The Philosophy and Methods of Deliberative Democracy: Implications for Public Policy and Marketing

Julie L. Ozanne, Canan Corus, and Bige Saatcioglu

Urgent social problems increasingly arise at the intersection of the interests of business leaders, policy makers, and consumers. The authors argue that deliberative democracy offers a fruitful approach for understanding marketing’s impact on society by revealing the complex and often conflicting network of interests among stakeholders. Deliberative methods hold promise for easing constraints on civic engagement and increasing consumer empowerment. The authors explore the historical and philosophical underpinnings of deliberative democracy. Specifically, they evaluate popular methods and applications of deliberative democracy and examine the implications for public policy and marketing.

Keywords: deliberative democracy, consumer welfare, civic engagement, consumer empowerment, stakeholder perspective

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understanding, even if a consensual solution does not emerge. This process is a normative and democratic one in which arguments are logically assessed and distinguished according to their accountability. Relevant stakeholders are equal participants who are actively involved in reflective and deep deliberation with few constraints placed on their exploration and dialogue (Holmes and Scoones 2000). Deliberative approaches expand political and corporate decision making to include informed consumers and relevant stakeholders as “makers and shapers” of policy (Cornwall and Gaventa 2000). We suggest that deliberative democracy is consistent with a macromarketing perspective that treats marketing as a “form of constructive engagement … that benefits local and global stakeholders” (Shultz 2007, p. 293).

The Importance of Deliberation in Strategic Decision Making

Traditionally, corporate actions face both legal and social constraints imposed by consumers who can always refuse to purchase the firms’ products. Consumers’ interest in corporate social responsibility is growing, and as a result, ethical and social corporate audits can provide a firm with a competitive advantage (Arnould 2009). Rather than responding to current consumer demands for social responsibility, executives may benefit by aggressively examining their broader social impact. However, tremendous difficulty lies in assessing the firm’s social impact and identifying profitable courses of action that would be efficacious for all stakeholders.

Proponents of the marketing concept suggest that good strategy should be based on the needs of consumers, while those who follow a more societal concept attempt to expand consumers’ needs to include the needs of society (Wilkie and Moore 1999). Typical methods to assess consumer needs include surveys, focus groups, and interviews. However, in an increasingly interdependent and global marketplace, consumers’ ability to determine in isolation what is in their or society’s best interest is far from perfect (Jocz and Quelch 2008). Consumers’ ability to communicate their needs accurately will likely improve when they are educated regarding the best available evidence at hand, have queried leading experts, and have debated the issue with other relevant stakeholders. Moreover, given that no single course of action is likely to be acceptable to all stakeholders, a democratic and dialogical process that includes wider input from various stakeholders would be useful to better understand the social implications of strategic decisions. The interests of a firm’s direct and indirect stakeholders are diverse and present managers with difficult trade-offs.

More effective methods are needed for including the voices of multiple stakeholders in marketing decisions (Bhattacharya and Korschen 2008; Shultz 2007). First, current approaches to corporate social responsibility often involve executives making top-down decisions that are announced to stakeholders after the executives have agreed on them (Norris 2005; Polonsky 1995). Thus, the flow of information is unidirectional from “informed” experts to the “uninformed” lay public. However, because regulations are usually slow to reflect technical developments, companies may choose not to disclose relevant but nonregulated information on product labels on the grounds that it is “confusing,” such as in the case of genetically modified ingredients (Magnan 2006). Ethical marketing decisions, based on a conceptualization of marketing as fair exchange, should allow for multidirectional exchange between the corporation and its stakeholders (Scherer and Palazzo 2007). Deliberative processes enable open dialogue to facilitate a meaningful consumer engagement through two-way dialogue (Newell 2006).

Second, current standards of responsible corporate behavior established by law provide a low bar of commendable corporate citizenship (Karpatkin 1999). The government’s responsibilities as promoter and regulator of investment often create conflicting motives. For example, to appeal to corporations, states often loosen environmental standards or labor laws and justify their actions with projections of higher employment and greater regional development (Laczniak and Murphy 2006; Newell et al. 2006).

Through deliberation, firms can consider the input of multiple stakeholders without requiring government mediation, they can potentially generate acceptable decisions for stakeholders, and they can be leaders in establishing new standards of corporate responsibility.

Third, consumers’ ability to shape company actions depends on whether they have sufficient purchasing power to affect profits. The poor are “consumers to a far lesser extent than others” and thus are stripped of this vital weapon (Arnould 2007, p. 105). As a consequence, they are chronically underrepresented in corporate decisions that affect their lives. For example, the poor and marginal suffer from greater environmental racism (e.g., Dole’s overuse of pesticides in Central American plantations (Ger 1997)). Deliberative practices offer an opportunity for consumers who are disenfranchised to voice their concerns to firms.

Next, we compare and contrast deliberative democracy with representative democracy, which are approaches that complete rather than compete with each other. We then explore the historical and philosophical roots of deliberative democracy, followed by a discussion of five popular methods and an application of these methods. Finally, we discuss critiques of deliberative democracy.

