



EDITORIAL

The many faces of engagement

by Marie Antonsen, Kristine Ask, Henrik Karlstrøm

We live in an age of public engagement. At least, one might get that impression from reading the literature of the fields of public understanding, engagement and participation (PES). Over time, the PES field has moved from understanding engagement as a matter of diffusing scientific knowledge in the wider society to emerging as a participatory concern crucially relying on lay input to even be considered good science ([Horst and Michael 2011](#)).

The articles in this issue deal with different kinds of engagement and different kinds of publics. What underlies the current models and perspectives of PES is the assumption that there are other types of knowledge and expertise besides science that are relevant, important and sometimes crucial in the production of technology or even more knowledge, and that knowledge and expertise can be expressed, accessed and used in multiple ways. At the heart of this lies a democratic endeavor: The inclusion of the many publics and knowledges which in turn will produce social and political robustness. However, as Hetland shows in this issue the actual policy landscape takes a more inclusive approach and contains all these perspectives simultaneously. Hetland's article deals with a formalised form of public engagement with science, analysing the Norwegian state's changing attitudes towards communicating the science that is publicly funded in Norway, but also noting that certain elements of "old-school" public engagement remain a cornerstone of the public science communication policy (for example by funding science journalism and public information campaigns about science). In this way, he demonstrates that modes of engagement considered outdated by the expert literature might still serve a function, even if the field of what is considered public engagement is steadily expanding.

Solli and Ryghaug explore the tension between centrally produced expertise on climate change, with its effects on the natural environment in terms of increased risk of extreme weather events, and the local expertise which is tasked with handling the consequences. This is on the one hand a particularly hands-on form of engagement (as anyone who has shoveled away excess snow on cold winter mornings can attest to), but on the other hand it demonstrates the difficulty in aligning local reality with scientific understandings of best practice derived from aggregated analyses.

Pettersen's article on mediated collaboration questions assumptions about participation through platforms like Wikipedia by studying information gathering and -sharing in a fairly large, knowledge intensive company. The paper shows how the ideal situation of effortless crowdsourcing is difficult to achieve in the workplace due to

time and financial constraints. It also demonstrates the difficulty of establishing a culture for open collaboration in a corporate setting. As such it shows how participation is both materially constituted and limited, while also emphasizing the context as decisive for what kind of involvement is possible and desirable.¹

All of these are examples of what one might call benevolent engagement – attempts to include more actors in a deliberative or participatory process in order to increase inclusion and robustness of decisions and actions. However, recent events in the online world point to forms of engagement that are more aimed towards undermining or outright attacking the legitimacy of existing expertise. This malign (from the point of view of the experts, of course) engagement represents a quandary for the PES perspective. In public fora such as newspapers, internet forums or television debates, topics such as climate change, computer games, gender roles and even governance are debated and discussed with varying degrees of animosity. These often take place in what Bucchi ([2009](#)) has identified as the "science and technology ambivalence quadrant" of public participation (see Hetland in this issue for a graphical representation of this), where the very foundational principles of scientific inquiry can be questioned or modified by the debate participants.

The newest example of large public engagement on an international level, the hashtag movement #gamergate, exploded on social media in August 2014 and has generated almost 3 million tweets since². It has become a focal point for a range of grievances in game culture, but ethics in game journalism and the role of women in games and game culture are the most prominent and polarizing³. For those concerned with the role of women in games the movement, which has been repeatedly linked to cybermobs harassing female game critics and -makers, has itself become proof that games and gamers are sexist. For those troubled by corruption and politicization of the games industry, #gamergate is a much needed grassroots movement. Of particular interest to the STS scholar is the ways in which science and expertise come into play in the process of building arguments in the controversy. #gamergate has, among others, resulted in a sub-campaign called "Operation Digging DiGRA" in which gamers band together to read through game studies papers to demonstrate that the research on gaming is actually ideologically compromised activism that aims

1 As a side note, it also points to the sheer improbability of something like Wikipedia, which relies on the voluntary, non-compensated and laborious input from users, working as well as it does.

2 <http://topsy.com/analytics?q1=%23gamergate&via=Topsy&period=3%20months>

3 <https://medium.com/message/72-hours-of-gamergate-e005137cfsd>



to impose a censorial content control on games. Their reasoning is that DiGRA (Digital Games Researcher Association) has financial and political ties that gives game studies unscientific bias, and the goal of the diggers is to find and collate examples of how this research is being used to politicise their hobby against their will.

The success of #gamergate and #operationdiggingdigra is debatable, as is their intent. It is nonetheless a striking example of an interest group (gamers) engaging with academic work about their lives (game studies) to question the role of this research. Whereas this sounds like a PES dream come true, the engagement from many of the prominent actors in the case of #gamergate has a problematic feature – not uncommon in controversies of our time – in seemingly being driven by voices that bear little resemblance to the imaged publics in STS literature. The publics usually described either theoretically or empirically in STS literature possess some kind of expertise or knowledge that is or would be useful in local practices, policy and/or technology development and scientific knowledge production. STS scholars take it upon themselves to access, describe and abstract this expertise and to give it a place and a voice in scientific communities.

Whether one agrees with the idealistic model of Habermasian deliberative democracy or purposes other ways of modeling and enabling public debate and engagement, inclusion remains a basic premise. However, in the case of #gamergate, it is the explicit goal of many of the participants to exclude groups of people, particularly women, from the debate and from the game industry and limit women's rights as citizens. This is certainly a contestable form of engagement, by any definition of the term.

References

Bucchi, M. 2009. *Beyond Technocracy: Science, Politics and Citizens*. Dordrecht: Springer.

Horst, Maja, and Mike Michael. 2011. On the shoulders of idiots: Re-thinking science communication as 'event'. *Science as Culture* 20 (3): 283-306.

How can this controversy and specifically the publics engaging with anti-democratic rhetoric be grasped and analyzed, without regressing to a scientific or democratic deficit model? It is perhaps tempting to think that the participant advocating the exclusion of everyone but themselves should be silenced to a discursive death. However, these actors have the right to vote, which they might do, and the right to free speech, which they do use, if only to address the fact that they feel they are censored. Last but not least, in the case of #gamergate, they remain a large and wealthy consumer group. This of course underlines the old insight from power politics: Whatever the discourse, money talks.

In light of this, how should we address the antidemocratic voices of #gamergate? Is this merely an outcry from people with conservative, one might say reactionary, values, masked in scientific rhetoric, or do they in fact, as they themselves claim, have different knowledge or expertise which is not taken into account in science or policy? Understanding the potentially destructive counter-knowledge of such movements remains a challenge for STS, but with its longstanding work on the rise and development of scientific controversies (see for example [Nelkin 1995](#), [Oreskes and Conway 2010](#)) this is a challenge it is well equipped to address.

These perspectives are bound to receive even more attention in the coming years. At NJSTS we welcome articles and opinion pieces that address the challenges outlined above, in order to do our part in the public discussion (and hence, engagement?) about these crucial issues that put heady concepts such as Truth, Democracy, Neutrality and Free Speech into play.

Nelkin, Dorothy. 1995. Science controversies: the dynamics of public disputes in the United States. *Handbook of science and technology studies*: 444-56.

Oreskes, Naomi, and Erik M. Conway. 2010. *Merchants of doubt: how a handful of scientists obscured the truth on issues from tobacco smoke to global warming*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA.