

Public Participation in Action Models

The Genetic Town Hall: Making Every Voice Count

Kathy Hudson, Ph.D.

Description of Public Participation Model: We used a Deliberative Democracy model of public engagement in two different settings – in person town hall meetings and online discussion groups.

Objective: To engage participants, experts, and policymakers on issues related to the use of reproductive genetic technologies (RGTs). Specifically, should there be limits on the use of RGTs; if so, who should set those limits; and what is the impact on the individual, family, and society of the ability of parents to select the characteristics of their children? The Center had already accumulated a great deal of information from the American public through focus groups, key informant interviews, and surveys. The goal of the public engagement was to examine these attitudes after participants had had the opportunity to learn more about the technologies, understand the issues, hear various perspectives, and deliberate with fellow participants.

Ideal group size: For the in-person town hall, 100 or more seated at round tables of 8-10 to encourage small- and large-group discussions. The online discussion groups consisted of 10-12 participants in each group.

Participant demographics: A total of 536 members of the general public participated in the in-person town hall meetings, which were held in 6 U.S. cities. Local resource experts, community leaders, and media were invited as table facilitators, community panel members, and observers/reporters. Online discussion group participants (n=133) and controls (n=403) were members of Knowledge-Networks web-enabled panel representative of the U.S. population. Facilitators were genetic counselors.

Setting/Location: In-person town halls were held in public venues in Sacramento, Seattle, Kalamazoo, Ft. Worth, New York City, and Nashville. Online participants were in their homes at their computers.

Results/Outputs: Areas of concern and optimism were similar to those expressed in focus groups and interviews and tested in surveys. Approval of some uses of technologies declined after participation in discussions and approval of oversight increased.

Strengths/Weakness: In-person town halls attracted more stakeholders, the technically savvy, and those with a “point of view”. However, they reached a wider audience, involved policy makers and community leaders, and attracted more media attention. Online groups were more representative of the general population, allowed more in-depth discussions, and changes in attitudes could more reliably be tested. However, they had less of an impact on the policy discussion.

Communication of Results: Individual city reports and an overall town hall report sent to community leaders and local officials. The Center provided reports to the Congressmen and Senators representing the town hall locations and held Congressional briefings to inform members of their constituents’ attitudes and concerns. Washington State legislators requested a town hall specifically for them based on involvement of two representatives at the Seattle town hall.

Democracy Online: National Electronic Dialogue on Public Involvement in EPA Decisions

Tom Beierle, Ross & Associates

Case Study Background

The National Dialogue on Public Involvement in EPA Decisions was an online public dialogue sponsored by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), which took place for two weeks in the summer of 2001. EPA convened the Dialogue to obtain input on its draft Public Involvement Policy (PIP) and gather ideas on how best to implement the PIP.

Description of the Public Participation Model

The model focused on encouraging considered deliberation among a large group of participants across the country. Key features of the model were:

- A vigorous advertising campaign to attract participants;
- An electronic “briefing book” of background material;
- Open participation, but a requirement to register with personal information and commit to participating throughout the two weeks;
- Asynchronous written interaction, enhanced with message threads and other approaches for following conversations;
- A highly structured agenda;
- Facilitation by daily “hosts,” supported by topical experts as “panelists;” and
- Daily summaries.

Objectives

The primary objective of the process was to provide EPA with information from a variety of viewpoints that would help the agency develop its public participation policy and ideas for how best to implement the policy. The objective was explicitly not to build consensus. Secondary objectives were to open up new lines of communication between the public and agency staff, to educate and inform those involved, to test a new approach to public participation, and to encourage formal comments on the policy.

Group Size and Demographics

1,166 people registered for the dialogue, and 70% of them said they intended to post messages. Overall, 320 ended up posting a total of 1,261 messages. The average participant read approximately 70 messages to each one he or she posted. Participant characteristics included:

- More likely to be white, older, and female than national averages;
 - 40% involved with EPA at least once a month;
 - 76% very or somewhat familiar with EPA public participation policies;
 - 86% used Internet at least 10 times per week; and
 - 66% had a graduate or professional degree.
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Key Dynamics

Key dynamics of the processes were:

- A high degree of reciprocity: 50%-70% of daily messages were replies to previous messages, and 83% of messages were part of a thread.
- Respectful communication, according to 78% of participants, but dissenting voices were sometimes marginalized
- A high level of responsiveness to questions, although responses were sometimes formulaic or bureaucratic
- “Insiders” contributed 33% of messages, but 66% of threads were started by less-frequent posters

Results

For the primary objective of informing policy, EPA staff members said they achieved their goal of getting more, and more diverse, input into the PIP and its implementation. Following the dialogue, information was forwarded to working groups involved in developing and implementing the PIP. Staff members said they would “mine” the information for further insights. Because many of the EPA participants were already deeply involved in public participation, some said that the public input they heard was not necessarily new. Nevertheless, some felt it was useful to hear it directly.

Other results were as follows:

- 76% of participants said they learned a lot (mainly about each other)
- 43% of participants said they felt more positive about EPA, and only 6% said they felt more negative.
- Participation resulted in only a few formal comments on the policy.
- 73% made no personal contacts—not a networking opportunity for most.

