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This is an author's accepted manuscript of an article to be published *Research For All* in 2017. The final definitive version will be available online. More details can be found at:

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# Engaging with the public in public engagement with research

By Nick Mahony and Hilde Stephansen

## Introduction

As the idea that research should be for *all* gains currency amongst researchers, funders and others beyond the academy, renewed attention is being given to the question of what research for *all* should or could mean. With the aim of contributing to the wider debate already underway about this question, this article seeks to develop a clearer understanding of what is meant by the 'public' in public engagement today. Among the many barriers to engagement that researchers currently face – alongside limited resources and the pressure to publish – is a lack of precision regarding what is meant by the 'public' in public engagement with research. There are multiple explanations for this lack of precision. It is certainly connected to the multi-valence of this term as it can be used in many different settings with varied effects. It is also partly related to the broader contemporary context in which we live, which is marked by ever-accelerating social fragmentation, continuous institutional reform, growing political antagonisms, widening levels of inequality and ever more mediated feedback loops (Gilbert, 2013; Mahony and Clarke, 2013; Srnicek and Williams, 2015). As we discuss below, this imprecision is also the result of important conceptual differences that persist regarding the theoretical constitution of this term. Nonetheless, despite it being one of the original difficult 'keywords' (Williams 2014), the concept of the public is still ubiquitous and highly valued, not only within academic discourse but also across a myriad of domains of popular life.

The objective of this article is to develop a clearer understanding of some of the conceptual and practical complexities associated with 'the public' today, to see how these might be more effectively addressed in contemporary settings of engaged research. In what follows we highlight a set of issues – related to the theoretical constitution of the public and the consequences of different perspectives for the enactment of the 'public' in public engagement – that are particularly important for engaged researchers to consider. This leads to some initial proposals for how the

public in public engagement might be negotiated more effectively, particularly by those committed to improving the quality of public engagement and seeing research make a difference in society.

As noted, the idea of the public is capacious and appears in a range of guises in the realm of engaged research. If, as is now often the case, numerical evidence of engagement or 'impact' is required, the public is typically assumed to be a real and bounded entity consisting of a pre-existing group or segment of a population. For researchers with emancipatory goals, a different version of the public will likely be in play, based on ideals such as societal inclusion, democratic decision-making or deliberative democracy. Then there are the broader public policy agendas that engaged researchers increasingly are expected to respond to, which call up yet another rendering of the public based on principles such as institutional transparency, democratic accountability or public benefit. One further sense of what it means to be public today is summoned-up when we consider the often quite unpredictable and sometimes innovative responses that can emerge from the forms of self-organised public action that occurs when people voluntarily engage with and seek to affect issues of concern to them.

There is already a set of emerging sub-disciplines that debate the growing need for public engagement for research: these encompass 'public' and, more recently, 'live' sociology (Brewer 2013, Burawoy 2005; Back 2007, 2012); 'engaged cultural research' (Ang, 2006) and 'public anthropology' (Vannini 2012). There is also a strand in the social sciences literature that specifically explores what the public means in settings of engaged research (see for example Back and Puwar 2012; Brewer 2013). Work in the area of science and technology studies has also addressed the public, focusing, for example, on the efficacy of perspectives that are reliant on the idea that publics have an independent or stable existence prior to processes of engagement (see for example Wynne 2016).

This literature highlights the array of theoretical perspectives and practical approaches to the public that now exist and how these can shape and interact with ways that publics are constituted and enacted. It also demonstrates that public engagement (and

the scholarship related to it) is now an increasingly crowded and contested field, made up of a mix of long-standing and more emergent understandings and practices. There is no single authoritative template for understanding the public in public engagement because there is no consensus about which theory of the public best captures the dynamics of contemporary processes of public formation and public participation.

This complicated landscape, in which multiple ideas and practices of the public exist at the same time, calls for a *reflexive* approach, generated by relating developments in the theoretical literature and empirical research to forms of practice. For this reason, we set out in a recent research project to identify a framework for making sense of the public that can be used by scholars and practitioners involved public engagement with research. This framework has emerged from a process of analysis whereby a set of empirical developments in the field of public participation and engagement were investigated in relation to different strands of the theoretical literature on the topic of the public. By moving back and forth between theory and practice, three distinct perspectives on the public were pinpointed as being especially useful to the understanding, design and evaluation of public engagement today.

