

Risks and achievements of face-to-face-interactions in participatory science & technology governance

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The poster presented my ongoing PhD research that empirically examines the uses and effects, potentials and limitations of face-to-face interactions in various contexts of the governance of science and technology.

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Most participatory and deliberative endeavours in science and technology governance heavily rely on the communicative dynamics of face-to-face-interactions. Methods like focus groups, consensus conferences, citizen juries, and scenario workshops employ interactions to facilitate exchange and understanding between the representatives of different academic disciplines, domains of experience, values, or world views. What exactly the interactions are expected to achieve in the context of specific methods and specific events depends. Generally speaking though, face-to-face-interactions in participatory exercises are mainly expected to integrate hitherto neglected perspectives, values, or knowledge and/or balance any lopsidedness of interests (cf. also Joss 1999; Joss and Bellucci 2002). Face-to-face-interactions, then, are regarded as feasible means to achieve certain ends: a specific form (social dimension) of communication is—implicitly or explicitly—expected to entail more or less specific effects with regard to its content (thematic or object dimension).

From a sociological point of view, this is interesting because in the literature face-to-face-interactions are described as a relatively autonomous and wayward form of the social: formal expectations are often undermined, presentational demands with respect to topics and persons are high while the capacity to extendedly and thoroughly address complex issues is rather low. And in fact, although many participatory methods accord interactions a central place they also specifically format and constrain them (e.g. by specifying themes or sequences of themes, seating orders, setting up sub groups, employing moderators, complementing oral and written communication etc.). In the field's own discourse as well as social scientific evaluation and analysis, however, the issue of what face-to-face-interactions can or cannot do is not touched upon. Up to now the specific relations of the social and the object dimensions of communication in participatory endeavours have not been systematically addressed, related, and analyzed. The literature on public participation and participatory technology assessment focuses on the rationale for it, its impact, or whether its design meets specific criteria like fairness, representation, competence etc. The events themselves, though, the interactions and communications that take place during the procedures and upon which their results rest, have been black boxed. So, this project's research question is: do face-to-face-interactions have the capacity to (and, indeed, do) perform the tasks they are used for? If we look at the interactions and communications, what effects, achievements, or risks can be empirically observed in the course of events?

Research Design

One research strategy to find out about achievements of face-to-face-interactions in participatory endeavours would be to compare a case with and one without face-to-face-interaction. But as we cannot compare the same case with and without interaction, e.g. a

consensus conference and the same conference as an “e-consensus conference” (cf. Patrick Hamlett’s contribution) I adopt a different research strategy: An empirical investigation of the interactions and communications of some ‘clear’ cases (still to be defined) that

- checks whether any of the interactional effects and problems that can be expected on the basis of the sociological literature can be detected and whether and how they are addressed and tackled, and
- relates the observed effects, problems and resolutions to the expectations directed towards the respective participatory method/device in order to gauge its status as achievement or adverse effect.

Theoretical Perspective

I adopt a perspective that conceptualizes face-to-face-interactions as a relatively autonomous form of social activity and communication, defined by the mutual perceptibility of two or more participants (Goffman 1983; Hirschauer 2005; Kieserling 1999). Interactions’ “ultimate behavioural materials are glances, gestures, positionings, and verbal statements that people feed continuously into the situation, whether intended or not. These are the external signs of orientation and involvement—states of mind and body not ordinarily examined with respect to their social organization” (Goffman 1967: 1). What happens in interaction happens only in and through these materials—they enable and constrain social activity in a specific way.

Such a perspective will expect a great deal of what happens in interaction to be ongoing solutions to structural problems of the interaction itself, above all co-presence and mutual perceptibility. What ensues is a typical interactional dynamics that structures the events and makes them discernible as a ‘chunk’ of the social, set apart from the general flow of social incidents. Interactions’ salient feature is their compactness in time and space: the range of perceptibility and ability to respond set their limits, accentuating what happens within and eclipsing what happens beyond these boundaries. Where the common focus is talk, interactions order themes and speakers serially, which limits the complexity of themes that can be engaged. Subscribing to such a view, it may be expected that the events only partly correspond to conveners’ and participants’ expectations towards public participation and participatory technology assessment.

Of course, participants’ intentions and prescribed, organizational expectations (e.g. the objectives and rules embodied in the design of participatory methods) do play a role—but only as mediated by face-to-face-interactions’ “situational” (Goffman 1983: 2) logic. Analytically, they have to be regarded as background conditions that may or may not gain relevance during the interaction. Role distance, i.e. the observation that individuals in interaction often do not act according to their formal role, is a widely known example of such interactional effects (cf. ‘Fun in Games’ in Goffman 1966; on the divergence of organisational self-descriptions and what happens in interactions see also Goffman 1961).

Part of what happens in participatory science governance and technology assessment can be explained with reference to assigned problems and formal expectations (in short: the design/organizational level). Part of it can be explained as the ongoing resolution of interactional problems. This project seeks to conceptually relate both strategies of analysis—and to gauge what the achievements of interaction in participatory endeavours are.

Aims and Expectations of the Project

The aim is to provide a theoretically informed empirical analysis of why participatory endeavours so often make use of face-to-face-interactions in spite of their situational

limitations and exigencies (i.e. of the ones that could be expected from a sociological perspective like the one I exposed above). I will provide a detailed empirical account of interactional effects in participatory endeavours, both favourable and adverse with respect to the expectations directed toward them. The analysis will relate these effects, the risks and achievements of interaction, to face-to-face-interactions' specific structure (that in principle offers undifferentiated chances for participation and evaluation of claims), their boundedness (that enables a deliberation relatively autonomous from external expectations and constraints), and their relation to (imaginings of) society.

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