Challenges

The following challenges were identified:

- It was time consuming to keep up with the evolving conversation, suggesting limits to scaling the process up without better filtering and navigation tools;
- The volume and nature of the content made it hard for participants (and EPA) to process;
- Participant demographics suggest the “usual suspects” were participating;
- There are bureaucratic challenges inherent in real-time interaction

Communication of Results

- Archived dialogue website: <http://www.network-democracy.org/epa-pip/welcome.shtml>
 - Democracy Online: An Evaluation of the National Dialogue on Public Involvement in EPA Decisions: <http://www.rff.org/Documents/RFF-RPT-demonline.pdf>
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The National Human Genome Research Institute's Community-Based Forums

*Presented by Vence L. Bonham, J.D.
Branch Chief, Education and Community Involvement Branch
National Human Genome Research, NIH*

The National Human Genome Research Institute (NHGRI) is one of 27 Institutes and Centers of the National Institutes of Health. NHGRI established in 2004 a Branch to lead its community engagement and public education programs the Education and Community Involvement Branch (ECIB). The Branch is responsible for the development of the Institute's education and community involvement programs to engage a broad range of the public in understanding genomics and accompanying ethical, legal, and social issues.

Model: To further the public engagement mission of NHGRI, the Institute established a public participation program described as the "Community Genetics Forum". To carry out this annual program, NHGRI awards contracts to academic institutions or community based organizations to host, plan, implement, and evaluate a public forum on genetics. The partner institution works in a collaborative manner with NHGRI to identify the target audiences and to develop strategies to engage the communities. Each organization that hosts the Forum is a part of the community that is being engaged and provides NHGRI the community expertise and perspective in engaging the community. Each Forum is evaluated to determine whether expectations were met, whether information was clear, and whether participants learned new information, their concerns were heard and questions were adequately addressed.

Objectives:

- To increase awareness, interest and understanding of the field of genetics, genomics, and the ethical, legal and social implications of genetics research
- To engage the community to facilitate a dialogue to identify questions, concerns and education needs related to genomics
- To engage a target audience including underrepresented minority and special populations
- To facilitate the establishment of ongoing community relationships that continue beyond the forum

Participant Demographics and Location:

2005 Community Genetics Forum:

The first Community Genetics Forum was held in Seattle, Washington. Diverse and underrepresented communities from the Seattle and Washington area, as well as out of state communities, including American Indian and Alaskan Native communities participated both in the Forum itself as well as the planning of the event. The Forum activities also included K-12 and university students and teachers, business communities, and policy makers in the Seattle area.

Setting: University of Washington with community meetings in the Seattle area

2006 Community Genetics Forum

The second annual Community Genetics Forum, to be hosted by the University of North Carolina and Duke University, is targeting community groups across the state of North Carolina. This includes African American communities, Hispanic communities, as well as student and faculty audiences from North Carolina Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

Setting: University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and Science and Mathematics High School, Durham North Carolina with community meeting within the six months preceding the Forum within the State of North Carolina.

The National Human Genome Research Institute's Community-Based Forums (continued)

Results: New community relationships for NHGRI and the University of Washington. A report of the program was generated that informed the initial planning of the subsequent Forum. Upon completion of the second Forum, the partner contractor will create its own report, which will in turn help to inform the next Forum project. As more Fora are held, we are able to better answer the question of how we engage communities around genetics.

Costs: Each Forum has cost less than \$100,000 for all activities.

Strengths and Weakness of Model: The strengths of this model include the ability of collaborating with an organization within the community to utilize existing relationships and its perspective in engaging local communities in the Forum. Also, it allows and encourages NHGRI and the contracting organization to continue relationships beyond the Forum itself. Finally, each Forum builds on the expertise of the projects that came before it. This allows the lessons learned to be applied to future projects. A weakness of the model is that for many of the participants of the Forum, NHGRI and the contracting organization interacts with them for limited time.

Lessons Learned: One lesson is to have community members involved in planning from the outset. It is necessary to learn what topics are interesting and relevant from the community itself, rather than from the funding agency making any assumptions.

Dissemination of Results: Results are being reported in both peer reviewed literature and community based periodicals.

America Speaks: 21st Century Town Meetings

Carolyn Lukensmeyer

South Carolina Citizens' School of Nanotechnology

Chris Toume, University of South Carolina

The South Carolina Citizens' School of Nanotechnology [SCCSN] is an outreach program which puts nonexperts in dialogue with experts through a series of presentations, discussions, and readings.

Objectives:

The goal of the SCCSN is to give nonexperts background and confidence that will assist them in becoming active stakeholders in nanotechnology policy.

Ideal group size:

40 to 50, so as to ensure an intimate and friendly atmosphere for discussions, questions, and comments.

Participant demographics:

Full range of ages from undergraduate students to elderly, with all ages in between;

Slightly more males than females, but not unbalanced;

Broad array of occupations, including patent attorneys, clergy, health professions, and engineers.

South Carolina Citizens' School of Nanotechnology (continued)

Setting/location:

Classroom or seminar room that can comfortably seat up to 50 people.

Results/outputs:

Over the past two years, the SCCSN has served approximately 130 people who are now comfortable asking questions and voicing opinions about nanotechnology.

Costs:

Cost to the participants: \$30 each;

Cost to run the program:

Approximately \$20,000 per year [with two rounds each year]; mostly this represents the salary of the coordinator.

Strengths/weaknesses of model:

More intimate than a mini medical school; more formal than a science cafe; more depth of content than either a mini medical school or a science cafe.

The SCCSN demonstrates that many nonexperts are intensely curious about nanotech; also, it is likely that the SCCSN model can be adapted for other topics in science and technology.

How results were communicated

1. presentations at conferences and workshops;
2. web site: <http://nsts.nano.sc.edu/outreach>
3. Several articles are being prepared.

Extension Service Outreach - USDA Cooperative Extension Service: Facilitating Engagement and Public Participation

Leslie Bourquin, Michigan State University
