The systemic impacts of discrete deliberative experiments

Central research theme and innovation

Recent scholarship on deliberative democracy has taken a systemic turn (Owen & Smith 2015). A deliberative system is one in which the institutions and networks of governance support a deliberative approach to political conflict and problem-solving at a whole-system scale (Mansbridge et al. 2012). This systems perspective on deliberative democracy is in part a response to perceived limitations of discrete deliberative experiments, such as citizens' juries and other mini-public events. While discrete deliberative experiments usually succeed in creating a deliberative environment for the members of a mini-public, they have been much less successful in achieving sufficient influence and authority to change the way decisions are made in larger governance systems.

This is not to say there is no place for discrete deliberative experiments in a deliberative system. The key question is how such experiments help to maximise the deliberative potential of entire governance systems, beyond the boundaries of the event? The newDemocracy Foundation has an unequalled catalogue of previous, current and planned deliberative experiments that can act as a wonderful resource to explore this question.

To address this question, the proposed research project will investigate the systemic impacts of deliberative experiments undertaken by the Foundation. There are multiple ways in which impacts could flow through broader governance systems, including through the direct experiences of participants, the experiences of associated stakeholders and their networks, and media transmission. The research therefore explicitly addresses several of the identified research themes: the **experiences** of participants and stakeholders; the **impact** on institutions and networks in the broader governance system; the **connectivity** with other elements of the governance system; and the role of **mass and social media** as a key transmission mechanism in governance systems.

Research question and aims

The research project has two overarching aims:

1. To explore the ways in which discrete deliberative events interact with and connect to other elements of governance systems, and their overall impact on deliberation at a system-scale

2. To identify practical measures that organisers and facilitators of discrete deliberative events can take to enhance the potential for a positive impact on system-scale deliberation.

Understanding how discrete deliberative events fit into broader systems is important for the emerging field of deliberative system analysis. However, we are ultimately most interested in identifying ways that system mechanisms might be used to amplify the deliberative impact of discrete deliberative events, for example through use of social media to connect broader online audiences with the face-to-face participants in mini-publics.

To address these aims, we draw on Stevenson and Dryzek (2014), who define the elements of a deliberative system as including: public space; empowered space; transmission between public and empowered space; and accountability mechanisms. In this scheme, discrete deliberative events occur in public space and their challenge is to use transmission and accountability mechanisms within the deliberative system to influence empowered space. This research project poses the following research questions with respect to these transmission and accountability mechanisms:

- What evidence is there that discrete deliberative events achieve influence and impact on the topics they address, beyond their boundaries? What are the mechanisms by which influence and impact is achieved?

- How do participants and other stakeholders experience discrete deliberative events? How do their experiences influence their likelihood to share the event through their networks?

- How are discrete deliberative events portrayed in traditional and new media?

- In what ways do the responses to the above questions vary with the scale of the event?

- What can the organisers and facilitators of discrete deliberative events do to facilitate deliberation and impact beyond the boundaries of the event?

Research design and methodology

The research adopts a case study methodology, using events run by the Foundation as the cases. The cases will all be events that have not yet commenced. This is to facilitate collection of the data required to build each case; for social media analysis in particular, it is impossible to reconstruct social media discussion about each event if suitable tracking was not established prior to the event.

The research will develop three cases in detail. The cases will be diverse on three dimensions: governance scale, topic, and process. With respect to governance scale, we anticipate that the nature of the broader governance systems, and the pathways for transmission and accountability, will be different for local, state and national issues. As such, we aim to include a local, state and national case in the research project to allow exploration of this diversity. Similarly, we anticipate that governance systems and pathways will vary by topic area; hence, cases on different topics will be preferable. Finally, diversity in process would also be valuable. For example, the Call for Proposals mentions an upcoming online and in-person deliberative process. Comparing such a process with one conducted purely in-person would add value to the research. We will work with the Foundation to identify the most suitable upcoming cases.

