy agendas, can assuage public mistrust in new and controversial technologies and reinforce the legitimacy of regulatory institutions (Bentley 2005; Wilsdon and Willis 2004).

The centrality of the public in science and technology policy has been accompanied, it must be noted, by the increasing deployment of *technologies of elicitation*; instruments, such as the opinion poll, the focus group, the counselling meeting, or the citizen jury, used to generate lay views on controversial issues and feed these views into the policy-making process. These technologies constitute, we would like to argue, a veritable *extractive* industry, one that engages publics in an attempt to increase the *productivity* of government. The means to produce opinions is usually the generation of new, experimental forms of community. These are managed by what Rose has described as ‘experts of community’, social and psychological research professionals who deploy the ‘whole array of little devices and techniques that have been invented to make communities real’ and are able to make claims on behalf of these newly demarcated constituencies (Rose 1999: 189-190).

The purpose of this paper is to analyse two recent cases of public consultation on controversial technologies with these considerations in mind, and to push further the political analysis of public engagements in science and technology. The first of our examples is the Public Debate on genetically modified (GM) crops conducted in the UK between 2002 and 2004; the so-called GM Nation? Public Debate. Our second example is a ‘transparency exercise’ carried out in Sweden since 2004 on the risks and hazards of third-generation (3G) mobile phones, a consultation formally known as the Transparency Forum for Mobile Phone Communication. In both cases we have analysed the documentation generated by these consultations, including some of the

¹ For a review of recent European experiences in this area, see the outcome of the STAGE (Science, Technology and Governance in Europe) at <http://www.stage-research.net/STAGE/>

reports produced by the consultants employed to manage the exercises. In the case of the Transparency Forum (hereafter TF), we have also followed *in situ* the conduct of the deliberations.²

These two cases illustrate in many respects opposite formats of public consultation. The UK Public Debate was a large endeavour intended to provide multiple venues through which any interested British citizen could express his or her views on GM crops. The TF consisted primarily of a series of small workshops with stakeholders, and its primary objective was to clarify and facilitate a mutual understanding of the often antagonistic values and principles held by these groups.

Precisely because of these procedural differences, we want to juxtapose these two cases to explore the peculiar forms of sociality that are generated when consulting and addressing the ‘public’. We will use these two cases particularly to examine a key distinction that often structures public consultation exercises: that between ‘stakeholders’ or ‘interested parties’ (those who already have a view on, or interest in, the issues under deliberation), and the unforthcoming and previously unengaged ‘general public’ (the generic constituency of individuals who seem either to have little interest in expressing their opinions or may have no opinion to express). As we will show below, the curious prioritisation of silent and unengaged majorities in consultation exercises creates a situation where those individuals who abstain from participating in political life and concern themselves exclusively with their private businesses, what the ancient Greek knew as ‘idiots’ (*idiōtēs*), private individuals who are exclusively dedicated to the privacy of one’s own (*idion*), become, explicitly or implicitly, the most highly valued and legitimate constituency in what is allegedly an attempt to broaden political participation.³

In the following sections we will compare our two examples of consultation along a series of procedural dimensions. Both exercises comprised complex mechanisms for the extraction of public opinions; they were carefully designed and choreographed by ‘experts of community’ to facilitate the generation and circulation of relevant opinions; and both exercises brought to bear the ‘institutional pressures to speak to government in a recognizable fashion’ (Irwin 2001) that characterise these events. They also gave rise to multiple forms of sociality, generally highly formalised and disciplined – participants are expected to assume preordained roles and express opinions that could be easily categorised within the criteria of the organizers. In this regard the two consultations were arranged to be as *uneventful* as possible, in the sense that whatever happened in them – the views expressed by participants, and the

² The ‘GM Nation? Public Debate’ has been formally evaluated by social scientists who were embedded in the process. The results of this evaluation can be found at Understanding Risk Team, *A Deliberative Future?* available at http://www.uea.ac.uk/env/pur/gm_future_top_copy_12_feb_04.pdf. For a summarised, and methodologically-oriented version of this evaluation, see Rowe et al (2005). Our analysis of the GM Debate has a different purpose, and is obviously less ambitious than the one offered by Rowe et al in their official evaluation.

³ The word ‘idiot’ did not have in ancient Greece the same kind of pejorative sense it has today, and it is in this non-pejorative sense that we hope to use it here. ‘Idiot’ served to describe a type of individual who, by refusing to participate in political life, became *useless* to the polis. As Pericles, quoted by Thucydides, puts it in his famous Oration ‘We alone regard the man who takes no part in politics not as someone peaceful, but as someone useless.’ For a related discussion see Arendt (1958), *The Human Condition*, chapters 1 and 2.

modes of articulation they used to express them – were expected to fit comfortably into the particular models of the public the organizers were applying.

And yet, by involving and enticing the public to debate controversial issues, the consultations also generated types of social responsiveness that overcame the bounds of mere public consultation, and spilled into other forms of political participation. Our two consultations thus became *eventful*: they generated surprises, a multitude of unanticipated events. And when this happened, the organizers and ‘experts of community’ leading the exercises were confronted with a choice between overriding the model on which their technology of elicitation was premised, or trying to preserve the model and re-adjust the participants instead.

We introduce the category of eventfulness to suggest an understanding of the mechanics of these exercises that calls into question the notion of public consultation as the search for an accurate and stable referent, the production and fixation of a representative image of the public that is external to the issues under debate. The production of fixed referents contrasts with what Latour has described as *articulation* (Latour 2004), a notion that emphasises the open-endedness of the process of consultation, and the value that the *mobility* of participants can acquire. These are, we think, more productive political categories to understand the politics of consultation on technoscience. Rather than emphasising the accuracy of reference, or consultation as a process of fixing and truth-finding, we would like to draw attention to the ability of these exercises to *move* participants and issues by articulating them with an ever-increasing range of actors and objects.

Before we go into the specific details of our two cases, let us first illustrate our interest in the sociality of public consultation with an example drawn from a different topical and historical context: the participation of the citizenry in the administration of justice.

Public engagement and the eventfulness of justice

In his analysis of social interaction in sixteenth-century Finnish courtrooms, the sociologist Johan Asplund describes some striking forms of citizen involvement in political affairs.⁴ Visiting court proceedings was something that citizens did regularly in sixteenth-century Finland; it was a normal activity through which one engaged in society as a citizen. In fact, those who refused to attend court proceedings – the *idiots*, in the sense mentioned above – were viewed as anti-social and could even be subject to a fine.

Yet, the citizens who attended court proceedings were far from providing simply an *audience* to the execution of justice. They were forceful and vocal, and their presence was instrumental to the very administration of justice: with their behavior in the courtroom they could confirm or contest the judge’s verdict. Asplund describes how, already on their way to the courtroom, people began to quarrel, insult and abuse each other. Once in the courtroom, they would not only hurl abuse at the defendant or the

⁴ Asplund’s study is an exegesis and critique of a previous study by the historian Pentti Renvall.

plaintiff; lawyers and judges could also become the target of their attacks. And these attacks were not merely verbal. As Asplund writes:

In 1591 Marjatta Hannuntytar was so furious over the verdict of the panel of ‘lay assessors’⁵ that she burst into the courthouse and attacked one of the assessors and tore his hair with both her hands. If you were not attacking undesirable people, you could destroy whatever came into your way. ... The sixteenth-century Finn was not indifferent in the least. She seems to have been incapable of being *nonchalant* in the face of her equals. The term ‘nonchalance’ merges a negative prefix with the old French word *chaloir*, which means warm, eager, urgent’.