In what follows we elaborate on this framework, seeking to demonstrate its usefulness in the context of our own public engagement with research activities as well as its potential to be deployed in a wider set of situations where researchers seek to support public engagement. The framework has been designed specifically as a resource that scholars and others can use pragmatically at each phase of the engagement process. We want to show how it can help researchers consider the consequences of different perspectives on the public, and identify what is at stake so as to support the process of negotiating the trade-offs and choices that inevitably need to be made. This new resource is also intended to help researchers account for how engagement with 'the public' is enacted in particular settings – in nuanced, transparent, contextually engaged and rigorous terms.

Other frameworks designed to support more effective engagement, which prioritise the need for reflexivity, are available. A valuable contribution in the field of science and technology studies has recently been made by Chilvers and Keanes (2016), who have

elaborated an approach that calls for heightened awareness of how public engagement experiments “frame and produce particular versions of the objects (issues), subjects (participants/publics) and procedures (philosophies) of participation” (2016: pp267-68). Reflexivity here, for Chilvers and Kearnes, involves analysts working to sharpen their understanding of the contingencies and indeterminacies of participation. While the approach we outline here also gives central importance to reflexivity, it has a specific focus on the possibilities and challenges of understanding and supporting the public in public engagement today and has also been designed for researchers and practitioners operating across a much wider range of disciplines and domains, beyond science and technology. To develop our approach we have drawn selectively on the vast social science and humanities literature on the topic of the public, and we set out here to illustrate some pragmatic ways that researchers can navigate competing ideas of, and expectations for, publicly engaged research – whether these emanate from institutional funders and managers, different theoretical traditions, academic peers or research participants.

The article includes a brief case study that shows how this framework was used in a recent engaged research project to identify and examine the versions of the public that were at stake, account for how we responded to the publics that circulated in our context, and help us be responsive to the expectations we encountered. These included the expectation (predominantly emanating from project sponsors) for an account of the publics of this project that was narrated in terms of metrics and instrumental impact; expectations (from critical social science colleagues) for a reflexive account of our underlying conceptual assumptions about the public; and our own ambition (emerging out of previous work on ‘emergent publics’ (Mahony et al 2010)) to attempt to support and help *create* a self-organising public linked to our project. The case study provides us with an opportunity to show the value of engaged-research that integrates a reflexive critique of the contested idea of the public. We believe the approach we offer has wider value beyond this project and merits further development.

## **Conceptual framework**

As already stated, the meaning and utility of the concept of the public continue to be disputed in the academic literature. Acknowledging its contested nature is key to understanding the concept's dynamism, long-standing importance, and promise. According to work that has most influenced our own views, publics are, in important ways, *constituted* entities – entities that are *made* and enacted through dynamic processes of mediation; they are also part imagined, part real (Warner, 2002). Understanding the public in this way can help us to consider the many ways in which the status, form and purpose of publics are continually being re-imagined and re-configured in different interpersonal and institutional contexts (Newman and Clarke, 2009); how publics can change their character in and through processes of interaction (Mahony et al, 2010); their material as well as discursive qualities (Marres and Lezaun, 2011; Marres, 2012); and how publics can have both fleeting and longer-lasting identities (Barnett, 2014). We take this view of the public as constituted as a starting point to help us better understand, and engage reflexively with, the varied ways that the public can be invoked in settings of engaged research.

While a comprehensive review of the extensive literature on the public is beyond the scope of this article, we identify three currents of thinking in the wider the academic literature to help us deal with different but related meanings of the public. The tripartite conceptual framework we adopt here is deliberately syncretic and was first developed during the initial phase of a research project undertaken between 2011 and 2014 (Mahony 2013). In the context of the Open University's Creating Publics project<sup>1</sup> and with support from the RCUK-funded Open University 'Catalyst' project,<sup>2</sup> the overarching aim of the later phase of this project that we focus on here, was to scale up our research on contemporary public engagement and participation by creating a digital platform for public learning, debate and innovation concerning this topic. This had three main objectives: first, to create a searchable collection of participatory public engagement initiatives that could help animate some of the diversity of activity emerging in different domains;<sup>3</sup> second, to collate a set of cases that could be compared, further researched and debated (by us and others); third, to research and evaluate the effectiveness of this new platform, to guide further development.

We have previously used the public-centric framework we discuss here to conduct a comparative analysis of a sample of 100 of the case studies of participatory public engagement in the collection we developed (Mahony and Stephansen 2016). For this earlier analysis we used the framework to generate a preliminary map of the different and competing ways that publics are being constituted across the contemporary field of public engagement and participation. In this article we will show how the differently useful *lenses* provided by the framework can be helpful in another way: when it comes to conceptualising, designing and evaluating publicly engaged research activities.