For each case, the following research tasks will be undertaken:

1. Map the relevant governance system to identify key system elements and connections, and the location of the discrete deliberative event. The mapping process will employ the system elements proposed by Stevenson and Dryzek (2014), but will also draw on broader literature on system definitions and system mapping, including Checkland (2006). The initial map will be based on literature about the issue that is the subject of the deliberative event but will be updated throughout the project in response to empirical data.

2. Interview the organisers and convenors of the event to understand their aspirations for the event and intended pathways to influence and impact.

3. Interview selected participants about their experiences and any actions they take during the event to spread influence, such as posts on social media.

4. Interview selected stakeholders about their experiences of the event and any actions they take to spread influence. These stakeholders will include decision-makers that the event is seeking to influence, representatives of businesses, industry associations or non-government organisations that have a stake in the topic that is being discussed, and journalists or social media influencers that have an interest in the topic.

5. Undertake traditional and social media content analysis to understand how the event is portrayed in the media and to trace its movement through social networks. The traditional media content analysis will use Factiva keyword searches to identify references to the event. The analysis will identify distinct themes or discourses in the media discussion of each event, before and after. The social media analysis will use hashtag searches and post-tracking in Facebook and Twitter to understand which social media communities are sharing news about the event, what they are saying, and what messages achieve the most traction.

6. Draw on the interviews and media analysis to write the case descriptions and update the system map for each case.

A maximum of 10 interviews is proposed for each case, comprising 1-2 with organisers/convenors, 3-4 with participants and 5-6 with key stakeholders. Interviews will ideally be face-to-face and will run for approximately 1 hour. Interviews will be transcribed and analysed by using multiple readings of the transcript to build up summaries of the interviewee positions on the key research questions.

Expected contribution to existing knowledge on deliberative democracy

As noted above, the recent systemic turn in scholarship on deliberative democracy is a challenge to the role and value of discrete deliberative events, like those run by the Foundation. Our hypothesis is that mini-public events do have an important role to play in deliberative systems, but more work is needed to understand the ways in which mini-public events connect to other system elements and achieve influence and impact. The research project is expected to deliver practical knowledge on how mini-public events can maximise their potential to contribute towards deliberative talk within broader governance systems. This is potentially an important updating of mini-public practice to take into account new theoretical directions emerging from the systemic turn.

The research project is also likely to deliver theoretical contributions. What exactly is meant by a 'deliberative system' is contested, and different theoretical frameworks have been proposed (Mansbridge et al. 2012; Owen & Smith 2015; Stevenson & Dryzek 2014). What is notable about these contributions is that they do not engage to any great degree with the rich literature on systems thinking and soft systems methodology (e.g. Checkland & Poulter 2006). By drawing on this literature, we anticipate bringing new insights into the nature and definition of deliberative system, and developing practical analytical tools for exploring the systemic impact of discrete events.

Proposed timeline (with key milestones for completion)

The research project needs to identify three upcoming events run by the Foundation that constitute suitably diverse cases for study. The Call for Proposals mentions some promising candidates, including the large-scale online and in-person deliberation, and the possible Federal Government project. Our timeline will need to be flexible to accommodate the uncertainty about which events will go ahead and when. Further, the length of the event also influences the timing of the media analysis. This makes it difficult to set key milestones in advance. With these caveats, a proposed timeline is as follows. The intention is to complete the research by the end of 2016.

Aug 2015: Identify Case 1
Sept 2015: Develop Case 1 system map
Oct – Nov 2015: Interviews for Case 1
Oct – Dec 2015: Media analysis for Case 1
Jan 2016: Identify Case 2
Feb 2016: Develop Case 2 system map
Mar – Apr 2016: Interviews for Case 2

Mar – May 2016: Media analysis for Case 2
June 2016: Identify Case 3
July 2016: Develop Case 3 system map
Aug – Sep 2016: Interviews for Case 3
Aug – Oct 2016: Media analysis for Case 3
Nov – Dec 2016: Writing reports and outputs

Communication of research findings

Three written outputs are planned. First, we will write a brief research report that could be co-badged as a newDemocracy Foundation and Institute for Sustainable Futures publication, and published on the websites of both organisations. Second, we will develop an open-access journal article based on the research. Third, we will develop a short piece for an online journalism website, such as The Conversation. These three different kinds of publication will help to ensure that the findings are disseminated in different research and practitioner communities.