Representative Democracy and Deliberative Democracy

The growing interest in participative and discursive forms of governance has arisen amid a confluence of factors. First, governments that employ representative democracies, such as the United States, assume that elected politicians are best able to argue and decide policy issues for the citizens who elect them (Smith and Wales 2000). In contrast, advocates of deliberative democracy assume that it is worthwhile for all citizens to debate the decisions that will affect their lives and that this input should be relevant to governments that serve at the pleasure of their citizenry and to companies that depend on the support of consumers for their long-term survival (Pimbert and Wakeford 2001). Similar to elected representatives, corporate executives presume that they create policies that encompass the diverse views of all relevant stakeholders (e.g., Mitchell, Agle, and Wood 1997). This assumption is undermined with the growing complexity and varying legitimacy of stakehold-
ers’ claims (Damak-Ayadi and Pesqueux 2005), the ascendency of powerful shareholders (Laczniak and Murphy 2006), and the interconnecting web of stakeholder networks. A deliberative approach expands stakeholder theory by including a broader range of constituents entangled in a conflictual, multifaceted social space in which claims can be voiced and discussed openly. In doing so, it highlights marketing’s role as a dynamic social force with the potential to transform society (Bhattacharya and Korschun 2008).

Second, different forms of deliberative democracy have evolved in response to the shortcomings of its representative counterparts for addressing the needs of disadvantaged citizens (Smith and Wales 2000). In the representative democracy model, the social and economic interests of the poor and other marginalized groups are often inadequately understood and served (Bloomfield et al. 2001). For many poor citizens, the political process ends with their vote at the polls. After a representative is elected, these citizens lack immediate power to influence policies that will affect their lives. Even in mature democracies, such as the United States, few deliberative spaces exist for citizens to influence policies from below, and they must increasingly trust others to act in their best interests (Button and Mattson 1999). The World Bank’s Voices of the Poor report finds that the poor are increasingly disenfranchised from governance, lack confidence, and view the state as unaccountable and unresponsive to their needs (Narayan et al. 2000). Deliberative and inclusionary practices have the potential to improve the legitimacy of public policy decision making by including disenfranchised consumers in the participative process (Ozanne and Saatcioglu 2008).

Third, deliberation, pursued as a logical and reasoned process, can improve the quality of political decision making (Dryzek 1996). Representative democracies tend to rely on people’s aggregated preferences and fail to attend to the underlying reasons or the legitimacy of those reasons (Young 2000). At times, people may vote out of fear, reciprocity, or even altruism rather than through the careful consideration of the best evidence, the full range of solutions, or the diversity of interests. However, public deliberation can provide a process of reasoning and critical judgment through which diverse citizens’ preferences can be examined and challenged (Dryzek 1996).

Finally, political and strategic decisions involve complex and uncertain conditions, such as the long-term safety of genetically modified foods or new pharmaceutical drugs (Stirling 2001). Scientific decisions have occasionally proved to be disastrous, leaving citizens with greater distrust and cynicism, as in the case of the medical decision to encourage hormone replacement therapy (Irwin 2001). Moreover, scientific experts offer competing predictions, do not represent the diversity of community perspectives, and often lack any special expertise to untangle ethical and moral issues. This erosion of trust among consumers means that representational governments, or firms for that matter, can no longer build their policies on the uncontested ground of scientific expertise but must also take into consideration competing local interests (Ger 1997; Holmes and Scoones 2000). Indeed, one of the greatest challenges that democracies currently face is to ensure civic respect and accommodate diversity (Delanty 2002). Deliberative processes may help rebuild trust by facilitating debates in which stakeholders can hold governing bodies accountable for their actions and advocate for acceptable principles of conduct before the decisions are made (Newell and Wheeler 2006). Deliberative processes can also aid firms by identifying unforeseen implications of their actions for consumers and communicating a deep and authentic interest in good corporate citizenship.

**Deliberative Democracy**

**Intellectual and Historical Roots**

Many theorists have argued that public deliberation is an effective way to improve decision making. Beginning with Aristotle and continuing through John Stuart Mill, writers have advocated different forms of deliberative democracy. Nevertheless, these early forms of deliberative democracy were often elitist, and only a privileged group of educated citizens were allowed to participate (Gutmann and Thompson 2004). A more populist form of deliberative democracy did not emerge until the twentieth century. John Dewey cautioned against the dangers of depending on an elite class of scientific experts who are detached and far removed from the public interests they seek to serve. He suggested that citizen involvement is fostered if the public is provided with balanced information and becomes aware of its capacity to understand and influence policies (Pimbert and Wakeford 2001). Dewey (1927) argued that the best social policy occurs when experts and citizens engage in ongoing dialogue in public spheres; democracy works poorly when individuals make judgments in isolation, lack empathy for others’ perspectives, and fail to act on issues that matter to them (Smith and Wales 2000).