(Asplund 1987: 50, *translation by authors*)

The public did not always act with hatred and antipathy. Demonstrations of poverty and misery on the part of the defendant or the plaintiff could arouse sympathy and lead to a favourable verdict. Regardless of the target of their anger or pity, the citizens attending the proceedings never had to justify their opinions – acting out their approval or disapproval was enough.

Asplund uses the term ‘social responsiveness’ to describe the participatory process taking place in the sixteenth-century Finnish courtroom. He refers to an improvised and immediate action, as opposed to a controlled, mediated and choreographed response. To be socially responsive is to respond to the other, to be affected and *moved* by the people and things around you. Citizen participation in the Finnish courts was vocal, unprompted, unsolicited and unrestrained, and this made the administration of justice an *eventful* occasion. The people assembled in public because their presence was crucial; they had a central role to play in the drama of justice. They did not attend the proceeding with a pre-formed view or opinion in their minds: their reactions were unpredictable precisely because they were shaped in the course of the trial and by the events and attitudes they encountered there. Asplund contrasts this form of sociality in the courtroom – unpredictable, unconstrained, and full of surprises – with today’s sanitised administration of justice:

Our own laws appear to be finished. So do the forms that shape proceedings in the courtroom. Here there is no assembled people interfering, expectedly or unexpectedly; there is no assembled people at all. Lay assessors and judges act according to a strictly formalised protocol. So does the defendant and the defence lawyer, they do nothing hasty or unexpected. All parties act as if they were not engaged in the proceedings at all; strictly speaking, as if they were not present at all. If there is ‘affection’, it appears as an inner state, which only occasionally and fastidiously is let out’.

(Asplund 1987: 53-54, *translation by authors*)

Today, the Law – both legislative acts and the administration of justice – *appears* complete and predictable. All the actors involved in its workings are assigned clearly

⁵ In Sweden a panel of lay assessors appointed by the municipal council participates in the courts’ decision-making in ordinary criminal and civil cases. Unlike the system of juries the lay assessors are appointed for a longer term and consequently participate in several proceedings. The assessors (two to four persons) take part in the whole decision-making process, together with a judge, and have individual votes (unlike juries, they are not expected to reach a joint decision).

defined roles and *expected* to act in accordance with them. If in a present-day courtroom the assembled public burst into shouting and screaming, let alone intimidation, the proceedings would be immediately stopped – order would be called – or the meeting would be called off. The riotousness of a sixteenth-century Finnish courtroom does not belong in our spaces for public deliberation.

This is clear if we compare Asplund's description with our best contemporary example of citizen participation in the administration of justice: the jury. The jury is first and foremost an *audience*, in the literal sense that its main form of sociality in the courtroom is to *listen* to what the parties and their spokespersons say. Jurors are carefully screened and selected, and their participation in the courtroom is highly choreographed. Their involvement is carefully managed to be as uneventful as possible.⁶ Crucially, jurors must be silent during the hearings. They cannot ask questions or probe into the statements made in the courtroom; they must rely on the lawyers and the judge to extract all the information they can use in their private deliberations. They are isolated to protect them from interfering influences, and their discussions are confined to a special and secluded 'jury room'. These detailed rules and protocols are designed to guard the universal quality of each juror and of the jury as a whole, as a representative of the general citizenry; the formalised procedures of participation are intended to make each juror theoretically interchangeable with any other juror and a representation of an abstract justice. As is the case in the public consultation exercises we will analyse below, formalisation is thus expected to maintain the accuracy of reference.⁷

We now turn to our two cases of public consultation exercises, the UK public debate on GM foods and the Swedish transparency exercise on mobile telephony, and analyse three sequential phases in their organisation– their design, conduct, and outcomes – to illustrate the dynamic between formalised procedures and the (un)eventfulness of consultation.

Consulting the public on controversial technologies

Our two public consultation exercises address controversial technologies – food biotechnology and mobile telephony – that have generated long and protracted discussions, and demands for changes in their regulatory status. The evolution of the regulation of agricultural biotechnology since the early 1990s could be described in

⁶ The uneventfulness of modern juries is limited to their role in the public courtroom proceedings. Their deliberations can probably be as heated and emotional as anything a sixteenth-century courtroom ever witnessed. We say 'probably' because we do not know for sure: the private deliberations of jurors are protected from the scrutiny of outsiders including specifically social science researchers. We can nevertheless assume that the 'social responsiveness' of jurors in their private deliberations is not that different from everyday forms of social judgment, and that their 'practice' does not necessarily follow the 'official line' of a standard jury deliberation. At least this is what we can deduce from early studies of jury deliberation (see Garfinkel 1967).

⁷ The sanitised and uneventful character of modern juries is linked to their formalised role in the administration of justice. The public in the sixteenth-century courtroom could shout, scream, and intimidate judges and lawyers, their range of behaviour was undoubtedly broader, but their influence on the verdict was largely unpredictable. It could be limited, or counteracted, by other, similarly vocal publics, or by particularly imperturbable judges and lawyers. In contrast, juries have to conform to strict rules of behaviour and judgment, but they are also guaranteed a very substantial and clearly defined role in shaping the final verdict.

Marteen Hajer's terms, as the progressive filling of an 'institutional void', a situation in which 'there are no clear rules and norms according to which politics is to be conducted and policy measures are to be agreed upon' (Hajer 2003: 175). In contrast, disputes over the radiation caused by mobile phones and their transmitters have raged for decades and generated a well-established scientific doctrine on the thermal effects of non-ionising radiation on humans. While public anxiety over 3G telephony has given rise to new kinds of scientific uncertainty over the non-thermal effects of the mobile telephony infrastructure, the technical dimensions of these concerns have largely been ignored in the policy debate (Stilgoe 2005: 62).

In the case of agricultural biotechnology, the institutional void has led to the establishment in Europe of a plethora of new and often experimental regulatory bodies, and it was such a novel body, the UK Agriculture and Environment Biotechnology Commission (established in 2000 by the government to provide 'strategic advice' on the long-term implications of biotechnology), that recommended the conduct of a wide-ranging public debate on the commercialisation of GM crops. The recommendation followed years of intense controversy over agricultural biotechnology in the UK; years of intense public mobilisation against genetically modified crops that had led to the virtual exclusion of GM foods from the British market. The call for greater public deliberation on the future of food biotechnology coincided, moreover, with parallel reviews of the regulatory situation of GM crops in the UK, including a review of the scientific evidence on the safety of genetically modified organisms, and a re-examination of the economic implications of GM agriculture.⁸ In July 2002, the Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs announced the launch of the GM Public Debate and the appointment of a Steering Board, composed largely of academics and non-affiliated experts, to be in charge of defining the goals and monitoring the management of the consultation.

Following the creation in 1999 of a European standard for mobile phone technology (EC 1999; Lembke 2002), the Swedish government set out to establish a 3G network and extend it to 99 per cent of the population by the end of 2003. However, the extensive process of handling building permits, an insufficient number of applications from the operators, as well as local protests against the installation of mobile phone masts throughout Sweden delayed the creation of this infrastructure. Almost a third of the permits for mobile phone masts issued in Sweden had been appealed against by the public by 2004 (Söderqvist 2004), and a survey conducted that same year suggested that only half of the population had faith in the authorities responsible for radiation protection, while a similar proportion expressed a desire for halting the establishment of the 3G infrastructure until the remaining uncertainties over health risks could be solved (KBM 2004).