The first perspective in the tripartite framework we recommend here offers a view of the public that takes it to be a real, pre-existing entity that can be understood through *calculative* techniques (eg Herbst, 1993; Igo, 2008). These include the polls, surveys, or segmentations (Barnett and Mahony, 2011; 2016) that are used in governmental research and decision-making processes, as well as in marketing, campaigning and behaviour change programmes. These have in common an understanding of the public as a concrete entity that can be known and 'spoken for'. This understanding arguably underpins much of the mainstream discourse of public engagement, in which the 'public' commonly designates the concrete group of people – or segments of the population – who are taken as the target of engagement activities (e.g. Facer et al, 2012). This is a positivist perspective, one that assumes that the public exists independently of any attempt at 'public engagement' and, by extension, that public engagement is an activity that will somehow reach out to, work on behalf of, or communicate with an entity that is already there.

The second perspective focuses on what the public *should* and *could* be. Work in this vein is more directly *normative* in its emphasis and orientations, offering a history of debates about the potentials, capacities and virtues of public actors, accounts of the democratic role of publics, and insights into the social, political, and economic conditions that are required for publics to come into being, be recognised and play an effective role in the polity. A ubiquitous reference point here is Habermas's (1989) model of the public sphere as a realm of rational communication oriented towards consensus-formation. Normative perspectives on the public already figure prominently in the literature on public engagement with research, particular in work that has

debated the relative merit of different models of democratic life (Biegelbauer and Hansen, 2011; Chilvers, 2008) and how publicly engaged research can support particular ideals of democracy. Such work has also sought to establish normative frameworks, by drawing on such models to establish criteria for evaluating public engagement projects (Rowe and Frewer, 2000; Rowe et al, 2008). Other strands of the normative literature on the public have been less satisfactorily debated in the literature on public engagement with research; these include work that has highlighted the exclusionary tendencies of the Habermasian model of the public sphere and the democratic importance of 'counter-publics' (Negt and Kluge, 1993; Fraser 1990), work that has proposed a model of democracy based on 'agonistic pluralism' (Mouffe, 2002; Dahlberg, 2007), and work that has pointed to the Eurocentric history and underpinnings of the public sphere concept (Santos, 2012).

As with calculative perspectives, normative accounts tend to operate with an understanding of publics as external to practices of engagement – an understanding that is challenged by what we refer to as *emergence-oriented* accounts, our third perspective on the public. Emergence-oriented accounts emphasise the mediated, reflexive and indeterminate qualities of publics, proceeding from the assumption that the public is 'not best thought of as a pre-existing collective subject that straightforwardly expresses itself or offers itself up to be represented' (Mahony et al, 2010: 2). Rather, the interest is in how publics can be understood in the plural (Calhoun, 1997), how they may be called into existence through different modes of address and nurtured by different types of material or technological support (Jackson, 2011; Marres, 2012), and in how these processes of mediation can be shaped by the agency and self-organisation of multiple social subjects variously affected by issues at hand (Warner, 2002).

Work in this tradition has focused on how self-organising publics can be formed via the circulation of discourse (Warner, 2002), mediated by the printed word, face-to-face interactions, or practices online; the role that the 'material substrate' of institutions and other infrastructures can play in the formation of publics (Jackson, 2011); as well as the role of affect (Berlant, 2011), social movement activism (Pell, 2014), citizen media practices (Stephansen, 2016) and interactive technologies (Kelty, 2008; 2012) in the



emergence of publics. Emergence-oriented perspectives are discernible within the growing literature on co-production and participatory research that emphasises the need to decentre the authority of researchers and empower the researched; the potential benefits of embracing serendipity and indeterminacy as part of the process of interacting and collaborating with non-experts; and recognising the generative possibilities of unintended outcomes and popular forms of self-organisation (e.g. Robinson and Tansey, 2006; Orr and Bennett, 2009). With the important exception of work in science and technology studies (e.g. Chilvers and Kearnes, 2016), emergence-oriented perspectives remain more marginal in the literature that specifically addresses the topic of engaged research.

The three perspectives outlined above are underpinned by different epistemological and ontological assumptions, and each gives rise to a distinct view of the public. The reflexive and critical approach we advocate does not seek to resolve tensions between different perspectives or result in a theoretically 'pure' conceptualisation of the public. Instead, it recognises that each of the three perspectives is *differently useful*. What we call for is an approach that brings these three different perspectives into relation and therefore also into contextually and project specific interactions with each other. Such an approach, we suggest, offers engaged researchers the opportunity to develop more conceptually nuanced, methodologically systematic and empirically grounded assessments of what is meant by the 'public' in public engagement today – in their own research settings and in debates with peers, institutional funders, research participants and others. Table 1 summarises the value of the different perspectives for researchers seeking to conceptualise, conduct and evaluate public engagement activities.