In the United States, deliberative democratic practices have both gained and lost prominence as a dynamic social and cultural force (Gastil and Keith 2005). Early manifestations of deliberative democracy occurred in open public forums and panel discussions. In the early twentieth century, these spaces were popular with the general public, which enjoyed the novelty of formal speakers engaging the audience in energetic discussions (Levine 2000). Through the Federal Forum Project, the government funded speakers who presented seminars to more than one million people annually with the goal of both educating the public and training people in the practice of democratic communication. Nevertheless, deliberative democracy lost ground around 1940 and into the 1970s. This retrenchment was due to various political and social dynamics, including the chill of censorship during the Cold War period, the spread of mass communication technology, and the privileging of scientific expertise over more populist wisdom. The upsurge of consumer advocacy in the 1970s signaled a resurgence of more grassroots involvement in democracy. More recent sociocultural and technological changes have inspired a revival of deliberative democracy, such as the development of a new civic spirit following the tragedy of September 11; new technology, such as the Internet, which has destabilized traditional power relationships; and the emergence of new civic players, such as nonprofit organizations (Gastil and Keith 2005). Often referred to as “discursive (communnicative) democracy,” deliberative democracy is a successor to the radical participatory communitarian models that
shaped various new social movements, including the ecological movement, the peace movement, and feminism (Delanty 2000).

Next, we explore deliberative democracy in detail by first examining the underlying assumptions and goals. We also provide examples of deliberative methods and applications that we evaluate for strengths and weaknesses. We argue that the methods of DIPs can broaden the opportunities for consumers to struggle for fair exchange in the marketplace and within government.

The Political Theory

Deliberative democracy is a normative political theory; that is, it espouses how political practice should occur rather than offering an explanatory model (Chambers 2003). Many variants of deliberative democracy exist, but we explore the common features that provide a family resemblance. We also note some of the major intellectual departures.

This theory can best be understood against the dominant approach, which is an interest-based or aggregate model of political behavior. This aggregate model assumes that in the marketplace of political alternatives, people cast their votes on the basis of what is in their private self-interest, and a simple majority of voters decides policy. As with economic models, democracy follows the voters’ preferences; issues of fairness revolve around making sure all votes are counted and that the process is transparent (Gutmann and Thompson 2004). This aggregate model is based on the principle of economic rationality, according to which all people act solely on the basis of their private self-interests and do not require public deliberation or any consideration of what is in the best interest of society (Jocz and Quelch 2008). However, deliberative processes are guided by the norms of communicative rationality (Habermas 1984) that emerge through intersubjectivity and social interaction as opposed to isolated individual subjectivity (Dryzek 1996).

Deliberative democratic theory aspires to an ideal in which people make judgments about controversial issues by moving beyond their narrow self-interests and engaging one another in reasoned deliberation to consider what is in the common good (Freeman 2000). Two main camps have emerged among theorists who advocate different notions of the common good. Procedural theorists stress that fair rules of process lead to a more democratic process, whereas substantive theorists suggest that good procedures are a necessary but insufficient requirement. For example, the rule that the majority vote decides policy can lead to unjust decisions, such as environmental racism. Substantive theorists focus on the fairness of the final political outcome and argue for the primacy of some basic rights, such as freedom of religion and freedom from discrimination, to ensure fair outcomes (Gutmann and Thompson 2004). Similarly, Rousseau argues that the common good can be defined as what all citizens need to be independent, free, and equal, which are values that are in everyone’s self- and collective interests to protect (Freeman 2000). Disputes also exist among consensual and pluralist theorists. Consensual theorists believe that the goal of reaching a cooperative agreement is idealistic but worth pursuing. Pluralists take deep moral disagreements in political life as the normal state of affairs and try to work out fair systems that allow people to live harmoniously despite their disagreements (Gutmann and Thompson 2004).

Despite these differences, most deliberative theorists would agree with the following definition: Deliberative democracy is an idealized system in which citizens deliberate before voting and try to make thoughtful judgments for the collective good. These citizens must be free and equal and must operate within a political system that guarantees basic rights and within a social life that provides them with basic resources. People are diverse and may form their own ideas about what is in the common good, but they must provide supporting evidence that reasonable people can understand (Freeman 2005).

Thus, deliberative democracy acts as a vehicle to realize a shared public life and civic engagement through a process of moral and mutual reason giving. In this regard, it offers a way of getting citizens and multiple stakeholders to discuss different views and ideologies, shape and transform opinions, correct misperceptions, and differentiate between interests geared toward the common good and merely self-interested agendas (Levine 2002). Deliberation encourages mutual respect and reciprocal accountability, thus motivating participants to eliminate irrational and self-focused opinions to generate a “moralizing effect of public discussion” (Smith and Wales 2000, p. 53). Such a view is consistent with the work of Habermas (1984) in his normative theory of communicative action. Habermas (1997) advocates popular sovereignty as the foundation for a deliberative democracy. Specifically, he argues for a collective, reasonable, and rational judgment of the people as the basis of a legitimate democracy.

This political theory assumes an active and engaged citizenry. Representative democracies are often accused of making the boundaries between the state and the citizenry opaque and puzzling (Pickard 1998), thus rendering citizenship a passive condition handed down from above by people in power. This view of citizenship is said to “de-skill” voters and to increase their cynicism toward participation in civic life (Smith and Wales 2000). Under deliberative democracy, the meaning of citizenship involves the active demand for and creation of social, cultural, and political rights rather than merely securing the right to generate economic resources (Root 2007). Autonomy and individuality are manifested in citizens’ struggle to improve society while taking responsibility and accepting accountability for their actions. As a result, rather than an inert member of a society, citizens have “co-responsibility” for shaping civil society and eventually governance policies (Delanty 2000, p. 128).