Given the public concern over the radiation provoked by 3G transmitters, the Swedish Radiation Protection Agency (SSI), the agency in charge of determining acceptable levels of radiation, decided to assemble some of the stakeholders in the 3G debate, including some of the groups most critical of mobile telephony, in a 'transparency exercise'. SSI had previous experience in responding to public mistrust in new

⁸ The first and second volumes of the GM Science Review, directed by Sir David King (the Government's Chief Scientific Adviser) are available at www.gmsciencedebate.org.uk. For the economic review, see Cabinet Office Strategy Unit, *Weighing Up the Costs and Benefits of GM Crops* (11 July 2003)

technologies. In the 1980s and early 1990s, the national nuclear waste programme met vocal local protests, and, to increase the acceptability of the nuclear waste disposal policy, the SSI and the Swedish Nuclear Power Inspectorate tried to improve the quality of communication with relevant stakeholders by emphasising broader participation and deliberation. This experience shaped the design of the exercise on mobile phones.

Designing the debate: stakeholders versus the public

The UK GM Public Debate and the Swedish Transparency Forum were experiments in public participation whose designs were premised on predefined communication models, a crucial aspect of which are the criteria for the selection of relevant participants and the exclusion mechanisms used to screen unwelcome members of the public. In our two cases, the fundamental distinction on which the organizers operated was that between a ‘general public’ (sometimes referred to as the ‘silent majority’) and ‘interest groups’ or ‘stakeholders’. The former are characterised by the fact that their views are deemed unknown, or even nonexistent, prior to the consultation, and by the assumption that that lack of commitment makes them representative of the generality of citizens, whereas the latter, the ‘stakeholders’ are seen as already possessing a position in the issues at hand, a position around which their particularistic identity takes shape.

The GM Public Debate was a rather open-ended exercise, organized to meet a series of heterogeneous aims. It was meant to promote public deliberation on the future of agricultural biotechnology, and to do so specifically in accordance with the public’s own interests and frame of mind. More explicitly, the debate sought to collect the views of ‘people at the grass roots level whose voice has not yet been heard’, and to ‘provide meaningful information to Government about the nature and spectrum of the public’s views’.⁹ In its initial statement, thus, the Steering Board declared that the Debate ought to be both a forum for debate and open-ended discussion among citizens of different persuasions, *and* a fact-finding exercise, a research instrument to unearth the public’s true attitudes towards biotechnology. These two goals, deliberation by the public and research on the public, proved very early on to be difficult to combine, and soon the organizers decided to develop two parallel tracks of public consultation – one targeting the ‘general public’, the other aimed at the ‘interested publics’.

To elicit the public’s own concerns and interests and use these to frame the overall debate, the Steering Board decided to conduct a series of focus groups known as the Foundation Discussion Workshops (FDW). In these, groups of 18 to 20 carefully selected individuals were given an opportunity to discuss agricultural biotechnology in the broadest possible terms, to put to rest the concern prevalent among the organizers that they themselves might end up imposing their own questions and assumptions over the deliberating public. The FDW goal was thus to discover the set of underlying concerns and questions that animated the views, or lack thereof, of ordinary citizens, and to use this information to structure the larger Public Debate.¹⁰

⁹ Aims of the Public Debate (Reference).

¹⁰ Corr Willbourn Research and Development (2003a), ‘A Report on the Foundation Discussion Workshops conducted to inform the GM Public Debate’.

A consultancy firm was hired by the Steering Board to run the FDW, and it ostensibly conducted the discussions groups on the basis of a combination of Heideggerian phenomenology and client-centred Rogerian psychotherapeutic practice, in order, as the consultants put it, to allow each and every participant ‘to engage without having to adopt ways of being that are alien to him’:

This approach enables participants to engage with the topic(s) of discussion with the minimum of prior framing by the researchers. The concerns and interests of participants are tracked and followed throughout the Workshop process, and the energy with which these concerns and interests emerge is used to guide subsequent questions, exercises and interventions. Thus participants are provided with a great deal of ownership of the process and how the process is structured.

(Corr Willbourn Research and Development 2003a: 7)

The desire to draw topics and opinions out of the participants’ own frames was accompanied by an effort to exclude, or at least balance, any individual or group with already-formed views on the issues at hand. These were people whose opinions had already been heard in the long and often raucous debate that accompanied the commercialisation of GM foods in the UK. The Public Debate had set out to listen to ‘ordinary citizens’, subjects who were largely *disinterested*, when not directly *uninterested*, and in any case devoid of any ‘prior allegiance with, or connection to, GM’ (Corr Willbourn Research and Development 2003a: 8); the targeted constituency was a silent majority of sorts – individuals who had not expressed or indeed developed any opinions on GM, and who were thus flexible enough to engage in, and be affected by an open-ended deliberation – as opposed to the partisans who would simply use the opportunity provided by the Public Debate to proclaim their solidified positions. In the writings of the communication experts, and even in the very declaration of aims of the Steering Board, stakeholders often appear as a threat to true deliberation, always willing to ‘hijack’ the Public Debate and drown the opinions of the inarticulate general public with their eloquent views.

A radical separation of two different kinds of publics was thus inscribed into the very organisation of these workshops, and a group of activists – known as the Actively Involved Workshop – was set up separately from the other seven discussion groups of ‘ordinary people’ (Corr Willbourn Research and Development 2003a: 7-8). According to the consultants, while the seven groups comprising ordinary individuals were happy to frame their discussion in terms of a series of questions posed to the organizers, the meeting of the already ‘actively involved’ was described in the reports as unavoidably confrontational: ‘as soon as the substantive issues surfaced powerful disagreements were expressed’ (Corr Willbourn Research and Development 2003a: 68-73). In contrast, the ordinary citizens were malleable and, critically, could be affected by the course of deliberations.¹¹

¹¹ The aim of the seven workshops of ordinary people was to unearth ‘an understanding grounded in their lived experience of the world’ (Corr Willbourn Research and Development 2003a: 29-30). In the epistemology of the public expressed by the Debate organizers, the ‘lived engagement’ of these people is ‘as valid and important as the more technical engagement of other actors’. The public’s discourse – understood here as the views of those previously unattached to any solidified views, the non-partisan ordinary people who are however willing to participate in an honest deliberation exercise – ‘is profound and important’ (ibid p. 41). In contrast, in their description of the deliberation of the Actively

The Swedish TF could not have had a more different goal. Rather than targeting the general public, or hoping to listen to ‘hard to hear’ citizens, its key constituency were the already defined stakeholders in the mobile telephony debate, and its aim was to enhance dialogue between various well-known actors. During the design of the exercise the distinction between stakeholders and general public was, however, a subject of intense discussion among the organizers.

The aim of the TF was ‘to thoroughly elucidate controversial issues in a way that would be trustworthy for all actors’, and the form and content of the exercise was decided in ‘co-operation with all concerned parties’.¹² Similar to the GM Public Debate, the mandate of the consultation was open-ended with regard to content and format, and this openness was in the view of the organizers a desirable characteristic. The communication model used to guide the dialogue was based on Habermas’s theory of communicative action. Its basic principles were broad participation, impartiality and fairness, ie allowing a wide range of participants and perspectives to effectively influence rules and agendas. Furthermore, the consultation procedures were expected to provide a means for the public to gain insights and reflect upon all the facts, norms and underlying motives influencing decisions.¹³

The SSI began the preparations for the TF by appointing in 2004 a reference group whose members were drawn from relevant national authorities, local governments, the mobile telecommunication business, and two ‘critical’ groups: the Wave Breaker, an environmental organisation opposed to the widespread increase of electro smog in society, and the Swedish Association for the ElectroSensitive. Electro sensitivity is a controversial term, used to describe a variety of symptoms (a burning sensation in the skin, nausea, headache etc.) that those afflicted associate with their exposure to electric and magnetic fields (EMFs), even though there is no scientifically established mechanism to supports this causal claim.