<b>Perspective</b>	<b>Focus</b>	<b>Value</b>
Calculative	How to calculate, track, represent and assess the 'reality' of publics.	Can satisfy external requirements for evidence of 'impact', but also help researchers identify and track their target publics.
Normative	Assumptions about the public's role and capacities; its relations with public institutions.	Can help clarify researchers' own normative commitments and how these relate to those of others.

Emergence-oriented	The mediated characteristics of publics; possibilities for self-organisation, innovation and indeterminacy.	Can help researchers think about how to support and manage the emergence of a public and to open up opportunities and account for unexpected outcomes.
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Table 1 – Perspectives

In the case study that follows we illustrate how the multi-dimensional framework we have outlined here was used to conduct a systematic evaluation of an engaged research project. What will become apparent is that the three perspectives in our framework can often intersect in practice and that multiple conceptions of the 'public' may co-exist in the context of any given engagement initiative.

### **Applying the framework – a case study**

The project that we draw on here focused on the development of *Participation Now*, a web resource for researchers, practitioners and others with an interest in participation and public engagement.<sup>4</sup> This project set out to investigate and engage with the wider landscape of public engagement beyond the academy, in realms such as activism, media, government and arts. Hosted by *OpenLearn*, the Open University's platform for free learning, *Participation Now* comprised two core elements: (1) a searchable collection of 139 participatory public engagement initiatives from diverse domains – including government, arts, activism and research – intended to illustrate a diversity of emerging developments and support interactive exploration; and (2) a 'comments, debate and analysis' section, convened in partnership with openDemocracy.net, featuring contributions from researchers and practitioners reflecting on contemporary forms of participatory public engagement.

The development of *Participation Now* emerged in relation to other projects involving online collections of case studies of public participation and engagement, such as *Participedia.net* (see e.g. Smith et al, 2015) and *Actipedia.org* (2105), as well as directories compiled by organisations such as *ScienceWise* and *INVOLVE*. While we share their aims of mapping and facilitating knowledge sharing about contemporary developments in public participation and engagement, our concern was not so much to evaluate case studies from a normative perspective or identify models of 'best

practice', as to animate the diversity of initiatives in this field and bring very different examples of emerging and established practice into relation. This meant including examples of both publicly engaged *research* and participatory public engagement initiatives in other realms, beyond academia. As we have argued elsewhere (Mahony and Stephansen 2016), academic researchers can learn much from paying attention to the patterns, relationships and divergences among different approaches to resourcing public action.

Another distinct feature of our project is that we viewed it from the start as an opportunity to support greater levels of public engagement with these developments. The broad aim of *Participation Now* was to enable users to explore the contemporary field of participatory public engagement, compare different kinds of practices, and learn from others. We wished to support debate and critical engagement with this field of practice, to facilitate collective learning about the myriad of ways in which publics are being engaged across different domains. *Participation Now* was therefore more than just a means of disseminating research findings: it provided a vehicle for our own ongoing research on participation and public engagement – a process that we sought to *make public* in as many ways as possible. In other words, *Participation Now* was both a research project about public engagement and itself an example of publicly engaged research. For a detailed account of how we analysed the initiatives in our collection, see Mahony and Stephansen (2016); here, we use *Participation Now* to illustrate how the framework outlined above can be used to conduct a multi-dimensional assessment of a publicly engaged research project. It is our suggestion that the kind of public-centric analysis enabled by our framework can be deployed and further developed in other, perhaps more familiar, settings of public engagement with research.

#### *Calculating and representing the public(s) of Participation Now*

Applying a calculative perspective to our project helped focus our attention on the characteristics of the publics we were targeting and the means by which we would track and represent these publics. Our 'target publics' comprised a range of actors who are either directly involved in participatory public engagement or interested in this field of practice. We wanted to engage a broad public made up of organisers of

participation initiatives, researchers with an interest in this area, activists and other 'interested citizens'.

To mobilise, track and represent this diverse public, we devised two broad strategies. The first entailed developing an online collection of 'participatory public engagement' initiatives. We deployed a deliberately broad definition of this term as we envisaged the diverse range of actors who organise such initiatives as constituting a contemporary 'field' of participatory public engagement, and assumed that these actors could be mobilised and represented as a public. The second strategy involved developing a 'comments, debate and analysis' section through an editorial partnership with openDemocracy.net. A special section of openDemocracy.net dedicated to Participation Now was set up, where contributions in the form of short blog posts, longer articles and interviews were published; these were also posted on Participation Now. This editorial partnership was designed with the aim of engaging both an active 'writing public' and a more diffuse 'reading public'. We assumed that beyond the actors directly involved in participatory public engagement initiatives, a wider public existed that wanted to keep informed about contemporary developments. Our decision to work with openDemocracy.net was motivated by the possibility this offered for reaching an already established readership interested in politics and democracy.