As efficacious actors in reasoned deliberations, citizens are assumed to have the potential to overcome bounded rationality and evolve into more informed and open-minded individuals (Smith and Wales 2000). In this respect, deliberative forms of politics promote equal and sovereign, but interdependent, citizens who respect and value the opinions of others. Furthermore, such robust conceptions link citizenship to various identities (e.g., gender, ethnic) and suggest that citizenship is realized through action not only with reference to the state but also in any political practice, such
social movements, or even within the home (Gaventa 2006).

This reflexive involvement in societal affairs is reminiscent of “participatory consumerism” (McGregor 2001), which is an approach that argues for a dynamic, discursive, and conscientious consumption process through which consumers relate to larger society by taking part and contributing to it. They are citizens first and then consumers, who cocreate new knowledge and worldviews through public discourse shaped by an “action–reflection–revised action” process (McGregor 2001, p. 4).

However, for this kind of participatory consumerism and active citizenship to emerge, there must be a genuine and empowering public sphere (Root 2007). In Habermas’s (1998, p. 373) terms, the public sphere represents “a highly complex network that branches out into a multitude of overlapping international, national, regional, local, and subcultural arenas.” This conceptualization implies that the broader public sphere consists of multiple interdependent, discursive, and all-encompassing spaces that serve as a mediating zone between the state and civil society; they act as “intermediary spaces, conduits for negotiation, information, and exchange” (Cornwall and Coelho 2007, p. 1). Typically, these democratic spaces are formed from above by governments, corporations, or nongovernmental organizations (Pimbert and Wakeford 2001). Moreover, in these spaces, citizens can realize their own potential to evaluate and solve important public questions. These spaces can be used to achieve a range of community goals, including seeking consensus, exploring conflicts, building civic skills (e.g., dialogical reasoning, active listening), or inspiring political action (Button and Mattson 1999).

**The Methods**

We evaluate five of the more popular forms of DIPs, but there are dozens of permutations (see Gastil and Levine 2005; New Economics Foundation 1998). Although all these methods involve deliberation, the final outcomes are shaped by who initiates the process, who is invited in the space, how they are selected, and the procedures they follow (see Table 1).

**Deliberative Focus Group**

Deliberative focus groups are based on the model of the market research focus group, in which a facilitator directs questioning among a group of consumers (Cunningham-Burley, Kerr, and Pavis 2001). In this case, however, citizens are briefed on an issue, and then they actively discuss and explore their different perspectives. One application of this method is Britain’s public consultation on the biosciences (following the government’s disastrous handling of public relations on the mad cow disease). The goal was for the public to explore and debate ethical concerns over issues including the use of cloning, genetically modified foods, and gene therapy. In a series of two-day workshops, 123 citizens were briefed on biosciences and then explored issues such as government regulation, scientific uncertainty, and issues of trust and reliability. Although this method involves participants deliberating and responding to issues, it is less participative than other methods because the members have limited input in framing the problem or questioning the evidence (Irwin 2001).

**Deliberative Poll**

Developed by the political scientist James Fishkin in the late 1980s, deliberative polls employ a random probability sample (between 130 and 450) of voting age citizens who are usually paid for their participation (Fishkin and Farrar 2005). In general, the organizers of deliberative polls are national or local organizations, universities, or research centers. Large-scale efforts, such as Public Broadcasting Service’s (PBS’s) “By the People,” are usually accompanied by media coverage. Ideally, this sampling creates a poll of diverse citizens who are briefed ahead of time using impartial background information and then meet to discuss their opinions in moderated small group discussions over several days. Participants also gather in a plenary meeting to pose questions to experts. Finally, participants complete a survey both before and after deliberation to assess whether and how their views changed as a result of deliberation (Luskin, Fishkin, and Jowell 2002).

Deliberative polls have been found to change people’s opinion because of the learning that results from the deliberative process. Moreover, people leave the process with a greater sense of self-efficacy. Common to many deliberative methods, there is a challenge to move these methods from a local to a national scale, which is both complicated and expensive. Some promising innovations include the deliberative project “By the People,” which explored issues such as health care at both a local and a national level by employing PBS local affiliates. The recent use of the Internet to facilitate deliberative polls also offers a more inexpensive way to conduct a national poll (Fishkin and Farrar 2005).

**Citizens’ Jury**

Derived from the model of a legal jury, citizens’ juries are constituted by a representative sample of people who convene for several days to explore a well-defined issue, cross-examine experts, call additional witnesses, and make a policy recommendation. This method was developed in the United States by Ned Crosby, the founder of the Jefferson Center, but has spread and is probably the most frequently used method among DIPs. Since 1996, more than 200 citizens’ juries have been conducted in countries such as Australia and Britain, and more than 30 citizens’ juries have been run in the United States since 2002 (Crosby and Nethercut 2005).