During the preparations, this reference group discussed possible mechanisms for the participation of the general public in the debate. The organizers’ original plan was to conduct a series of seminars with the stakeholders to prepare and frame a second phase in which the wider public would be involved. However, when the ElectroSensitives and the Wave Breaker rejected the offer of the telecommunication industry to finance this second phase of the debate, the plan had to be abandoned due to budget restrictions. Yet, in spite of the fact that the consultation was in the end limited to stakeholders, the distinction between ‘interested parties’ and ‘silent majority’ was still an object of discussion and reflection at the TF. Clearly, the organizers took for granted that the participants were not really representative of the general public, a constituency they evidently thought was important to reach. This is apparent in the following discussion between two of the consultants managing the

Involved Workshop the consultants point out that its participants not only had strong views on the issues presented to them, but also a great deal of cynicism about the influence that their discussion would have on governmental policy.

¹² Minutes from Preparation meeting for TF, 17 April, 2004, SSI 2004/1828-52. Available at the Swedish Radiation Protection Agency, Stockholm.

¹³ See also Andersson, K., Drott Sjöberg, B-M, Wene, C-O. (Forthcoming). Transparency and Trust in Risk Management – The VALDOC Approach. *Journal of Medical Safety*.

discussion (C1 and C2), members of the Wave Breaker group (WB), a representative of the mobile industry (MI), and a public health expert (E):¹⁴

C1: How do we reach the silent majority?

WB1: The question is why this majority is silent. Those who worry the most are the most enlightened.

C1: This majority has another view on risk perception and is an important group in this context. Can you make panel surveys to reach the opinions of the majority?

C2: There are many methods and panel surveys and focus groups are just two of them. We must not forget that [during the second TF] many elected politicians were there and they represent the public.

MI: Vodafone has an investigation over public risk perceptions. We can look at the available material.

WB2: It is very questionable to use material that comes from Vodafone.

E: It should be used. We can look at the questions it raised; it can provide some of the pieces of the puzzle [...]

If the GM Public Debate was trying to reach the puzzling ‘general public’ through focus groups and a careful selection of participants, in the TF this abstract public was ever-present, but largely through its absence from the proceedings. It was a referent always lying outside the discussions, a point of fugue that proved unreachable – from the lack of funding, and the refusal to consider the mobile industry as a legitimate spokesperson – but it nevertheless shaped the deliberations and, as we will see, the weight of the evidence generated by the consultation.

Conducting the debate: dealing with the eventfulness of consultation

In their design, the two consultation exercises correspond to particular models of the nature of the targeted public and of the best way of reaching it. These models, be it Rogerian psychoanalysis or Habermasian communicative action, are highly formalised, even if the organizers usually employ reduced and schematic versions of the theoretical models. This formalised set of expectations is quickly confronted with the reality of the consultation meetings.

The key venue for the GM Public Debate was the series of public meetings held throughout Britain in June 2003. Six large events were organized by the Steering Board itself – in Birmingham, Swansea, Harrogate, Taunton, Glasgow and Belfast. Attended by more than 1,000 people, they were monitored by independent ‘professional observers’ who served also as rapporteurs. In addition to these six national meetings there was a second tier of around 40 regional and local meetings,

¹⁴ Minutes from the reference group meeting, 16 February 2005, this and the following quotes from the TF case are translated by the authors.

and a third tier of over 600 local meetings, organized by local volunteers and largely unsupervised by the Steering Board. The Debate website received 2.9 million hits between 1 June and 16 July (24,609 unique visitors), and 36,557 feedback forms (available on the website and also at the meetings) were received by the organizers, who also registered over 1,200 letters and e-mails.

The fundamental problem for the organizers of the Public Debate was how to balance the reliance on *public* events, in which people could participate without any prior screening, with the stated desire to extract opinions from individuals with no engagement with, or deep interest in, food biotechnology; people, in other words, who would be unlikely to voluntarily show up at a public event to discuss these issues. The search for this body of ordinary people led some, including members of the Steering Board, to question the validity of the public meetings altogether, and to see the presence in them of vocal, self-selected individuals as a key methodological problem, a view that became prevalent after the first large public deliberation meeting was held. 'It does concern me that people are using this as a platform to publicise their views,' a member of the Steering Board declared to the press after the first meetings had been conducted. 'A number of people are just here to say something through a microphone,' argued another board member.

The media adopted this interpretation of the open meetings. A newspaper described the event as 'a unique experiment to find out how ordinary people think', but pointed out that the 'only blemish on such noble intentions was the absence [...] of ordinary people'.¹⁵ Rather than 'ordinary people', in this interpretation, the meetings were serving as a venue for stakeholders and activists: individuals, more often than not radically opposed to biotechnology who arrived with pre-formed opinions and used the occasion to publicise them. These self-selected participants were generally confrontational and non-amenable to deliberation; their participation in the meeting did not seem to *move* them at all, they remained *fixed* in their starting positions.

To control this bias in the public events, the organizers announced that in addition to the open meetings they would conduct a series of closed, private meetings, to which only carefully selected members of the general public would be invited. The worrying confrontational nature of the public events would in the end be balanced, a member of the Steering Board noted, because the organizers 'were also canvassing views from carefully-selected focus groups, who would form the control against which to compare views from the wider public debate'.¹⁶

This parallel, closed component of the Public Debate came to be known as the Narrow but Deep (NbD) strand. It continued the FDW experience and consisted of ten small focus groups, with seven to eight participants each (hence the 'narrowness') who met twice, once for an introductory meeting, and again two weeks later to assess the effects of the deliberation (hence the 'deepness' of the exercise). Between the two meetings, the participants were asked to keep a diary of their investigations and reflections on the GM issue. By reconvening the groups and giving participants instructions to record their thoughts as they evolved, the organizers hoped that individual opinions would be allowed 'to mature and to change' (COI Brief), and that

¹⁵ 'Government's 10-day public roadshow opens with a whimper, *Guardian*, 4 June 2003.

¹⁶ 'Public GM views "will count",' *Farmers Weekly Interactive*, 4 June 2003.

they would be able to trace this progress in the attitudes of ordinary people towards GM.

To ensure that the NbD element consisted of ordinary people, and that activists or those already engaged with the issue were excluded, the consultants used a recruitment questionnaire. Several kinds of individuals were actively excluded by this form: those individuals who had already participated in research or group discussions on topics related or similar to GM, and those who had, during the past five years, worked in advertising/market research/journalism/public relations, the biotechnology industry, scientific research into gene technology, or in a campaigning organisation or any other group concerned with biotechnology.¹⁷ All these groupings were actively barred from the focus group discussions. As for farmers or those working in agriculture, only individuals who professed to 'have a completely open mind' about GM crops were allowed to participate.