To what extent did we succeed in engaging these target publics? Aware that we would be required (by funders and colleagues) to report quantitative measures of the size and basic characteristics of the public that participated, there was a calculative dimension to the way we designed Participation Now. We set up web analytics, which enabled us to collect metrics on visits and usage; these provided, *inter alia*, an indication of the size and character of the reading public we engaged, as well as its geographical spread. A calculative perspective on the public also encouraged us to track the character of the writing public that we mobilised; to do so we conducted a basic quantitative analysis of the contributions to the debate we facilitated.

Quantitative data of this kind provided a way of representing and tracking the public we sought to engage as part of this project. This data proved useful for responding to demands from our institution and funders for objective measures of public 'effects'. It

also helped us track, on an on-going basis, the extent to which our own ideals of inclusiveness and diversity were fulfilled, and thereby show that our project had at least the potential to contribute to longer-term processes of societal change by involving a broad range of actors beyond academia in a public debate about participatory public engagement.

Adopting a *calculative* perspective helped us to think about the decisions we faced regarding how to identify, target, represent, track and enumerate our public(s), and – subsequently – to design the project accordingly. Calculative perspectives were also mobilised strategically to help us account for the public ‘impact’ of this engagement project in instrumental terms. Calculative perspectives have the potential to be useful in other settings where the question of how engaged researchers choose to target, represent, track and enumerate publics is likely to also require negotiation. However, while this perspective can support reflection on how researchers may invest in calculative techniques and deploy them as an indicator of engagement, it cannot help researchers evaluate the character and quality of debates that take place or the public role that is assumed by research participants. To do this, it is necessary to assess the public in public engagement from a normative perspective, to which we turn next.

#### *Normative assumptions about the public's role and capacities*

In the context of our engagement project normative perspectives on the public helped us focus attention on our underlying assumptions about the public's role, capacities, and virtues: ideas about how publics *should*, or *could*, be constituted, and their social, institutional or democratic function. In practical terms, considering engagement from a normative perspective helped us formulate the kinds of publicity and versions of the public that the project sought to support. Evaluation, therefore, focused on the extent to which we succeeded in supporting and mobilising the kind of ideal public that we envisaged engaging, and negotiating different expectations.

As researchers with an interest in exploring how publics are convened and engaged through participation, we adopted a normative orientation that emphasised openness and public pedagogy. This orientation was both a product of our own commitments and shaped by our location within an institution with a strong tradition of ‘open’

education. Our commitment to co-production of knowledge and to valuing non-academic perspectives meant our project was not simply concerned with disseminating research findings or taking forward a particular conceptual position. We wanted to facilitate critical reflection and exchange across various kinds of difference; in brief, the goal was to support a more inclusive and interactive *public* debate about contemporary developments in participation and public engagement.

We sought to do so through the two key features of *Participation Now*: the searchable collection of participatory public engagement initiatives and the 'comments, debate and analysis' section. The aim of the former was to enable users of the site to explore similarities and differences among diverse approaches to participatory public engagement, and in this way support reflexive thinking about relationships and patterns, the broader politics of this field, and possibilities for new forms of practice. The 'comments, debate and analysis' feature was intended as a means to extend and collectivise this reflexive thinking. We wanted to facilitate a debate characterised by critical reflection, co-operation, exchange and mutual learning. The aim was to make the project of understanding – and perhaps even theorising – contemporary developments in participatory public engagement a *public* one.

Implicit in these aims was a set of assumptions about the capacities of our public and the quality of the public discourse we wanted to facilitate. We assumed that the public of *Participation Now* would share our interest in attending to the cultural dynamics, contextual specificities and myriad politics of these developments. We imagined a public that was critical, interested in contributing to a public debate, and committed to advancing collective understanding.

To what extent were these assumptions met? One indication of people's interest in this new site and their capacity for contributing to this kind of public debate can be found in the character of the contributions submitted to our debate section. A qualitative analysis revealed contributions of a varied nature: while some authors reflected critically on the achievements and shortcomings of their own project, or explored more conceptual issues, others were mainly oriented towards gaining publicity for their particular initiative. In other words, not everyone shared our

assumptions about the form that this kind of debate 'should' take (cf. Horst and Michael 2011). We also found limited evidence that our project succeeded in facilitating exchange and mutual learning across difference. Though contributions came from a broad range of actors, there were only a few instances of authors engaging directly with one another or citing other contributions (we return to this below). This is perhaps unsurprising: building up the kind of public debate that we wanted to support requires time, more than was available for the brief duration of our project. In hindsight, we also realised that we overestimated the degree to which participants were able to engage in sustained exchanges of the critical and reflexive nature we had hoped for. To be able to produce this kind of writing requires more resources than are available to most people – particularly busy activists and practitioners.