The underlying logic guiding the jury approach is that a small but fair sample of nonspecialists, having heard and deliberated on the evidence for 30–50 hours, can represent the common sense and will of the people. The citizens’ jury is assumed to be a “microcosm of the community” (Crosby and Nethercut 2005, p. 113). This assumptions stands in stark contrast to opinion polling that argues for legitimacy based on a representative sampling of large numbers of often uninformned people who respond with little deliberation (Wakeford 2002). In rural India, for example, a citizen jury made up of subsistence farmers evaluated Monsanto’s genetically modified seeds after hearing expert testimony.
Table 1. The Pros and Cons of Five Deliberative Methods

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Pros</th>
<th>Cons</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tr>
<td>Deliberative focus group</td>
<td>After being briefed, citizens discuss their views on an issue; often, focus groups are used to highlight the views of a specific group of citizens (e.g., the visually impaired).</td>
<td>Stresses active involvement and dialogue; seeks a variety of views and experiences to explore the problem’s complexity and ambiguity.</td>
<td>Debate is limited to the time of the focus group; no opportunity exists to challenge the evidence or call experts; limited deliberation time; method tends to be more extractive.</td>
<td>The United Kingdom’s public consultation on the biosciences (Irwin 2001)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deliberative poll</td>
<td>Representative sample of citizens are briefed on an issue and led in discussions; citizen participants develop and address questions to a panel of experts; usually, a survey before and after deliberation is conducted.</td>
<td>Documents the changes in citizens’ views; representative sample of citizens; payment increases diversity of the sample; increased self-efficacy as a result of learning and discussing issues of concern.</td>
<td>Structured agendas predefined by the organizers may result in overlooking “real” issues of concern to citizens.</td>
<td>PBS’s “By the People” (Fishkin and Farrah 2005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizens’ jury</td>
<td>A small set of people selected to be a fair representative sample convene over several days to consider a specific issue; experts offer evidence and are interrogated by the jury.</td>
<td>Time exists for deliberation and questioning; it connects policy makers and citizens and has the potential to improve trust and relationships; potential for empowering citizens.</td>
<td>Some pressures exist for consensus, and divergent policy makers must agree to consider input or distrust may result.</td>
<td>Indian Farmers’ Foresight project (Satya Murty and Wakefield 2001)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Consensus conference</td>
<td>A public meeting in which ordinary citizens dialogue with and cross-examine a range of experts to form a position on important social issues (e.g., use of technology); the panel meets a couple of times to be briefed and then sets the agenda; it typically runs over several days.</td>
<td>The panel frames the problem; witnesses can represent a range of stakeholders; citizens can select and query experts; connects citizens, experts, and policy makers; findings are made public.</td>
<td>Disagreements are discouraged; the policy makers can narrowly frame the problem, thus foreclosing broader solutions; format and deliberation rules are imposed.</td>
<td>The United States’ Telecommunications and the Future of Democracy (Guston 1999)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Scenario workshop</td>
<td>A planning process in which citizens dialogue with diverse stakeholders over a specific problem; different solutions are written up in scenarios to encourage dialogue; lasts two days across three phases of scenario criticism; explores new visions and develops action plans.</td>
<td>Issues are framed by people from the bottom up; dialogue occurs across citizens, experts, policy makers, and business people; the resultant vision can be used by experts and policy makers to guide plans; delves into the human–technology relationship; engages multiple stakeholders.</td>
<td>Must be an important problem on which people agree action is needed; difficulty in translating this local process to a national scale.</td>
<td>Danish ecologically sustainable city (Andersen and Jaeger 1999)</td>
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both for and against the seeds. The stakeholders involved included farmers’ unions, biotechnology firms (e.g., Monsanto), government officials, nongovernmental organizations, and university scientists. Despite lacking formal training, the farmers were experienced agronomists who understood their local realities and needs and could use this expertise to interrogate the “official” experts. Representing a significant reversal of power, these farmers voted to reject the seeds and specified the conditions that would need to be met for the seeds to be acceptable (Satya Murty and Wakefield 2001). Although juries can succumb to pressures for consensus, this method provides people with a chance to voice their opinions directly.

Consensus Conference

Inspiration for consensus conferences came from the National Institutes of Health’s use of medical consensus development conferences in the 1970s to assess new tech-
nologies. Leading experts deliberated for several days using the best available data to evaluate and make recommendations on the adoption of new medical technologies. Modifying this expert-based model by incorporating lay citizens into the process, the Danish Board of Technology developed consensus conferences (and scenario workshops discussed next) in 1987. These conferences allow citizens to shape policy on technologies that will affect them, including the irradiation of food, fertility treatments, and sustainable consumption (Guston 1999). Citizens who lack affiliation to any interest group are briefed on a controversial technology and then are invited to set the agenda for a conference, invite and question experts, reach a consensus, and make recommendations to policy boards in the form of presentations. Although this method evolved to examine new technologies, it could be used for evaluating a range of issues. The most popular topics examined include medical testing, energy conservation, and gene technology (Hendriks 2005).

Although many DIPs are often just one-time events, consensus conferences constitute an ongoing part of governance in Denmark (Andersen and Jaeger 1999). To date, more than 60 consensus conferences have been organized around the world, including countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Japan, Israel, and Korea (Hendriks 2005). In the United States, a diverse set of organizations, including universities, nonprofits, and the National Science Foundation, worked together to organize the first consensus conference on telecommunications. Citizens were selected for diversity, and the conference was organized around topics such as universal access to the Internet and guidelines to regulate the use of relevant technology (Guston 1999). The power of citizens to frame the issues and direct the collection of evidence is a key strength of this method. Therefore, when issues are controversial and involve possible ethical and social consequences for citizens, consensus conferences can be especially illuminating (Hendriks 2005). This approach seeks consensus, so disagreements are discouraged.