The NbD meetings constituted the managed strand of the Public Debate, and helped establish a particular view of the attitudes of the general public towards GM crops in stark contrast with the experience of the open meetings of self-selecting individuals. Three key ideas emerged from the NbD meetings: (1) that the majority of participants became increasingly concerned and negative about GM over the course of the deliberation exercise; (2) that participants formed and expressed more opinions as they immersed themselves in the issue (ie the number of 'don't knows' was significantly reduced from the first to the second meeting); and (3) that the more knowledgeable these 'ordinary' people became, the more likely they were to believe that relevant knowledge about the effect and implications of biotechnology was lacking.¹⁸

It was, however, the mobility of the participants that struck the organizers most. The 'native intelligence' or 'intuitive deduction' process expressed by the ordinary people of the NbD meetings, the consultants wrote, did not constitute 'a straight line, from recruitment at the beginning through information gathering and deliberation to conclusion' (Corr Willbourn Research and Development 2003b: 56), but rather 'a line that traced a circular path, starting at attitude on recruitment, circling out into questioning, information gathering and deliberation and coming back towards the original position before going out on another circuit'. The consultants' report describes this trajectory of movement in striking detail:

This curve would be traced many times. This is illustrated by the fact that a great deal of what was expressed in the second meetings had been previously expressed in the first meetings or in the work in the Daily Diaries. In some cases wherever the line swung out to, it always passed back over the same point, in other cases it circled out and passed close to, but not directly over the same

¹⁷ This exclusion criterion also applied if any member of the family, relative, or close friend of the potential participant had been employed in any of these fields.

¹⁸ A degree of cynicism and scepticism regarding the purpose of their discussions was also evident among the NbD participants but this was tempered by other, more positive characteristics which set these 'ordinary' people apart from individuals who tended to participate and dominate the public events. 'In spite of this cynicism,' the report of the research company stressed, 'there was also considerable evidence both of gratitude that consultation had been undertaken, and hope – if not yet confidence – that participants' views would indeed influence Government policy' (Corr Willburn Research and Development 2003b: 18).

point, describing a more spiral-like process. For many this tended to lead to a movement overall away from their original opinion – for some this was a slight movement, for others it was more noticeable. Thus most engaged in a *recursive* process of information gathering and deliberation. For some this either deepened their knowledge or appreciation of their initial intuitive understanding or, more explicitly, reinforced their initial position. Others, however, displayed a *noticeable movement* that took them beyond their initial position – either to a more pro or entrenched anti position.

(Corr Willbourn 2003b: 56-57)

The fundamental aspect of the deliberation is thus, as the authors' own italics make clear, the idea of *movement*; the mobility of opinions along a non-linear path. The ordinary participants were, first and foremost, *moved* by the process of deliberation; regardless of whether they reached positions that were different from their starting ones, they displayed noticeable, traceable movement in their attitudes towards GM foods. The path might be circular, but is not simply repetitive: it is rather recursive, and thus traces a trajectory of *noticeable movement*, a spiral. The deliberation displaced the participants, it turned them into movable entities, in stark contrast to the immobility and rigidity of the positions expressed by the self-selecting individuals who had dominated the public meetings, individuals whose views were, first and foremost, 'entrenched' and or 'hardened'.

Our second case, the TF on mobile phones, was arranged on a very different basis. As mentioned, only a small number of participants took place in the three discussion workshops. The first meeting comprised some 40 participants and lasted a full day, while each of the two subsequent meetings involved around 60 participants and took place over a two-day period. The three meetings were held in or around Stockholm, and the participants were largely from this area. Broadcasting and newspaper media were invited to all of the events, but none attended the meetings. The size and format, as noted earlier, was partly a consequence of the lack of funding, and the organizers were willing to accept that the final arrangement was in fact a compromise and constituted a sort of 'mini TF'.

The emphasis was on engaging stakeholders, people who, following the scheme of things of the GM Public Debate, would presumably hold rather immobile positions. The TF made an effort to draw together highly polarised groups, and disagreements were thus clearly visible. This very fact, however, moved participants, albeit in a different sense from the movement participants seem to have suffered in the GM Public Debate. The discussions at the TF did not lead the stakeholders to change their positions in any visible way, but the heated and antagonistic atmosphere moved participants emotionally. Perhaps the mere presence of groups holding radically opposing views in the same room, and the need to engage with them, could have intensified the clash of views and the sense of insoluble conflict, but there is also evidence to the contrary. The format of the three TF seminars was a mix of small group discussions and plenary sessions, presentations and interrogations. It was assumed that the participants had articulated opinions, and possessed a relatively stable set of identities, before they entered into the consultation. Yet, even in such highly arranged events where participants are expected to follow clearly defined roles, the element of surprise and the dimensions of eventfulness cannot be excluded.

Take for instance the discussion over the phenomenon of electro sensitivity. The members of ElectroSensitive, with their deeply held convictions about the correlation between their illness and exposure to EMFs, faced opposing but similarly static views about the non-existence of such correlation in the absence of clear scientific evidence to the contrary. During lunch, and in small group discussions at the margins of the official meetings, participants representing regulatory authorities and the mobile phone industry made statements to the effect that the very identity that justified the presence of the electro sensitive was at best questionable. ‘The only thing that could help [the electro sensitive] would be cognitive behavioral therapy,’ a participant said. ‘It can be a problem to be too complaisant to their demands, since that is in fact to admit that they are right,’ another one argued.¹⁹

On the other hand, on several occasions the same actors who denied that the phenomenon of electro sensitivity actually existed *acted* as if it did. The first TF seminar was held in a place chosen for the benefit of the most severe electro sensitive.²⁰ The first thing the participants did upon entering the meeting was to turn off their mobile phones, wrap them in aluminum foil and put them in a box outside the building. They had to do the same with their electronic car keys (after they had moved their cars further away from the building if they were parked too close). As one of the consultants said, ‘We were actually rather complaisant’ [towards the demands from the electro-sensitive].²¹ That is, even though some of the participants entered the TF meeting denying openly the very phenomenon of electro sensitivity, they acted respectfully towards the demands of other participants. The TF meetings caused some movements in the actors’ previously defined positions, at least temporarily. After the first TF event, one of the Wave Breakers pointed out that ‘some of them [mobile phone operators] were actually rather touched; they are beginning to realise that this is real. But it is difficult to tell how it affects them in the long run’.²²

Essentially, however, what characterised the TF from organizers’ viewpoint was a polarisation between those who were ‘critical’ and those who were ‘uncritical’ of the existing regulations on mobile phone radiation, and this forced the organizers and the reference group to address two types of problems.²³ The first was how to balance the two sides of the debate – which experts to invite and how to keep a balance between researchers on the critical side and those on the uncritical side. After the second TF seminar an SSI official admitted that ‘there was a strong bias... We had hoped that the composition would be more heterogeneous, many expressed the same critical opinions.’²⁴ Secondly, the stated intention to ‘reach a better understanding’ and to enhance dialogue between polarised groups presented the organizers with constant challenges in the administration of the deliberation. Established rules for producing a good dialogue had to be made repeatedly explicit to the participants, and the

¹⁹ Second TF, observation.

²⁰ At the second and third TF seminar, two of the most severe electro-sensitives participated over the phone.

²¹ Personal communication with one of the consultants, February 2005.

²² Telephone interview with the member of the Wave Breakers responsible for its information and media contacts (December 2004).

²³ The term ‘uncritical’ was not used to describe any participant in the TF exercises. However, a consequence of labelling the Wave Breaker and the ElectroSensitives as ‘critical groups’ is that all the others are presumably ‘uncritical’ or even ‘neutral’.