This brief account of the interactions that our project generated illustrates the kind of analysis that may be conducted from a normative perspective on the public. Early on, normative perspectives helped us think reflexively about our own commitments and how these related to the 'ethos' of The Open University as well as broader debates about public engagement, thus helping us negotiate different expectations and design our project accordingly. Retrospectively, an analysis of the kind presented above brings into clearer view the versions of the public that we sought to support, and helps assess the extent to which the interactions that occurred and the types of discourse that were generated reflected our normative expectations.

The analysis above highlights some of the issues that are at stake for researchers when considering the *roles* that they will offer their public(s). We believe this perspective has relevance in other contexts as it makes evident how all researchers have choices regarding what the public could, or should, be in the context of their engagement initiative. These choices have consequences, and negotiating what is at stake in different possible ways of supporting engagement involves considering the capacities and desires the public is assumed to have, the relationships that participants will be invited to enter into (with each other and with researchers), and the ways the public will be expected to contribute to institutional projects, research agendas, wider public debates, or – more broadly conceived – the public good.

Of course, it is always difficult to predict what is going to happen during a public engagement initiative, however much such issues are reflected upon and planned for in advance. The inherent instability of work involving public engagement and participation means its outcomes can never be fully anticipated. The planning and evaluation of publicly engaged research, therefore, needs also to be able to recognise and assess the value of unexpected processes and outcomes. For this, emergence-oriented perspectives on the public are valuable.

### *Supporting the emergence of a public*

Our case study therefore also points to some of the questions and choices that are at stake when considering engagement from an emergence-oriented perspective. These include questions about how researchers will support forms of mediated public self-organisation as part of their engagement work, and the extent to which an engaged research project will be shaped by the public interactions that it encourages and that are allowed to take place in a particular setting. How should researchers support, 'manage', respond to and account for the unpredictability that such public self-organisation can generate?

Emergence-oriented perspectives throw the other two approaches in our framework into relief by highlighting the mediated nature of all publics. From this perspective, far from simply enabling researchers to track and represent already existing publics, calculative perspectives offer a set of techniques that can also be seen as *constituting* the publics they seemingly only seek to measure (cf. Savage 2013). Here we see that web analytics and other quantitative data on people's engagement with our website provide a way of rendering the public of *Participation Now* intelligible as a concrete entity, thereby giving it empirical reality. Similarly, the normative assumptions and ideals that underpin any given engagement project have consequences for the character of the public that is engaged, as researchers' calls for certain kinds of participation can frame and shape the engagement process itself – even if, as we have seen, there are no guarantees that their normative ambitions will be fulfilled.



Emergence-oriented perspectives on the public thereby highlight the need for researchers to be reflexive about their practices and assumptions as well as the mediated and constructed nature of all approaches to the public in public engagement. Emergence-oriented perspectives can furthermore help researchers attend to processes of mediation that can support the self-organisation of publics (e.g. Warner 2002). Here the focus shifts to how researchers can help support the *emergence* of (a) public(s) around their research, and the inherent indeterminacy and instability of such publics. It was this emergence-oriented perspective that formed the starting point for our project.

While we were mindful of the importance of considering the public in public engagement from calculative and normative perspectives, and expectations to demonstrate 'impact' in these terms, we set out with the rather ambitious aim of attempting to mediate and thereby help create a self-organising public around the topics of participation and public engagement. To do this we drew on two key insights in the literature: an understanding of publics as emerging through the circulation of discourse around issues of common concern (Barnett, 2003; Dewey, 1927; Warner, 2002), and the idea that this depends on the existence of infrastructures (digital, social, institutional) that enable such discourse to be circulated (cf. Jackson, 2011; Chilvers and Kearnes, 2016). Our efforts to support the emergence of a public around our research on participation and public engagement focused, therefore, on creating such infrastructure and utilising this to initiate and further facilitate the circulation of discourse around these topics.

