

Guest Editorial Preface

Special Issue of Imagining the Engaged Citizen and Public in the Age of Social Media

Marco Adria, University of Alberta, Alberta, Canada

The use of dedicated public-involvement methods, such as citizen juries, panels, and polling, has increased since their introduction in the 1970s (Abelson et al., 2003; Lyn & Martin, 1991). Policy areas that have benefited from these methods include electoral reform, land-use planning, environmental assessment processes, human reproductive technology development, and health care delivery. The authors of this special issue of *IJPADA* use cases and data from the U.S., Canada, and Spain as the basis for their insights, cautions, and encouragements, suggesting something of the broad importance of the theme, “Imagining the Engaged Citizen and Public in the Age of Social Media.”

New opportunities and challenges are emerging for the engaged citizen and public as a result of the arrival of social media on mobile electronic devices (Bilge and others 2016). The evidence offered by the authors allows us to consider critically the pathways that are often proposed for higher quality engagement and participation: process innovation, learning, and technology adoption. Three questions in particular are considered by the authors in this special issue.

1. In an area of practice in which face-to-face deliberation and discussion is often given primacy, what role should be given to non-human elements such as artificial intelligence (AI)?

Along with his colleagues, José Luis Fernández-Martínez describe and assess the outcomes of a special workshop held in association with Spain’s University of Barcelona and the Artificial Intelligence Research Institute. The workshop attracted activists, designer, scholars, and practitioners who took on the task of developing CoGovern, an online tool that incorporates AI to support and improve the quality of citizen participation in policy decisions. The authors’ article, entitled, “Co-designing participatory tools for a new age,” describes AI’s capacity to aid in selecting the best possible combination of policy priorities based on previously agreed and weighted decision criteria. The authors describe such a process as more sophisticated and nuanced, when compared with traditional vote-counting. Although CoGovern is only at the prototype stage, the authors conclude that it represents enough promise to form the basis for further research and development.

2. How will citizens learn about and practice new ideas and innovations in the area of public engagement?

Two articles address this question. The first concerns the higher educational programs by which journalists learn their trade. If citizens are to develop their capacities as engaged contributors to public policy and the political culture in which they live, they require sources of validated facts, along with narratives and analyses that reveal hidden problems, even scandals, in the public sphere. These were

previously made widely available through the traditional media of newspaper and mass broadcasting. Yet professional and career prospects have become precarious in the field of journalism, because of widespread reductions and consolidations in the budgets and operations of the newspaper and broadcast media.

In “Public service journalism in the age of entrepreneurship,” Maggie Mary Reid addresses this problem by considering the concepts of entrepreneurial journalism (journalists responding to volatile or shrinking employment prospects by self-branding), and the public service ideal (journalism marked by the values of independence, freedom from censorship, critical thought, and so on). The article describes a gap between the goals and practices of entrepreneurial journalism and the values of the public service ideal. The author interviews university professors as key informants as the basis for assessing the potential fate of journalism education in support of the public service ideal. She finds that while entrepreneurial journalism and the public service ideal are not in “inherent conflict,” caution must be taken to ensure that the former does not overshadow the latter.

Valerie Steeves and Priscilla M. Regan, authors of “Teaching digital citizenship in the networked classroom,” consider how we can imagine citizens who will come of age in the digital era by addressing the topic of digital citizenship as it is taught in schools. Based on a 2016 survey of teachers, the authors find that government curricula continue to emphasize the technical aspects of digital literacy for students, to the detriment of teaching the broad values of the engaged citizen and public. According to the authors, the barriers to teaching digital citizenship include a dissolving boundary between in-school and out-of-school contexts, the commercial nature of the digital world, and continuing difficulties in evaluating online information. The authors conclude that the concept of digital literacy should be broadened beyond the skills-based approach and instead be carried out with the goal of promoting and preparing students for democratic citizenship.

3. Will social media help or hinder as citizens become more engaged in decisions that affect them?

In their article entitled, “Social media use and political mobilization,” Justin W. Holmes and Ramona S. McNeal consider whether the use of social media helps or hinders citizens as they seek to become more participative as citizens, especially in the context of active political engagement, including voting. The authors hypothesize a positive association between social media use and political engagement. Assessing the results of a large-scale survey questionnaire, they find mixed results. Social media, according to the authors, is most likely to be associated with higher levels of political engagement when citizens are already politically predisposed.

Taken together, the articles in this special issue suggest that citizen and public are rapidly shifting constructions. The authors avoid simplistic solutions to the question of how higher quality engagement and participation may be achieved. However, they show that in at least the following areas, further development and study are likely to yield worthwhile results: process innovation using AI, higher education in which the journalistic ideal of public service is maintained, and learning in schools and universities that takes into account the importance of the citizen and public for maintaining the health of democracy.

Marco Adria
Guest Editor
IJPADA

REFERENCES

Abelson, J., Forest, P., Eyles, J., Smith, P., Martin, E., & Gauvin, F. (2003). Deliberations about deliberative methods: Issues in the design and evaluation of public participation processes. *Social Science & Medicine*, *57*(2), 239–251. doi:10.1016/S0277-9536(02)00343-X PMID:12765705

Bilge, G., Hehl-Lange, S., & Lange, E. (2016). The use of mobile devices in participatory decision-making. *Journal of Digital Landscape Architecture*, 234-242.

Kathlene, L., & Martin, A. (1991). Enhancing citizen participation: Panel designs, perspectives, and policy formation. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, *10*(1), 46–63. doi:10.2307/3325512