²⁴ Interview with an SSI official who is the director for the domain of non-ionising radiation, March 2005.

organizers had to continuously rebuke participants who deviated from the rules. This occurred when voices were too sharp and the discussions turned into what the consultants termed ‘a debate’, characterised by antagonistic parties trying to win over each other, rather than a dialogue with participants listening and trying to understand each other. On one occasion the moderator plainly told participants that the heated exchanges were obstructing a good dialogue from taking place.²⁵

The effort to control the events had varying degrees of success. In one instance, the rules for the achievement of a proper dialogue had to be articulated – ie to avoid sarcasm and leading questions, to give suggestions and supportive responses to others, etc. In addition, the various parties were asked to appoint a group leader to ensure that the rules were followed. However, once the group discussions began, the participants often ignored these rules by not appointing a group leader, and by aggressive assertions such as the provocative placement of evidence supporting their case.²⁶ The formal TF procedures implied in the communication model employed by the organizers were based on the expectation that all parties would listen to each other and be affected by each other’s arguments – to the point of being willing to change their minds accordingly. In other words, the organizers wanted the participants to be moved by the experience of deliberation, and reacted strongly – explicitly restating the rules of the game – when they felt the anticipated dialogue degenerated mere debate.

Consultation outcomes and demobilisation

In principle, we can identify three potential outcomes of a consultation exercise. The first mentioned earlier would be the changes in attitude, emotions and positions of those who – including the organizers – undergo the process. The second is a more material one: the documents that usually emerge from a consultation exercise, and in particular, the official report is the visible outcome of a consultation and attempts to officialise its meaning. The third possible outcome is the response to the consultation and the conclusions of governments and regulators, the degree to which the lessons of the consultation influence policy decisions. This form of influence is hard to specify, and its assessment requires a detailed analysis of policy-making in the aftermath of the consultation that we cannot provide here. As such we focus here on the first two outcomes: the mobility of participants, and the production of written reports that summarise the content and conclusions of the deliberations

We suspect that the impact of consultation, in terms of generating public awareness and eliciting a public debate on the technologies under discussion would be much greater in the the GM Public Debate than in the TF on mobile phones simply because the former was a much larger enterprise, attracted a great deal of public and media attention, and was expected from its inception to influence governmental policy in a significant way. The impact on the participants ie on those who actually took part in the discussions, is independent of the size and format of the events. We discussed earlier the affect on participants in terms of their *mobility*, and we noted how a concern with balancing mobility and immobility dominates the strategies of the experts that devise and manage the debate on GM foods. To discuss this point further,

²⁵ Second TF, observation.

²⁶ Second TF, observation.

we would like to remind readers about the distinction between statements oriented towards the ‘accuracy of reference’ and ‘articulations’ following Latour (2004) as a possible means to describe what is static and mobile in consultation exercises. The main difference between these two concepts in Latour’s terms, is that ‘there is no end to articulation whereas there is an end to accuracy’ (2004: 210). Our two consultation cases contained many statements oriented towards accuracy, but they also contained a multitude of articulations, ie the creation of positions that are not fixed and can move and change over time. As participants engaged in information gathering and became acquainted with each other they could find their initial positions reinforced but they could also be taken beyond them.

The NbD discussions in the GM Public Debate were described by its organizers as generating a very noticeable kind of mobility, a spiraling movement, whereas the public events were characterised as dominated by fixed, static positions. The participants in the NbD focus groups were selected because they were utterly unaffected by the issue of GM foods. Yet, their participation in the consultation turned them into highly mobile individuals. The TF events, on the other hand, seem to have caused only a slight and humbler kind of movement, one that brought participants closer to each other and made future contact easier, even if their opinions were still polarised. An SSI official referring to the ‘critical groups’ stated that ‘at least we have established a contact with some of them and realised that they are serious and really worried about this... In the future, when SSI is planning new recommendations we can gather these groups again’.²⁷ Clearly the interaction of stakeholders throughout the duration of the TF favoured this limited but important form of effect or movement.

Beyond the effects on participants, the most tangible outcome of our two exercises was the production of official reports. The report of the debate on the GM Nation was released in September 2003. The TF report has only appeared in draft form. We will thus focus largely on the former to try to understand the dynamic force of such documents.

The fundamental purpose of the official report of the GM debate was to bring together and give coherence to the multiple strands of the consultation and to extract a single narrative on biotechnology and the public from the complex experience of the debate. The central problem was how to integrate what the report itself identifies as two rather different sources of evidence: the opinions expressed by self-selecting participants at the public meetings, in the letters sent to the Board, and in the feedback forms returned to the organizers on the one hand, and on the other, the views of those carefully chosen individuals who participated in the NbD discussions. The report tried, first of all, to emphasise the commonalities between the views and attitudes expressed in both kinds of settings:

We found that the content of the debate was very similar right across each spectrum. Whether they write a letter or an e-mail, or visit the website, or express themselves in a meeting, or sit down with each other in a deliberative process, people raise the same types of issues and concerns about GM. They use

²⁷ Interview with SSI official.

the same kinds of arguments whether they are asked to think hard about the issues or choose to express themselves from the top of their head.

(GM Public Debate Report 2003: 38)

The report reinforced these similarities by drawing a series of *general* lessons or ‘key messages’ in its conclusion and executive summary (ie ‘People are generally uneasy about GM’; ‘The more people engage in GM issues, the harder their attitudes and more intense their concerns’; ‘There is little support for early commercialisation’), applicable to both strands of the debate even if the evidence used to support their validity comes primarily from the NbD meetings.

However, in parallel to this effort to draw a single narrative from the Debate as a whole, most of the report is devoted to teasing out the specific lessons that can be drawn from each venue of participation, and it is here that the report manages, quite successfully, to establish a clear distinction between the kinds of opinions expressed in the public events, and those articulated at closed meetings – and, more importantly, between the kinds of people who expressed them.

The report draws far-reaching conclusions about the particular kind of people who took part in the open venues of the Debate on the basis that, as the report argues, GM is an issue ‘far removed from ordinary life and the mainstream of current politics’ (GM Nation? 2003: 79); that it ‘is not a salient issue in most people’s ordinary lives’ (GM Nation? 2003: 97).²⁸ From the premise that ordinary people are not unduly concerned with the issue of GM foods, it follows logically that those individuals who took an active interest in the debates and volunteered their participation are not representative of the ‘general’ public. If one begins by assuming that ordinary people rarely think about GM ‘in their daily lives’, (GM Nation? 2003: 15), one can deduce that those who attended the open meetings must be extra-ordinary, and therefore unrepresentative.²⁹ A similar conclusion is drawn with respect to those who made the effort to write a letter or send an e-mail to the Steering Board: ‘They are also unusual people. ...GM is not a salient issue in most people’s ordinary lives. If it is unusual to write a letter for publication about anything, it is fair to suggest that it might be even more unusual to write a letter about GM’ (GM Nation? 2003: 97). These extra-ordinary people were easily characterised as having established, entrenched views, in contrast to the participants at the NbD discussions who came to the meeting with ‘no fixed position on GM’ and the anecdotal evidence gathered at the public events supported this view.³⁰

²⁸ This assumption is drawn from the views expressed by the participants at the NbD meetings. But these individuals were selected, it must be remembered, precisely on the basis of their lack of ‘prior allegiance to or connection with’ the issue of GM foods.

²⁹ ‘Going to a meeting on a public issue is an unusual activity for the British population’, the Report notes, and ‘this might suggest that GM meeting-goers were people who are highly interested and engaged in public issues generally and GM in particular. Unusual or not, people who go to public meetings and events are self-selecting’ (GM Nation? 2003: 78-79).

³⁰ ‘Both meeting goers and observers commented on the number of people who went to meetings with established views on GM, and who felt themselves well informed about it, which prompted comments that meetings might be missing the general people’ (GM Nation? 2003: 91), who “did not generally change their minds as a result of going” to the events (GM Nation? 2003: 94).