Opportunities for conference presentations on the research will also be explored. For example, the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) conference may be a suitable forum, but there may be other conferences at a suitable time with a focus on deliberative democracy. We are happy to explore other communication opportunities with the Foundation.

Background and role of principal researcher(s) and their institution

The proposed research is a collaboration between Dr Chris Riedy and Dr Jennifer Kent from the Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Technology Sydney. Dr Riedy supervised Dr Kent's doctoral research, and our subsequent collaboration has delivered a journal article (Riedy & Kent 2015) and an upcoming conference paper applying deliberative systems thinking.

Dr Chris Riedy is an Associate Professor at the Institute for Sustainable Futures with experience in organising, facilitating and evaluating deliberative democracy events, including the Capital Region Climate Change Forum in 2006 and World Wide Views on Global Warming in 2009. His recent work explores the role of grassroots innovations and niches in deliberative systems. Dr Riedy coordinates the Institute's work on social change for sustainable futures and he is the Director of the Institute's Higher Degree Research Program. He is a Senior Research Fellow of the Earth System Governance Project, President of the Climate Action Network Australia and a member of the International Environmental Communication Association. He has published more than 30 peer-reviewed articles, one book and more than 50 research reports.

Dr Jennifer Kent is an Honorary Associate of the Institute for Sustainable Futures. She is also Senior Environment Office at Marrickville Council's Green Living Centre. Jenny completed her doctoral research at the Institute in 2012 on the topic *Climate Change: Whose Responsibility? From the personal to the global.* A book drawing on her doctoral research is forthcoming with Routledge.

The Institute for Sustainable Futures is a research institute of the University of Technology Sydney with a mission to create change towards sustainable futures. The Institute has a long history of engagement with deliberative democracy, having run one of the first deliberative mini-public events in Australia (on container deposit legislation) and several mini-public events since that time.

Proposed budget and justification

The proposed budget for the research project is $27,870, excluding GST.

Research assistant to arrange interviews and run media analysis	Level 5 RA at $45/hr plus 26% on-costs, for 100 hours	$5,670
Buy-out of project hour commitments	This buys 20 hours of Dr Riedy's time at his normal rates. Dr Riedy will commit at least 100 hours to the project in total.	$6,000
Travel costs for interviews	Assume two interstate trips for two researchers to conduct interviews. Flights at $400 return, accommodation $150 per night, meals $50 per day. Includes an allowance for taxi and public transport fares.	$6,000
Interview transcription	Transcription of 30, 1-hour interviews at $3.50 per minute (Pacific Transcription quote).	$6,300
Fee for open access journal article	Fee for Environmental Politics is USD2950	$3,900

References

Checkland, P & Poulter, J 2006, *Learning for Action: A Short Definitive Account of Soft Systems Methodology and Its Use for Practitioner, Teachers,and Students*, John Wiley & Sons.

Mansbridge, JJ, Bohman, J, Chambers, S, Christiano, T, Fung, A, Parkinson, JR, Thompson, DF & Warren, M 2012, 'A systemic approach to deliberative democracy', in *Deliberative Systems: Deliberative Democracy at the Large Scale*, pp. 1–26.

Owen, D & Smith, G 2015, 'Survey Article: Deliberation, Democracy, and the Systemic Turn', *Journal of Political Philosophy*, vol. 23, no. 2, pp. 213–234.

Riedy, C & Kent, J 2015, 'Australian climate action groups in the deliberative system', *Environmental Politics*, vol. 24, no. 3, pp. 363–381.

Stevenson, H & Dryzek, JS 2014, *Democratizing Global Climate Governance*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.