WHY WE NEED A GREATER DIVERSITY OF EXPERTS FOR EFFECTIVE PUBLIC DIALOGUE

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One of the key outcomes from the 'Use of Experts' workstream report was for the role of experts to be more carefully considered in the planning and delivery of public dialogues. This article looks at one aspect of that report – to advocate bringing in a greater number and diversity of experts in public dialogue and why that is becoming even more pertinent.

In the public dialogues Sciencewise-ERC has funded and advised on, a sample of members of the public is asked to deliberate on an issue, exploring their hopes, fears and aspirations so that policy can be better informed by those views.

Therefore, we give people quite a challenge – from knowing little, if anything, on a subject to, over the course of two or three days, being immersed in subjects such as synthetic biology, geoengineering, stem cells and animals containing human material, and then discussing the challenges, issues, benefits and pitfalls. Participants are taken through a range of information and often in a spread of different formats – information sheets, videos, presentations and their own research – to bring them up to speed with the core aspects and narratives on the subject. Participants also hear the views of different 'experts' as another way of enabling them to see through and round the different aspects of an issue.

And therein is the challenge that requires explicit consideration – who are the 'experts' and how do we faithfully and credibly cover the diversity of perspectives that may exist on an issue?

WHY A DIVERSITY OF EXPERTS?

I suggest there are two key drivers for this diversity. Firstly, to enable participants to deliberate as effectively as they can on the issue at hand and, secondly, (and often not given enough emphasis) to provide an opportunity for the experts to be participants themselves in those processes as a way of directly hearing the issues from the public and thus informing their own thinking and research trajectories.

FOR PUBLIC PARTICIPANTS – SEEING THE WHOLE

If we are expecting people to make choices or express views on a subject, then we should provide perspectives that enable participants to get as holistic a view as possible on the issue to help the process of deliberation.

Without faithfully providing as full a picture as possible of the issues, the process becomes in danger of being challenged for bias.

"Debates about science should involve different opinions/viewpoints and a plurality of expertise and recognition of other types of knowledge that take into account minority opinions" [1]

Obviously, each dialogue is specifically planned and factors such as purpose of the dialogue, and the issue being discussed are key to defining who the experts may be. Inevitably, time factors will also play a part somewhere along the line restricting how much can be achieved – which is why it is so important to think carefully about who is chosen to provide 'expert input'.

Evaluations of dialogues show that a variety of viewpoints is always valued by participants – and, indeed, if the variety of input is not there, then participants often quickly pick up on its omission.

"It was also particularly valuable to have a variety of viewpoints among the speakers. This helped ensure that participants did not feel manipulated towards a particular conclusion, and also helped them feel there was no 'right' answer which, in turn, made them feel more comfortable about expressing their own views." (HFEA Hybrid & Chimera Embryos dialogue) [2]

As far as possible, it is really valuable to give participants the opportunity to say which experts and/or viewpoints they would want to hear.

FOR EXPERTS – REFLECTING PUBLIC HOPES, FEARS AND ASPIRATIONS

There is another reason for wanting to include a diversity of experts in public dialogue – to provide greater opportunity for the experts themselves. Public dialogue is, importantly (or should be), about experts being able to discuss the issues with public participants – to hear first hand the issues and concerns. Giving experts an opportunity to hear what the public thinks and feels about an issue is important, and crucial in the case of research, if we are to truly embed societal thinking into future research trajectories.

"I gained a lot from listening to the views of a very diverse range of members of the public who, by and large, were very supportive of us, but had a few areas where they weren't certain. I think it has allowed me to sort of set my barometer at a more appropriate point." (Professor Chris Mason, University College London, an expert speaker and member of the Oversight Group in the Stem Cell Dialogue) [3]

Not only does diversity enable richer public dialogues, it also enables greater reflection of public thinking into future science and technological developments.

EXPERT – WHAT EXPERT?

