

Introduction

From Public Participation to Community Engagement—and Beyond

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This volume starts with the assumption that effective participation by members of a community in policy decisions that impact their lives and livelihoods should be promoted, both as part of a normative commitment to deliberative democracy and because such participation often results in superior and more politically sustainable solutions to thorny or contentious issues (Dryzek, 2010; Fishin, 2011; Guttman & Thompson, 2004). The role of community input in environmental policy making has been a prominent issue for decades, dating back to Rachel Carson's call for a citizen's right to know about exposure to poisons in *Silent Spring* (1962) and the passage of landmark legislation such as the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969, a law that pioneered the creation of explicit pathways for soliciting public comments on proposed governmental actions. Public interest and involvement in environment quality has accelerated in the United States and elsewhere ever since, spurred by the activism and energy of Earth Day in 1970, opposition to nuclear energy, the crisis of hazardous waste disposal, environmental justice concerns, sustainable food and energy choices, climate change mitigation and adaptation, and many other local and global issues (Gottlieb, 1993).

Environmental problems that prompt the consideration of legal remedies or policy options are often multifaceted and complex, and present challenges for effective community involvement. For instance, in many situations, the “perceptions of problems (e.g. the nature of risk and priorities for collective action)” held by scientific or technical experts “are judged to be more rational than the ‘subjective’ perceptions . . . of the public” (Fiorino, 1990, p. 229), leading to decisions that are less than optimal for impacted stakeholders. Reconciling the need for expertise in managing and protecting the environment with the ideals of participatory democracy remains contentious but is nevertheless critical to the legitimacy of our political system, particularly with respect to the energy-food–natural resource management–environmental protection sectors.

Scholars from a variety of disciplines have generated a substantial body of theories, models, and concepts that inform the design, implementation, and evaluation of participatory processes attached to environmental and related policy arenas (Daniels & Walker, 2001; Nabatachi & Leighninger, 2015). However, effective public engagement remains difficult to do well, illustrating for us the vital need for more meaningful interactions among community members, civic leaders, and other interested parties. With a focus on the relationship between structure and enactment via discourse, the field of environmental communication offers theories and concepts that grapple with questions concerning the value and impact of public influence in environmental decision making, the role of power in the development and implementation of environmental politics, and also what equitable governance can look like (Carvalho, Phillips, & Doyle, 2012; Cox & Pezzullo, 2016; Depoe et al., 2004).

For example, Senecah’s (2004) Trinity of Voice (TOV) heuristic articulates three critical conditions that must be met to optimize effective public participation: access (opportunity for expression), standing (civic legitimacy), and influence (equal consideration of perspectives) (pp. 23–25). As a “practical theory,” TOV continues to be mobilized in contexts ranging from policy and planning (Carvalho, Pinto-Coelho, & Seixas, 2016; Hall, Gilbertz, Anderson, Lucas, & Ward, 2016; Natarajan, 2017), to natural resource management (Chowdhury & Rahman, 2008; Egunyu & Reed, 2015), to human ecology (Walker, Senecah, & Daniels, 2006). Designing and implementing participatory processes in ways that foreground these conditions is central to building trust between community members and their civic leaders, [building] capacity, and creating better environmental decisions (Senecah, 2004, p. 23).

As some observers have noted, in recent years “the participatory agenda has started to lose its momentum and justification” (Wesselink et al., 2011, p. 2688), and the environmental public sphere seems increasingly under attack. For example, 2016 was an especially turbulent year that featured, among other things, a surprising Brexit electoral result in the United Kingdom, reactionary rumblings across Europe and the Global South, a protracted and at times violent protest by indigenous water protectors opposing the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline through native lands in North Dakota, and the disturbing election of Donald Trump as president of the United States. Rollbacks in U.S. environmental regulations and withdrawal from international climate change agreements will certainly damage natural systems, have already garnered harsh criticism from global leaders and environmental activists, and will stifle opportunities for expansive public input.

Yet people *are* engaging decision makers in innovative ways, using tactics such as leadership capacity building, protest, and social media campaigns in efforts to reclaim access, civic standing, and influence. Community engagement can take many forms to empower communities and enact discursive change. With Wesselink and colleagues (2011), we call for a “more reflexive awareness of the different ways in which participation is defined and practiced” (p. 2688). Following this, our volume aims to break boundaries—that is, to widen the scope of concepts, practices, and theoretical insights included under this umbrella term. It may not (always) be the case that public participation is waning, but rather that there are other possibilities for public involvement in particular regulatory outcomes or for building awareness and relationships among stakeholders in long(er) term fights for change, as we illustrate below.