**Scenario Workshop**

Scenario workshops are future-oriented planning sessions for developing and exploring different solutions to a specific problem. These workshops have their roots in technology assessments that seek to evaluate different technological developments and issues to shape technology-related policy making. The most popular topics examined are environmental sustainability and urban planning (Street 1997). Competing ideas representing different values are distilled into scenarios that are discussed and criticized, new solutions are created, and an action plan is developed. Scenario workshops bring together citizens, experts, policy makers, and businesspeople to share their different knowledge and perspectives. Although scenarios are framed by all the involved stakeholders, the issues to be discussed are constructed by the citizens, and the workshops go through three consecutive phases: criticism of the scenarios, vision, and realization.

For example, in the Danish scenario workshop on imagining a sustainable city, diverse stakeholders evaluated visions of the experience of living in different types of sustainable housing in 2010, such as solar homes and “smart” houses (Andersen and Jaeger 1999). This approach is most inclusive because the perspectives of multiple stakeholders are considered, and each group brings different expertise to bear on the problem. Furthermore, unlike most citizens’ juries and consensus conferences, scenario workshops are less structured, supportive of divergent views, and aimed at triggering local action.

**Quality**

Common to all methods, the quality of the output generated by DIPs is determined by the rigor and skill with which the procedures are employed. For example, elements of a well-designed DIP would include transparency, representative sampling, balanced and nontechnical information, adequate time for asking questions and deliberating, and the use of a steering committee to assess for a democratic and fair process (Satya Murty and Wakeford 2001). Personal skills are needed, such as skills in organization, moderation, and facilitation. Moderation skills are particularly important in larger forums in which the dynamics of deliberation may be affected by different ethnicities, socioeconomic status, and cultural backgrounds (Levine, Fung, and Gastil 2005).

In general, the overall quality of deliberative practice is evaluated against four criteria of validity. First, democratic validity assesses whether the process was inclusive and whether all relevant stakeholders participated meaningfully. Second, process validity explores whether adequate time was provided so people could learn about the issues. Third, dialogical validity addresses whether opportunities existed to discuss different views freely among various stakeholders. Fourth, outcome validity assesses whether the solutions generated led to sustainable change with broad public support (Levine, Fung, and Gastil 2005; Ozanne and Saatcioglu 2008). In the next section, we present an application of deliberative democracy and evaluate it against these four validities.

**Application of Deliberative Democracy: Dialogue with the City**

With an increasing population and economic growth rates beyond its current capacities, the Western Australian city of Perth has experienced significant environmental and sustainability problems. The Dialogue with the City initiative was developed by public policy makers to engage multiple stakeholders in determining the future of Perth. The goal of the deliberative project was to make Perth the most livable city in the world by 2030. (This discussion draws from the work of Hartz-Karp [2005, 2007].)

Before the project, an interactive Web site was created to encourage Perth residents to read reports and articles on the city’s sustainability challenges. The Web site also provided a portal through which citizens could exchange views and opinions, post comments, and address questions to the experts. Daily newspapers disseminated experts’ and citizens’ views, a prime-time television broadcast depicted various scenarios for the city’s future, and school competitions encouraged youths to share their hopes for the city.

A random sample of 8000 Perth citizens were surveyed to explore their opinions on how to ameliorate the city’s problems. The organizers facilitated several “listening and learning sessions” to increase the participation of marginalized groups, such as youths, indigenous people, and non-
English speakers (Hartz-Karp 2005, p. 4). The concerns of these disadvantaged groups were also addressed separately in the final reports so that they would receive special consideration. Next, 1100 people participated in a large representative deliberative public forum, which included city residents, community organizations, business representatives, academia, government members, and other special interest groups. People who felt intimidated to speak out could give computer-mediated input. Deliberative focus groups, scenario workshops, regional planning games, and discussion of hypothetical videos were the methods used.

In the second phase of Dialogue with the City, more than 100 participants worked together to create the final plan known as the Network City. A large implementation team was made up of three “liaison teams,” which consisted of community members, industry, and government representatives. They handled conflicts and unresolved issues that emerged during the dialogue and deliberation phases. In addition, six working groups were created, also encompassing representatives from the three stakeholder groups. These working groups gave ongoing recommendations on emerging planning issues. The Network City plan was presented to the cabinet and was approved. This plan was used to direct the local divisions of government in developing local sustainability strategies.

The Network City led to the restructuring of the city by integrating public land use and transportation to increase the efficient movement of citizens and freight through the creation of activity centers, activity corridors, and transport corridors. Activity centers are hubs of civic and commercial activities connected by activity corridors that provide public transport. Transport corridors directed high-density traffic around activity corridors to ensure a more efficient flow of freight and people (State of Western Australia 2006).

These deliberative procedures rate high on democratic validity because representative participation was a priority for the organization. Participants were individuals from a random sample of the population, representatives from a broad range of stakeholders (e.g., local government, industry, special interest groups, and environmental groups), and people who responded to media invitations. Some marginalized groups were underrepresented in the initial set of participants, so their participation was specifically solicited in the form of special forums, and participants who found the public forums daunting could offer input through more anonymous avenues.