So, who exactly is an expert? This, of course, will vary from subject to subject and process to process. In Sciencewise dialogues, expert input has broadly fallen into the following categories:

- **Experts (scientific/technical/legal)** provide technical and scientific-based inputs from the whole range of science – from social science and philosophy through to physical and life sciences
- **Stakeholders** largely provide views and evidence based on a particular standpoint and often represent lobbying or special interest groups, eg the Renewable Energy Association, Greenpeace
- **Experiential** publics are members of the public who have a specific knowledge, can contribute by sharing their personal insights and stories into an issue, eg parents of children with a chronic medical condition, who have gained considerable knowledge of that particular condition over time, but who also have direct experience as users of a medical service

BROADENING THE NOTION OF WHO IS AN EXPERT

The notion of who might be perceived as an expert is under constant debate.

"…when it comes to the future of an emerging technology, no one (or everyone) is an expert." http://www.nature.com/news/2010/100804/full/466688a.html NatureNews: World View: Not by experts alone – David Sarewitz

As the Big Society starts to play out, it is possible that, with an emphasis away from centralised 'power' to more local delivery, there will come a greater recognition of the role and experiences of those individuals and organisations delivering solutions. The extension of this means a widening of whom we might perceive as experts in the future – particularly to those with increasing direct and practical, rather than academic, experience.

Couple this with the continued rise of the professional amateur, resourced and profiled by ever wider internet powered information sharing, and it is likely that the choice of which 'experts' and perspectives are pertinent, challenging and appropriate in public dialogue is sure to broaden.

So, while advocating a much stronger presence and number of scientists and academic experts to participate in public dialogue, it is also necessary to consider involving a much wider set of perspectives on an issue to equip public participants with the range of viewpoints on the subject at hand.

In conclusion, the tips to bear in mind for every dialogue is to think carefully about which, and in what way, experts are involved in public dialogue:

- Are the range of perspectives faithfully covered to give participants a holistic view of the issues?
- Who is best suited to give those perspectives – academics, NGOs, those with experiences or stories to share – do we need to look beyond the 'usual suspects'?
- How can experts themselves be participants in the process and become more able to understand fully the thoughts of public participants so that, in turn, this can help develop thinking, research and developments that are fit for purpose and in line with a society that ultimately gives the 'licence to operate' for many new technologies.

1 Participatory Science and Scientific Participation: The role of Civil Society Organisation in decisionmaking about novel developments in biotechnology. http://www.participationinscience.eu/psx2/final/PSX2_final%20report.pdf

2 Warburton, Diane – Shared Practice (2007) - Evaluation of the HFEA public consultation on hybrid and chimera embryos http://www.sharedpractice.org.uk/Downloads/HFEA%20Report.pdf

3 Mohr, Alison (2009) An independent evaluation of the BBSRC and MRC Stem Cell Dialogue Project 2008. University of Nottingham, Institute for Science and Society, P47, Final draft May 2009.

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RESEARCHERS VISUALISE HERPES VIRUS' TACTICAL MANOEUVRE

For the first time, researchers have developed a 3D picture of a herpes virus protein interacting with a key part of the human cellular machinery, enhancing our understanding of how it hijacks human cells to spread infection and opening up new possibilities for stepping in to prevent or treat infection. This discovery uncovers one of the many tactical manoeuvres employed by the virus.

The Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC)-funded team, led by The University of Manchester, have used NMR – a technique related to the one used in MRI body scanners and capable of visualising molecules at the smallest scales – to produce images of a herpes virus protein interacting with a mouse cellular protein. These images were then used to develop a 3D model of this herpes virus protein interacting with human protein. The research was published this evening in PLoS Pathogens on 6 January.

Lead researcher Dr Alexander Golovanov from Manchester's Interdisciplinary Biocentre and Faculty of Life Sciences said, "There are quite a few types of herpes viruses that cause problems as mild as cold sores through to some quite serious illnesses, such as shingles or even cancer. Viruses cannot survive or replicate on their own – they need the resources and apparatus within a human cell to do so. To prevent or treat diseases caused by viruses we need to know as much as possible about how they do this so that we can spot weak points or take out key tactical manoeuvres."