The official report on the TF on mobile telephony presents important differences to GM Debate, differences that reflect the dissimilar goals and scope of the exercises. The fundamental purpose of the TF report was to present the dynamic process and the open and participatory working method that characterised the deliberations among stakeholders.³¹ The aim of the TF had been to improve dialogue and illuminate opinions on mobile phones in a thorough and comprehensive way. Given this goal, the ideal result of the exercise would be, according to the organizers, the evidence of a ‘multiplicity of questions raised’, rather than any singular narrative or set of univocal answers.³² Thus the primary ambition of the exercise was not to give a coherent picture of the participants’ views on mobile phone technology, but rather to present the working method used by the reference group, the specific mode of conduct of the seminars, and the forms for dialogue that characterised the exchanges among participants. The emphasis was thus on the methodology of deliberation employed and on its virtues. The TF report did not draw any conclusion in terms of public or stakeholder opinions on mobile phones. At some point, however, the report draws broad conclusions about the openness and fairness of the TF process. And this indicates conclusions about the mobility of participants:

Through the form of the meeting you learned quickly about each other, and this prepares the way for the common interest to illuminate the questions that were the task for the day. The relationship serves to prepare the way for accomplishing the task rather than hindering it. In the groups that have worked step by step according to these principles, important questions were discussed while the risk of this discussion being captured in a polarised situation was mitigated. This enabled more questions and important information which might not have been presented in this forum otherwise. All were given a *real* opportunity to think out loud and to contribute new questions and perspectives. To conclude, a well-functioning meeting form reduces polarisation and increases the amount of productive ideas

(TF Report 2005: p. 18-19, *translation by authors*)

The aim of the TF was to improve the understanding of each other’s perspectives, and this demanded actors capable of affecting each other. As indicated in the quote above, the key to this was the face-to-face meeting and the personal relationships that characterised the interaction model employed by the organizers.

To conclude this section, we will discuss one last outcome of our two case studies – the governmental responses, and, more particularly, the government reaction to the report on the GM Public Debate. This response offers an interesting contrast to the emphasis on mobility and mobilisation that characterised the conduct of the exercises. The TF report has not yet been published – the preliminary version was available in December 2005, and the official version is expected in Spring 2006 – and as yet there is no information on the government’s formal response.

³¹ In December the reference group met to discuss the preliminary version of the TF report. At this meeting a new set of actors was present – a group of professional evaluators – engaged by the SSI to evaluate the TF process. A preliminary version of the final TF report was sent to all participants in advance and was discussed at this meeting. Both the report and the evaluation have yet to appear. The TF report in this paper refers to the preliminary version – in the final version of the paper we will analyse the contents of the final TF report.

³² Reference group meeting, 16 December 2005

Soon after launching the Public Debate, the UK government promised to respond *in writing* to the conclusions of the Debate, in the hope that this ‘will reassure the public that their participation is worthwhile’.³³ The government’s written response was issued by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) in March 2004.³⁴ This document is, firstly, a joint response to the three reappraisals of biotechnology that had taken place in the UK – the GM Public Debate, the Scientific Review, and the Economic Assessment of GM crops. This is important as by choosing to respond jointly to the three strands of this wide-ranging consideration of food biotechnology, the Government was able ‘weigh up’ the evidence from the three processes and to find in the Science and Economic reviews responses to the ‘concerns’ expressed by the public in the Debate.³⁵

In its response, the government construes the Public Debate as fundamentally a research exercise, one that ‘has helped to improve our understanding of what people really think about GM crops’ (DEFRA 2004a: 11). According to this construct, the Debate is no longer an open-ended deliberation process but a fact-finding enterprise intended to discover fixed ‘concerns’ and ‘anxieties’ in the public domain. The Government can recognise, or take into account these concerns and address them by first registering them and then pointing to the different ways in which the existing regulatory process addresses these uncertainties and fears. The following is an example of this acknowledgement:

The report of the public debate suggested that people’s opinions about GM food and crops are shaped by a wide range of issues and concerns. We have looked at these concerns carefully, and we have concluded that for the most part the regulatory regime which is now in place is capable of addressing them, but that on some issues further action is required.

(DEFRA 2004a, paragraph 4.9)

The ability of the Government to describe the Public Debate as the expression of a series of concerns, and to frame the deliberation as fundamentally a research process meant to ‘broadly reflect the current state of public opinion on GM’ (DEFRA 2004a) is paved by the differentiation between the open and the closed strands of the debate, a difference that the official report had helped established. We have noted how the official report of the consultation had tried to bring the different strands of the Debate together into a single composite image of ‘the public’, but this effort is easily dismantled in the Government’s response, by selectively quoting paragraphs from the report to support the claim that the participants in the open and closed meetings were very different kinds of people, and that only the latter offered a representative image of the general public’s attitudes towards GM foods. According to the Government’s response, the closed sessions of the NbD component of the debate:

³³ Letter from Margaret Beckett, 20 January 2002. The Secretary of State also announced that she ‘would be happy to indicate what the UK government has learned from the debate when making future policy announcements on GM issues’.

³⁴ *The GM Debate: Government response*.

³⁵ For instance, the Debate unearthed evidence of public anxiety about the GM effects on human health. In its response, the government simply pointed out that ‘the science review concluded that there is no evidence to suggest that current GM foods pose a greater risk to human health than their conventional counterparts’ (Response, para 16). DEFRA 2004a.

... enabled the debate process to take account of the views of those members of the public who might not normally have chosen to take part, in contrast to the 'self-selecting' participants in the debate. The 'Narrow but Deep' element is generally regarded as one of the more successful features of the debate, serving as an important 'control' on the findings of the open process.

(DEFRA 2004b, paragraph 23)

The literal meaning that the term 'control' acquires in the above sentence is made clear by how the government the evidence of the closed sessions to neutralise the opinions expressed in the open meetings:

We recognize that people are generally uneasy about GM crops and food, and that there is little support for early commercialization of GM crops in this country. However we note that there were some differences between the views of those who took part in the 'open' debate, and those members of the public who took part in the 'closed' discussion groups.

(DEFRA 2004b, paragraph 3.2)

'The predominant feeling among the Narrow-but-Deep sample,' the response argues, 'was one of uncertainty and this was largely because they felt uninformed.' This general public is a more malleable constituency, less inflexible and categorical than the usual stakeholders; it is a more promising constituency for a government seemingly bent on leaving the regulatory regime for GM crops unaltered.

There is an interesting paradox here. Whereas the Debate organizers used the NbD focus groups to generate a *mobility* of opinions to produce a trajectory of deliberation, the government's response relies precisely on these findings to produce a *static* image of 'public concerns' as a set of fixed and clearly identifiable attitudes. The discussion groups had managed to move the participants, in the view of their organizers, but the government was more interested in the public as a stable, immobile entity. In this way, a set of discrete and stationary concerns can be met by a stable set of regulatory structures. The open meetings had been criticised for simply reiterating a set of static opinions, but in effect a similar image of public opinion as an inert entity characterises the government's response.

Discussion: malleable 'public' and the political value of mobility

In this final section we would like to draw together and reiterate briefly the key threads of our analysis, and discuss two distinct but related dimensions of our case studies. The first has to do with changing views of citizenship, the second with the political value of mobility.