The first infrastructural dimension of the project was the *Participation Now* website, located on the OpenLearn platform. Making use of existing infrastructure in this way enabled us to benefit from dedicated technical support and gain access to an already established user base. A key priority was to design and develop functionality that could support new thinking about participation and public engagement: the collection of initiatives was displayed as a visually engaging 'mosaic' of images – each representing a particular initiative – and a live filtering functionality allowed users to interact with the collection in a variety of ways to explore differences, similarities and patterns (see figure x). The second infrastructural dimension was the editorial

partnership with openDemocracy.net (see figure y). Forged with the intention of extending the reach of our discourse beyond the openLearn user base, this collaboration enabled us to benefit from openDemocracy.net already established reputation and readership. We also made use of a number of other communication channels: the project was publicised via The Open University newsletters as well as discipline-specific academic mailing lists; we also set up a Twitter account which we used to publicise new content.

Our efforts to initiate and support the circulation of discourse using these infrastructures took a number of forms. We posted brief texts providing background and information about the project, circulated open calls for contributions to the openDemocracy.net debate, and wrote a series of editorial pieces reflecting on the project's progress. By experimenting with these ways of supporting exploration and debate, we invested in the idea of trying to allow the ongoing agenda of this project to emerge.

To what extent did we succeed in these efforts to support the emergence of a (self-organised) public? Notwithstanding the complicated methodological question of how to measure the emergence of a mediated public, the limited duration of our project made it difficult to collect irrefutable 'evidence' of public formation. What we have been able to capture are glimpses and fragments that point towards the beginnings of such processes and therefore provide indications of what the emergence of a public might look like were the project to be continued and scaled up. Though direct interactions between contributors to our debate were rare, we were able to detect brief instances of particular discourses about participatory public engagement circulating – among contributions to the openDemocracy.net debate, but also more widely: a number of external websites linked to *Participation Now*, the project was mentioned on several blogs, and also generated some activity on Twitter.

We can also highlight two examples of *Participation Now* being used in more unanticipated ways. First, the site was used as a teaching resource by a lecturer at a London university, as part of an undergraduate politics course on 'democratic innovation'. Second, our agenda of supporting informal collective learning about

participation and public engagement was enthusiastically embraced by the chairperson of the Raymond Williams Foundation, resulting in the organisation of a residential event and a new festival of democracy called *DemFest*, which were held in November 2014 and May 2016 respectively and which together convened several hundred people interested in further developing the debate we had initiated.

Although we certainly do not have indisputable 'evidence' of a public emerging around our project, we can point to limited indications of people responding to our calls for involvement, to discourse circulating through people's contributions, to unanticipated outcomes, and to the beginnings of an informal network of people connected as a result of this project. These outcomes are unlikely to have emerged without the infrastructure we created. Emergence-oriented perspectives provided the impetus for conceptualising our project in terms of mediated public self-organisation and *public creation*, prompted us to invest in creating infrastructure to support the circulation of discourse, and offered a lens through which we were able to capture glimpses of public emergence that would not have been visible from other perspectives. We believe, therefore, that this perspective has wider relevance, particularly in settings where engagement is conceived of as entailing processes of mediation, infrastructure building, group interaction and active involvement.

## **Discussion**

Our case study offers a glimpse of some of the ways that different conceptual lenses on the public can *participate* (cf. Law and Urry, 2004: 392) in the design, enactment and assessment of public engagement. The framework helped with the practicalities of designing the project by encouraging us to reflect on and account for our own commitments to certain formations of the public from three different but intersecting perspectives; it also provided a tripartite process for assessing and reporting on the effects of this engagement project. Our case study illuminates just some of the wide range of possibilities and choices that researchers face when planning and conducting publicly engaged research, and how the framework might help them understand what is at stake. We recognise that our project was perhaps unusual, in the sense that it was a publicly engaged research project focusing on the topic of public engagement, and because the scope of the actors we sought to engage exceeded the boundaries

of mainstream public engagement with research. Nonetheless, we believe the framework is applicable beyond the confines of our project. For example, it might be used in a relatively 'light-touch' and 'diagnostic' way to facilitate critical reflection on, and evaluation of, more established approaches to engagement, such as collaborations, Science Shops, consultations or communication exercises. Alternatively, it might be used in a more involved fashion to help design and support new (and perhaps more experimental) forms of engagement in public-centric ways.

Here we encounter another important issue, which impinged on our project and should concern others too. This relates to the degree to which researchers see the public as a potentially *active* agent in the context of their engaged research practice. In the literature on the public, engagement is not simply understood as a supplement to existing practices of institutional or professional power, and therefore certainly not as a possible route to the public promotion and legitimisation of academic research. The public is often regarded as an independent opposition or a 'counterpublic' (Fraser, 1990; Warner 2002) that can exist in tension with established institutions and processes. The conceptual framework we offer acknowledges this possibility, but it is up to researchers to consider the extent to which they wish to, or are able to or indeed have the resources to, deal with the public manifesting itself in this way in their settings. In situations where researchers *can* consider supporting more active forms of public engagement, a key question concerns the extent to which they choose to *limit* processes of public self-organisation in order to realise a set of pre-constituted engagement goals (and thereby control the risks associated with more unfettered self-organisation), or take these risks by trying to support processes of public self-organisation in ways that could lead to more radically inclusive and innovative forms of engagement.