Recent Developments—and Lessons Learned

Two recent developments illustrate the contemporary landscape of environmental civic engagement and deliberative democracy; their contrast reinforces the significance of this edited volume. The first represents limitations of what Nabatachi and Leighninger (2015) refer to as the “public participation infrastructure,” a concept that informs the traditional view of public participation in environmental decision making. In late 2016, the U.S. Department of Interior Bureau of Land Management (BLM) released a new policy designed to “democratize” the BLM resource management planning process by “making it more collaborative, inclusive, transparent

and reflective of landscape-wide priorities” (Shogren, 2016). Although BLM planning decisions are subject to federal public participation requirements, some stakeholders claim that management plans have been drafted behind closed doors, often with minimal opportunities for public feedback offered too late in the process (McElroy, 2014). Titled “Planning 2.0,” the new rule called for elevated public participation, providing greater agency-public interaction through shared documents and data, written rationales for resource management plans, as well as public comment periods (Shogren, 2016). Applying Senecah’s (2004) TOV framework, Planning 2.0 showed great potential for increasing citizen engagement by supporting the access, standing, and influence of those involved in BLM planning decisions.

In spite of the BLM’s intentions, President Obama’s original executive order was derided as government overreach (Anderson, 2017). Through strategic deployment of obscure legislative procedures and hidden influence of industry lobby groups (Shogren, 2016), Congress voted to “strip the Bureau of Land Management’s (BLM) ‘Planning 2.0’ rule from the books” (Henry, 2017). The bill was subsequently signed by President Trump on March 27, 2017. In this process, our elected officials communicated their skepticism about (or perhaps disdain for) meaningful and frequent public participation in environmental management and planning, significantly diminishing TOV.

The second development was more widely publicized and, unlike Planning 2.0, occurred *outside* conventional spaces of public policy deliberation. Throughout the spring of 2017, several large-scale public protests were held in Washington, DC, and internationally, mobilizing millions in response to policy retrenchments instigated by the Trump administration. On April 29, 2017, the 100th day of Trump’s presidency, several hundred thousand participants marched to the White House under the slogan “There is no Planet B” (People’s Climate, 2017). Just one week prior, on Earth Day, the March for Science also brought more than one million people to the National Mall, marching “to defend the role of science in policy and society” (March for Science, 2017). Indeed, the Women’s March, convened in January, “was the largest coordinated protest in U.S. history and one of the largest in world history” (Women’s March, 2017); participation in this event was nearly three times higher than attendance at the Presidential Inauguration the day before (Wallace & Parlapiano, 2017).

Largely coordinated through social media outlets including Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit, these day-long events not only invited participants to march on Washington, but also sparked satellite protests in hundreds

of cities across the United States and around the world (Levinson, 2017; March for Science, 2017; Tamkin & Gramer, 2017). Through activities like crafting hats and making signs, giving speeches and playing music, delivering performances and parodies, posting pictures, and sharing videos from the events, protesters engaged in various creative and innovative tactics to voice their concerns and advocate for social change (Borovic, 2017; Levinson, 2017; People's Climate, 2017). The legacy of these marches endures as their Facebook pages and hashtags remain in circulation, and each of the charter organizations now outline explicit agendas for growing its respective movement. In addition to signaling the emergence of renewed political mobilization, these marches represent “new forms of participation” that become necessary when people “lack control over social decisions that affect them” (Fiorino, 1990, p. 228). Indeed, protest can be an important means by which “stakeholders who are denied [Trinity of Voice] . . . find a means by which to claim them” (Senecah, 2004, p. 23).

We draw two lessons from these developments. First, as the demise of Planning 2.0 illustrates, traditional public participation structures and pathways too often remain insufficiently open, transparent, or fair (Depoe and Delicath, 2004). Indeed, Nabatchi and Leighninger (2015) suggest that “the infrastructure of the public square”—what they conceive as the antiquated laws, processes, and institutions that no longer adequately support robust public engagement—is failing. The prescribed rules and procedures for public hearings, for example, can be difficult for ordinary citizens who may be unaccustomed to making public comments, thereby limiting engagement between decision makers and the public (Cox & Pezzullo, 2016, p. 303). Although policy frameworks such as NEPA often require public comment or other feedback, this can be perceived as perfunctory when regulatory authorities (ab)use public participation processes to “decide, announce, and defend” decisions made a priori rather than collect and incorporate input from affected publics (Hendry, 2004). Amid polarizing environmental policy debates, even the perception that “systems [are] designed to protect [officials'] expertise from citizen interference” (Nabatachi & Leighninger, 2015, p. 3) can sow the seeds of distrust between leaders and community members.