Process validity was high because the project began with an initial educational period, and the process occurred over several phases, allowing time for citizens to learn, ask questions, and deliberate on sustainability challenges. The grassroots listening and learning sessions provided disadvantaged populations the opportunity to learn more about the focal issues and to voice their concerns.

Dialogue validity was enhanced by allowing several public forums for debate and the ongoing representation of diverse interests groups throughout the implementation process. Trained facilitators were employed to encourage open dialogue and in-depth discussion, and participants were purposefully seated in close proximity to those with diverging views to maximize exchange of ideas. The additional listening sessions were held before the forum with disadvantaged groups to make sure their views were heard and recorded.

During the forum, the Minister for Planning and Infrastructure emphasized that the forum was not a “talkfest” and that the collective decisions would indeed be implemented. The final report was distributed to all participants two weeks after the forum, and an implementation team was formed. The final product of deliberations, Network City: Community Planning Strategy, was accepted by the ministry and the cabinet to be used as the development template for the city of Perth. Thus, outcome validity was high because the deliberations directly resulted in the city being restructured to improve transportation efficiency and sustainability.

**Criticisms and Challenges**

Deliberative processes are particularly difficult to establish in societies in which no traditions of democracy exist. Production of knowledge through discussion is never neutral, and the relationships of power may distort communication in any public sphere (Habermas 1984). People in power can easily manipulate the outcomes of DIPs because they are gatekeepers and can control the flow of information and shape the discourse to legitimate their decisions. Invitations into deliberative spaces are framed by the people organizing them. As a case in point, a pharmaceutical company organized a Welsh citizens’ jury that was designed to find the conditions under which people would support genetic testing rather than more broadly exploring whether genetic testing should be done at all (Glassner 2001). Thus, the design and construction of deliberative spaces can be used toward either coercive or constructive ends. We examine three more fundamental criticisms of deliberative approaches: the problems of including marginalized groups that lack the skills of deliberation, obstacles in linking deliberative outcomes to action, and the limits of reason.

**Inclusiveness and Marginality**

As Levine, Fung, and Gastil (2005, p. 272) state, “the desire to deliberate is not universal.” Simply creating deliberative public spaces does not ensure inclusive participation. Often, DIPs are dominated by highly motivated, educated, and socioeconomically privileged consumers who are confident in their oral and written communication skills. As innovative as deliberative techniques are, they are hardly a panacea for giving voice and legitimacy to the needs of the poor, less educated, and disadvantaged groups. As the French anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu suggests, if language competency is distributed hierarchically, deliberations bear the risk of reproducing inequalities (Kohn 2000). Thus, deliberative spaces need to be filled by people who possess significant agency and self-efficacy. Yet it is common for even educated citizens to defer to scientific experts and fail to voice legitimate concerns (Button and Mattson 1999). The “micropolitics of participation” can make entering a public space daunting for the marginalized: multiple inherent inequalities, such as gender dynamics and socioeconomic status, may inhibit the less powerful to voice their concerns (Cornwall and Coelho 2007, p. 10). Even if they try to participate, the disadvantaged are often ignored by not being able to speak the “right” language or through
oppression by more powerful groups (Eyben and Ladbury 2006). For this very reason, Canada’s Romanow Commission on national health care concluded that separate culturally sensitive deliberative spaces were needed for the concerns of their aboriginal citizens to be heard (Von Lieres and Kahane 2007).

Building skills in safe and homogeneous spaces can help marginalized and politically silent groups gain greater authority to assert their positions in larger, more heterogeneous spheres and thus engage in effective participation in civic life (Fraser 1992). This type of citizenship often begins with interaction within smaller, more secure spaces on local issues and then moves to larger political action in more public spheres (Eyben and Ladbury 2006). For example, Mahmud (2007) describes the gradual progress of Bangladeshi women toward political engagement. This initiative first began with workshops to train poor people to lodge complaints to people in power but evolved to them actively monitoring public health care. Viswanathan, Gajendiran, and Venkatesan (2008) demonstrate a similar progression in their work with poor, uneducated women. Their entrepreneurial literacy program began within safe secure spaces before moving into more intimidating commercial spaces.

From Deliberation to Action

Simply engaging multiple stakeholders in deliberation does not guarantee that public policy or business practices will change. Many DIPs are organized through grassroots and civic efforts without support from key political and corporate decision makers. For “mini-publics” to affect legislation or business strategy, all necessary parties should be involved in the process (Goodin and Dryzek 2006). “Invited spaces” can remain largely empty if they reproduce marginalized identities, traditional gender roles in participation, and sociocultural and economic hierarchies, but deliberations can lead to real change. The 1999 Canadian Consensus Conference on the use and labeling of genetically modified foods developed a report that was sent to seven federal ministries supervising biotechnology regulation. Policy makers were involved in the conference and circulated the final report to their individual ministries. Consistent with the calls for action in the report and spurred by media coverage, food producers were pressured to use standard labeling of genetically modified and non–genetically modified foods (Einsiedel, Jelsøe, and Breck 2001).