At stake here are differing ways of thinking about the agency and responsibility of researchers; the capacities, desires and potentials of publics; as well as different understandings of the power relationships between them. The tripartite framework has been shown here to be a resource that publicly engaged researchers can deploy at different phases of the engagement process – to bring into view what is at stake in different ways of approaching the public, to help negotiate and account for their

decisions, and to help them report on what happens as a result. We hope to have shown that there is much to be gained by reflecting on what is at stake in negotiating different understandings of the public. Together, the three perspectives offer a framework that researchers can use to design and conduct engaged research in contextually responsive and theoretically attuned ways, and to assess engagement practice with the kind of systematic and nuanced attention that these processes undoubtedly require and deserve.

This article therefore contributes not only to existing work concerned with the development of frameworks, models and indicators for evaluating public engagement (see for example Rowe et al, 2005; Neresini and Bucchi, 2011), it also contributes to broader debates about the development of research that is more socially relevant and publicly beneficial (see, for example, Burawoy, 2009; Brewer 2013; Campaign for the Public University 2015). At minimum, we hope this framework might have a role in mitigating situations in which engaged research projects inadvertently reproduce existing power relationships between academics and publics (Facer and Enright 2016). We have repeatedly highlighted the importance of role of reflexivity in this regard, especially when it comes to understanding and supporting the public in the midst of public engagement projects. However, such reflexivity will be just as valuable when it comes to negotiating tensions between the need for professional academic autonomy (when designing and assessing an engagement project) and the need for public accountability (in terms of engaging others within and beyond the academy and reporting on a given project); or when it comes to considering the potential an engagement project has for wider societal relevance or making a contribution to the broader public good.

## **Conclusion**

By offering a framework for understanding and supporting the public in public engagement today, our goal has been to contribute to debates about what research for *all* could and should mean. The framework is designed to support researchers in improving the quality of public engagement with research, by enhancing the empirical sensitivity and conceptual robustness of engagement projects and their role in wider efforts to improve the societal relevance of research. We began by reflecting on the

context of these developments, pointing to how debates about engagement take place in a contemporary situation in which the character, role and definition of the public in public engagement is capacious, multiple, often imprecise and not always agreed upon in advance. Having observed the need for a pragmatic resource that researchers can use to help them think about and support the public in public engagement, we introduced an approach that has been specifically designed to help address current challenges. Rather than offering a ready-made 'solution' to negotiating public engagement, this approach calls on researchers to use the framework to navigate public engagement in pragmatic, contextually responsive and theoretically informed ways. We have highlighted how this approach can enable nuanced processes of public engagement design as well as more systematic accounts of the public in public engagement activities.

The set of proposals and strategies offered here now need wider discussion and further testing. More research is also needed to further develop the framework we have outlined, as its usefulness and relevance needs to be assessed in other settings – as does its acceptability to institutional sponsors (whether as a supplement, or possibly alternative, to more mainstream approaches to assessing public engagement and impact). In a situation in which definitions, concepts, practices and the value of the public in academic research are likely to remain complicated and fraught, further work in this area should have three aims: to continue to investigate the public, empirically and conceptually; to participate actively in broader on-going conversations about the public purpose and societal role of engaged research; and to support more practice-based experimentation with new forms of public engagement with research. For it will only be by constituting the public in more reflexive, critical and creative ways; by better supporting and more rigorously accounting for the public in public engagement projects; and by more robustly advocating the positive benefits of involving the public, that the potential of the public in public engagement will be more fully understood and the contribution of contemporary publics can continue to grow and develop.

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<sup>1</sup> The Creating Publics project was a three-year Open University funded project led by Dr. Nick Mahony that investigated the changing landscape of public engagement and contemporary publics to identify lessons and insights for scholars interested in public engagement with research (project blog and list of outcomes available at: <https://creatingpublics.wordpress.com/>)

<sup>2</sup> For further details of the Open University's RCUK-funded 'Catalyst' project see final project report available at: <http://oro.open.ac.uk/44255/>

<sup>3</sup> We use 'participatory public engagement' here as an inclusive term to relate publicly engaged and participatory research to similar practices initiated by actors beyond academia.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.open.edu/openlearn/society/politics-policy-people/participation-now>