The UK Public Debate and the Swedish TF constitute two different instruments for obtaining public opinions and for incorporating those opinions, in one form or other, into the policy process. In their format, design, content, and expected outcomes they represent different models of public elicitation and mobilisation strategies. But we have juxtaposed them in an attempt to draw some general conclusions about the forms of sociality that are operative in these forms of political experiments.

For us public consultations are, first and foremost, an *extractive* industry in which experts apply technologies of elicitation to configure a stock of lay views amenable to the policy process. In our view, this industry always depends on shaping, restraining and channelling particular forms of sociality; that is, on enforcing particular models of citizenship. The experts who design, conduct or analyse these meetings operate with particular models of communication and of the public in mind, even if the specific tools and devices they employ are often simplified or schematic versions of well-known sociological or psychoanalytical theories.

A key distinction that is present in both our cases is that between the general public and stakeholders. Consultation exercises will adopt distinctive forms of organisation depending on which one of these constituencies they target. However, in our two cases we detect a kind of confusion or hybridisation, an attempt to target *both* – a set of clearly demarcated groups and opinions *and* an amorphous silent majority yet to be heard. This is particularly apparent in the GM Public Debate where this distinction led to a certain institutional schizophrenia and a progressive bifurcation of the consultation into distinct and separate strands. The public meetings, originally conceived as the backbone of a consultation that wanted to be broad and national, came under criticism for being monopolised by self-selecting participants and interest groups that did not represent the general population as a whole. To control for this bias a series of closed and tightly controlled focus groups were set up, and it was from these private meetings that the bulk of the evidence of the Public Debate was drawn. Perhaps paradoxically, the desire to allow the public to frame the discussion in their own terms led the organizers to rely on private and closely monitored forms of social interaction.

In the TF, a general orientation towards the general public was curtailed by funding problems but the distinction between the silent majority and stakeholders permeated and structured the deliberations. Against the background of an ever-present but never reached silent majority, the forum developed into an attempt to elucidate the deep values and premises that explain the stakeholders' positions; a sort of clarification exercise that had a necessarily limited policy impact, since, as many participants and certainly the organizers believed, the general public was absent from the proceedings. The reliance on private meetings was evident in the TF case too, albeit in a highly different fashion. The closed strand of the GM Public Debate, the NbD groups, resembled a laboratory study of a malleable public, while the private nature of the TF meetings was similar to a 'hostage' situation in which citizens are involved in a process that is stacked against them as it serves exclusively the interests of the organizers. The face-to-face meetings and sustained interaction helped the organizers enrol critical actors into their programme of elucidation. This might not have been the intention of the organizer (the 'privatization' of TF was in fact involuntary and due to budgetary constraints), but it was however an important characteristic of the consultation.

There is more to say about the unintentional effects of public consultation exercises. Open, deliberative meetings tend to generate a sort of *eventfulness* that the organizers find difficult to comprehend; they produce a complexity that is irreducible to preconceived models of the public. In contrast to the eventfulness of unruly actors, the general public that is abstractly targeted in many consultation exercises appears as a

more flexible category. Firstly it is an abstract constituency, one that seems more amenable to the effects of deliberation precisely because it is construed as devoid of fixed views or strong opinions. And yet, when, as in the case of the NbD strand of the GM Public Debate, the general public is actually consulted and thus the silent majority finally enlisted and enticed to talk, this can only take place under highly orchestrated conditions, such as those of a focus group, and with the help of stringent screening criteria and continuous monitoring and translation by experts.

There is thus a peculiar return to the figure of the *idiot*, in the classical, Athenian sense. In public consultation, the citizen with no opinion or no unprompted interest in public deliberation, the individual that minds exclusively his or her own business becomes a key legitimising constituency, a source of political value, the kind of people governments are eager to enrol in public consultations. Pericles described as ‘useless’ (not peaceful or obedient) those members of the *polis* who only minded their private businesses. And yet, the opposite is true in consultation exercises: in the minds of the organizers of these events, the idiots are the most *useful* of publics, the true source of valid opinions.

This has clear political implications. The current interest in the ‘quiet’ citizen calls into question the classical distinction between political action, or *vita activa*, and its counterpart ‘non-action’ (or contemplation), the quietness of the Greek *skholē*, the ‘freedom and surcease from political activity’ (Arendt 1998: 14ff). For it is the quiet citizen that takes centre stage in the political debate. But, obviously, as he or she gets involved in the mechanism of consultation, this inactive citizen becomes increasingly un-quiet (*askholia*); he or she becomes political in the sense that the person acquires a trajectory of opinion, the movement that the organizers of consultation exercises are so keen to provoke and trace. We are getting close to a concept of political action that takes mobility as its primary value.

For Hanna Arendt the value of politics does not lie in its outcomes but is manifest in political action itself. The human capacity to act, in terms of starting something new and to set something into *motion* (which is the original meaning of the Latin *agere*) is, according to Arendt, underemphasised in the modern age where important distinctions between various kinds of action has been obliterated. The advantage of this conceptualisation of action is that it offers both a defence of participatory politics and a critique of the increasing instrumentalisation of participation in policy-making mechanisms (Torgerson 1999; Szerszynski 2003). It is not hard to understand the political value of using public opinion as a set of fixed concerns in the policy process. But a consistent espousal of mobility would impede a reduction of participation to the instrumental value of ‘moving the public’ for one’s own purposes; it would imply a willingness not only to move but also to *be moved*.

Consultations tend to become, as we have argued, eventful. They can *move* participants, and, in so doing, they can move the topics on which participants deliberate. The mobility of opinions is clearly a desirable characteristic of deliberation as we have seen from the views expressed by the organizers of these exercises. Yet this desire is often combined with the aspiration to imbue this mobility only with instrumental value, and/or to reproduce a scheme of fixed, stable opinions (and to attribute them to a fixed, stable, manageable general public) because a static target makes it easier to reassure the public of the validity of the existing regulations.

Thus, in both our cases the motion triggered by the public consultation exercises was curtailed by the organizers' and the governments' desire to *summarise* these events into a unified and stable statement. The extractive mechanisms of public consultations allows the organizers to maintain a certain degree of control; these techniques tend to produce a kind of simulated responsiveness, the strategies of 'crafted talk', that political scientists have noted in politicians who claim to be responsive while in practice avoiding taking public opinion into account. 'Politicians track public opinion not to make policy but rather to determine how to craft their public presentations and win public support for the policies they and their supporters favor' (Jacobs & Shapiro 2000: 55)

We would not like to suggest that the crafted talk of public consultation is mere rhetoric in its most limited and pejorative sense, or that public consultations are merely symbolic and designed to obscure the true motives of policy-makers. The notion of symbolic politics assumes a distinction between genuine action and symbolic action that we want to avoid; it seems to suggest that there is a hidden agenda operating behind the rhetoric of public involvement (Blühdorn 2005). Instead of searching for hidden motives and real objectives – which would entail a return to interrogations over the 'accuracy of reference' that we have dismissed as a useful tool to understand the public – we would like to argue that public consultations are technologies of elicitation and engines of movement; that they often generate unpredictable movement, of people and issues, and give rise to forms of sociality that spill over the models of interaction their organizers bring to bear; and that one of their fundamental outputs, and a yardstick by which they must be measured is their ability to move and entangle actors and the issues upon which they are called to deliberate.

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ESRC Centre for Analysis of Risk and Regulation

The London School of Economics and Political Science
Houghton Street
London WC2A 2AE

tel: +44 (0)20 7955 6577

fax: +44 (0)20 7955 6578

email: risk@lse.ac.uk

www.lse.ac.uk/Depts/carr