Second, as illustrated in the huge protest marches that unfolded in early 2017, public involvement in environmental decision making is increasingly going beyond traditional channels and mechanisms of participation. To be sure, comment periods, advisory boards, and hearings are still important means by which citizens communicate with decision makers, provide feedback on policies and practices, and voice their concerns. However, protests

like the March for Science and People’s Climate March demonstrate how publics also use unofficial, local, and disruptive means of public participation.

Mobilized marches and other activities analyzed in this volume support recent findings in the environmental policy literature, where scholars have noted shifts in public participation frameworks as traditional approaches are challenged and innovative alternatives are pursued. Charting this discursive turn over the past decade, Ross and colleagues (2016) find that “worldwide, the term ‘public participation’ is in decline, while ‘community engagement’ is rising” (p. 123). While traditional participation requirements can be met with passive methods, such as “command and control” public meetings or comment periods, engagement efforts emphasize active approaches that can foster collaboration and reconfigure the pathways by which community members become involved in environmental governance, such as interactive workshops, visualization exercises, community cafes, and participatory strategic planning. Individuals and grassroots groups also actively engage in deliberative processes through online tools, including using social media and apps, to raise awareness, share resources, recruit participants, and even coordinate affiliated events. Indeed, engaged citizens and communities are increasingly becoming “active agents, often taking their own initiatives to protect environments, whether through advocacy or practical action” (Ross et al., 2016, p. 125).

We are chastened as well as inspired by Planning 2.0 and the 2017 marches because they illustrate how engaged publics are using a widening array of creative, impactful, and sometimes multilayered tactics to advocate for environmental change and participate in decision-making processes. The March for Science and the People’s Climate March effectively mobilized people in a way not evident since the Civil Rights and anti-Vietnam War movements of decades past. Participants not only flew, bused, or carpooled to Washington, DC, but also hosted knitting and sign-making parties, sang together, and shared photos and videos online. Thus, as “active agents” (Ross et al., 2016), stakeholders may employ methods and tactics that embrace empowerment—participation that influences people and outcomes—involve-ment that makes a difference.

“Breaking Boundaries” as our Central Motif

By attending to the range of *and* interactions among “activities by which publics’ concerns, needs, interests, and values are incorporated into decisions

and actions on public matters and issues” (Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015, p. 13), scholars and practitioners may generate both theoretical insights and structural reforms. With this in mind, we invoke “breaking boundaries” as an organizing thematic for the critique, celebration, and expansion of what normatively constitutes public participation, while highlighting efforts to persuade, enact, and resist agendas; (re)define environmental problems; and advocate for solutions.

We collectively explore *how stakeholder voices can be reclaimed in regulatory decision making, what is afforded (and foreclosed) by various practices and tactics used to design and navigate public participation processes, and how communities around the world are innovating new technologies to engage environmental decision makers*. This volume is offered in the hope that scholars and practitioners can break the boundaries that demarcate formal public involvement from other civic activities and work across concepts and categories, to not only expose their limits but also productively nuance the interrelationships among them.

Chapter Organization and Cross-Cutting Themes

Following an opening chapter that provides an overview of the public participation innovation landscape, this volume is organized into three sections. Section I, “Exploring Dimensions of Participation Within Policy Frameworks” (chapters 2–6), presents a variety of case studies drawn from traditional public participation infrastructures. Section II, “Expanding Pathways of Community Engagement” (chapters 7–10), explores ways to move engaged publics beyond the limitations of traditional participation toward broader, more inclusive engagement. Section III, “Enacting Horizons of Civic Technology” (chapters 11 and 12), explores the emerging use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in environmental decision making. As you read this volume, we invite you to extract both theoretical and critical insights and more specific, practical guidance that can improve environmental public participation at all levels. In particular, we want to preview four cross-cutting themes that emerge in the chapters.

1. Public participation infrastructures should adapt to local conditions and stakeholder concerns whenever possible to yield optimal results. Local context should be strongly considered when designing and implementing participation mechanisms, whether they are mandated by regulatory