The Limits of Reason

Deliberation involves the carefully reasoned consideration and weighing of the claims of various interest groups. If people who are best able to engage in reasoned deliberation are already in positions of power, deliberative democracy may have the unintentional consequence of leading to outcomes that support the status quo (Sanders 1997). Arguably, the concerns of minorities, women, and the poor might not be proffered in tempered and reasoned voices but instead might have overtones of anger or shrillness and could even erupt into shouts of moral outrage or desperation. Why should citizens who live in poverty, receive third-rate education, and lack political capital choose to engage in reasoned debate? After all, some of the most successful political transformations of society, such as the civil rights movement, the women’s movement, and gay liberation, have arisen from conflict, protests, and demonstrations. Moreover, prejudice sneaks into public discourse in subtle, persistent, and unperceived ways (Pimbert and Wakeford 2002). Respecting diversity of opinion is more than letting someone who is different share a public forum. It requires listening carefully to imagine the person’s life well enough to sincerely seek a common ground or alternatives that honor these differences.

Sanders (1997) suggests that public discourse should be expanded to include the personal and sometimes emotional narratives of everyday people. For example, personal testimony is a method that could be used in conjunction with deliberation to give weight to the experiences of marginalized individuals. Personal testimony is based on the assumption that everyone has a story to tell and the right to be heard. In contrast to deliberation, which seeks consensual solutions aimed at the common good, testimony can highlight what is different and unique. Personal testimony does not require reasoned arguments but uses a narrative format to offer unique and emotional insights. If deliberation is limited to reasoned arguments, these often valuable insights may be overlooked. Personal narratives allow emotional and often alarming evidence to be brought into deliberative spaces to shape decision making (see, e.g., Hill 2001).

Conclusions

Deliberative spaces can be effective in building communication among firms, governmental bodies, and local communities. Policy makers’ commitment to using the output of these deliberative forums is critical because they have the power to change laws and regulations that directly affect citizens and corporations. When marginalized communities are compared with affluent ones, they do not equally benefit from the actions of government. Thus, special efforts are needed to include their concerns in political decision making, such as creating separate deliberative spaces for disenfranchised citizens.

Policy making tends to be reactive and is often driven by specific issues, such as concrete labeling practices. Laws are sometimes only enforced when lawsuits are filed (Sheth and Sisodia 2005). Access to competent lawyers and experts is a privilege of corporations rather than of many communities, especially those in less affluent countries (e.g., Newell et al. 2006). It is hardly surprising that the powerful get greater government protections than the powerless. Deliberative spaces offer less powerful citizens a chance to correct mistakes in policies that adversely affect them. Noncoercive public spaces are especially valuable because though legal frameworks provide political mechanisms for defining rights in specific disputes, they are hardly egalitarian in practice (Garvey and Newell 2005). Thus, a “neutral” space in the legal system is difficult to find; it is often difficult for communities with limited resources to make strong cases in court against those of powerful corporations. As spaces that allow all stakeholders to participate, DIPs offer an alternative.

Even if communities were to defend their positions in deliberations, the execution of their will is often left up to
the discretion of corporate executives, unless it is enforced by regulations. Calls for increased emphasis on sustainable development and stakeholder engagement in corporate agenda are steadily emerging (e.g., Bhattacharya and Korschun 2008; Lusch 2007). Still, it is unrealistic to assume that current company priorities will suddenly change to regard community needs as their immediate responsibility. Researchers emphasize that “there is little sense that firms have responsibilities that go beyond legal duties” (Newell 2005, p. 545), and such community demands are deemed to be the responsibility of governments rather than firms. Fostering community development and encouraging direct citizen involvement are issues of “stakeholder management” for firms, and their priority among competing financial responsibilities and constraints is weak at best (Kennedy, Harris, and Lord 2004). Even when communities secure recognition of their rights, they often lack the power to enforce agreements made with the company. Thus, citizens and communities need an active and accountable government and deliberative processes that can guide their interventions.

Nevertheless, firms may benefit from encouraging greater deliberation among their shareholders and stakeholders. Controversies continue to rage on topics ranging from executive compensation and the hiring of illegal immigrants to environmental performance and overseas labor practices. Engaging shareholders in greater deliberation on corporate practices may improve strategic decision making more than the common practice of shareholders casting nonbinding votes (Gutmann and Thompson 2004). Deliberative democratic theory can help address pressing issues in corporate social responsibility, such as increasing inclusive and democratic corporate decision making (Mitchell, Agle, and Wood 1997), increasing corporate transparency (Cassill and Hill 2007), and reversing the trends in declining public trust (Golin-Harris Trust Survey 2002).

Final Thoughts

Democracy in the United States is hardly enivable when it comes to citizen participation; most citizens say that they are turned off by the political process and report little or no contact with elected leaders (Fischer 2004). We highlight the instrumentality of deliberation in heartening citizens, corporations, and politicians to assume their role in the revitalization of a democratic culture. Deliberative and inclusive methods promise to deliver new knowledge and better quality decisions because they draw on insights and understanding from a wider range of people (Irwin 2001), develop better informed and more confident citizenry due to their participation (Button and Mattson 1999), and foster more responsive governments and firms that must consider competing interests (Andersen and Jaeger 1999).

References


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