frameworks or are part of the ongoing fabric of the community. Based on a variety of local experiences and interventions, Silka et al. (chapter 1) warn against a “one size fits all” approach to public participation, and indicate that design choices should be sensitive to issues of scale, range of stakeholders impacted, and decision complexity. Walker et al. (chapter 2) provide a number of concrete suggestions for public participation practice derived from listening sessions with local stakeholders within the U.S. forest system. Lind (chapter 4) suggests that environmental policy makers should take into account variations in local geography and politics when designing programs to solicit public input on complex issues such as water use and quality. Reinig and Sprain (chapter 5) examine cultural discourses in public participation around energy-related issues in Boulder, Colorado, and suggest that conventional tools like public hearings, email communications, and referendums can have different meanings and effectiveness depending on local norms and patterns of interaction. Dodson and Paliser (chapter 7) compare and contrast two public participation frameworks in New Zealand and present ideas for improving multiparty dialogue that involve indigenous voices and expertise in ways that can yield superior and more supportable decisions based on community access, standing, and influence as outlined in Senecah’s (2004) TOV. Based on her lived experiences and interviews with community members living in Indonesia, Tam (chapter 8) recommends that public participation planners account for the spatial particularity of participation practice, meaning that stakeholder input is sometimes best obtained in byways and neighborhood spaces outside the government hearing room or town hall.

2. Innovative public participation practices should combine elements of traditional infrastructure with alternative formats and approaches to community engagement. As indicated earlier, breaking boundaries does not necessarily mean discarding long-standing mechanisms for public participation such as hearings, comment periods, and advisory boards. Rather, we see innovations occurring in many instances that involve *combining* old and new ways of generating community interest and involvement. McKinney (chapter 3) outlines a regional approach to natural resource management in the Crown of the Continent region of the northwestern United States and southwestern Canada. What McKinney terms the “ecology of governance” in the region involves a dense network of relationships and activities among a host of governmental and quasigovernmental bodies that encourages a

significant amount of local stakeholder engagement. Upton et al. (chapter 9) outline a program of indigenous leadership development offered in a number of countries by the nonprofit organization Rare, and conclude that the program has produced a variety of benefits including an increase in the amount of local community engagement in more conventional structures of environmental problem solving and governance.

3. While digital media and other information and communication technologies (ICTs) can enhance the quantity and impact of community engagement in environmental decision making, their affordances and limitations should be also be considered. A number of chapters examine the use by community members of so-called “civic technologies” as a way of both gaining information about environmental issues and influencing future outcomes in environmental decision making. Quiring (chapter 11) presents “trans-media storymaking” as an innovative mode of interactive social media engagement that can provide users with information provided by government officials and others as well as ways of inputting ideas and comments into an ongoing discernment process. Typhina (chapter 12) presents “eco-apps” as a technology that can afford users with opportunities for tagging, posting and commenting, and visualization related to local geographic contexts and concerns. Both chapters present preliminary user experience results, with Quiring focusing on counting views of the transmedia website and Typhina focusing on the limitations of various design elements of the eco-apps. While these case studies highlight the civic potential of digital modes of community engagement, they also illustrate that digital technologies may stimulate a variety of forms of engagement, but should not be taken as substitutes for other participation modes that provide access, standing, and influence for stakeholders. As noted by Dubow (2017), “it remains to be seen whether online activism actually translates into positive change in the offline world, and whether the increasing use of digital technologies actually facilitates or hinders greater social inclusion” (p. 2). Thus, governmental entities and others that employ these technologies should account for their limitations as well as their affordances.

4. Public participation formats and technologies should account for power dynamics present in local decision-making contexts and embedded in the formats themselves. The relationship between public participation infrastructures and citizen power is a central element of Trinity of Voice.

For Senecah (2004), voice is a normative concept that is assessed based on the degree to which participation processes provide opportunities for community members and other stakeholders to have a demonstrative impact on the outcome of an environmental policy decision that impacts their lives and livelihoods. A number of the chapters in this volume examine ways in which community members can reclaim political influence and power to shape issues and decisions, either within or outside official participation channels. Innovative or creative tactics may either disrupt or transform conventional public participation strategies. Hunt et al. (chapter 6) examine ways in which participants in public hearings may subvert institutional efforts to label activist discourse as “indecorous voice” in order to interrupt routinized processes in ways that promote maximum visibility for otherwise forgotten issues or communities. Simis-Wilkinson and Hopke (chapter 9) coin the term “disruptive public participation” to describe how activists can employ various media platforms (like Twitter) and forms (words and images) to create and circulate a counternarrative that critiques institutional rules and use of force in ongoing environmental protests both within and outside the meeting hall. Innovative strategies may either disrupt or transform conventional approaches to public participation.

The landscape of public engagement is changing as the environmental public sphere is under threat; traditional ways of communicating and enacting public participation in environmental decision making must be reclaimed, reinvigorated, and transformed. As revealed in this volume, innovations taking place in local communities can nourish a new generation of deliberative engagement in the environmental arena. We invite readers to reconsider the conventions of public participation in environmental decision making amid the realities of 21st-century governance, and imagine possibilities for new processes and structures for citizen engagement in the United States and around the world.

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