



Granite Journal

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ENGAGING THE PUBLIC: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

Editorial: Engaging the Public in Times of Change

Josefine Björkqvist, Co-Editor, Granite Journal

At the time of writing this editorial there are two major issues affecting citizens worldwide: the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate crisis. Both are complex or ‘wicked problems’ with conflicting views on the ideal solutions. Wicked problems, a term coined by design theorist Horst Rittel (Rittel, Webber 1973), consist of many interdependent factors that require researchers to develop interdisciplinary solutions, and to present these solutions in a way that is understandable for the general public. COVID-19 has galvanised unprecedented cooperation among researchers to develop testing, treatments and vaccines but governments have also relied on the efforts of healthcare workers, businesses, charities and individual members of the public. Equally, the global response to the climate crisis will rely on joint action by governments, businesses and citizens. But what happens when engagement with the public is inadequate? During the 26th UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties in Glasgow (COP26) US Climate Envoy John Kerry remarked: “we are here because climate change and the urgent need for action is fact-based. It is not ideological, it is not political, it is fact-based.” Yet, researchers and policy makers working to address both the climate crisis and COVID-19 are faced with division in modern society that may prevent us from following the science. As such, the need for researchers and policy makers to provide clear communication and involve the public in matters that will ultimately affect them is crucial. Public engagement is particularly important when considering policy initiatives



where the burden of action is shifted to the citizen, such as taxation on carbon emissions or policies to increase vaccine uptake.

A recent example of unclear communication with the public was messaging and policies regarding the wearing of face masks to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The face mask has been considered a symbol of collective solidarity in the East, whilst it has been regarded by many as a symbol of oppression and encroachment on individual freedom in the West (Greenhalgh 2021). The slow implementation of face coverings in countries such as the UK was partially due to a lack of data obtained via randomized controlled trials, despite a wealth of evidence obtained outside a randomised controlled trial setting showing their effectiveness in slowing the spread of the virus (Pearson 2021). This further highlights the need for researchers and policy makers to improve the manner in which uncertainty is communicated to the public and to continually emphasise that evidence obtained via scientific methods may change as more information becomes available.

Public engagement can refer to any activity that brings researchers and members of the public together. Early taxonomies of public engagement include Arnstein's ladder of participation in 1969. This model categorises levels of engagement by degree of participation and decision-making power awarded to citizens, moving from non-participation at the bottom of the ladder to citizen power at the top (Arnstein 1969). More recently Rowe and Frewer identified three main levels of public engagement: public communication, public consultation and public participation (Rowe, Frewer 2005). The majority of public engagement in research to date has focused on public communication, where researchers seek to educate or inform the public via media or public engagement activities. However, public engagement is increasingly moving beyond mere communication and towards consultation and participation. Evidence by lived experience is now driving patient and public involvement in medical research as captured by Doebel's paper in this issue. Doebel describes the experience of involving patients as partners in healthcare research and gives recommendations for how postgraduate researchers can involve patient and public members within the design and conduct of their study (Doebel 2021). Another good example of public participation in health research is the ZOE COVID Study led by Professor Tim Spector at King's College



London. The ZOE COVID Study is a citizen science project providing the largest community monitoring of COVID-19 in the world and this type of public participation may transform how health research is conducted in the future (ZOE Limited 2021).

Articles in this issue of Granite explore the topic of public engagement through the temporal lens of past, present and future. Museums and exhibitions are an important channel for engaging the public with history. However, with museums forced to close their doors to the public during the COVID-19 pandemic, and on account of the increasing digitalisation of society, the rise of the virtual museum is here. Black's article in this issue provides an insightful analysis of what the post-internet art museum and 'museums without walls' may mean for engagement with the public. The author presents her own virtual exhibition, which fuses together imagery of the past Mercat Cross and present Castlegate in Aberdeen City, as a case study to illustrate the transformation of an important public place over time (Black 2021).

Not only is there a change of medium through which historical artefacts are being presented, but what is presented and where, is also increasingly being contested in the public domain and this can be attributed to the momentum created by the Black Lives Matter campaign. The University of Aberdeen is spearheading the discussion around decolonisation through their work in the Decolonisation Working Group of the national Museums Association. Notably, the University of Aberdeen was one of the first museums in the UK to lead by example as they repatriated a Benin bronze, which although purchased at an auction was originally looted from the city of Benin in Nigeria by British troops in 1897 (Adebola, Curtis 2021). Decolonisation of history and knowledge, also termed epistemic decolonisation, is equally at the forefront of public discourse. Kosal's article in this issue presents an analysis of the British rule of the Western Wall in Palestine in 1917-1948, including the conflicting perspectives created by the British, Jewish and Arab authorities to assert their claim to the Western Wall based on different historical interpretations (Kosal 2021).

Lastly, public engagement includes fundraising in the charity sector. Charities deliver vital support and services to different communities but also provide an important source of funding for research. Smith's article on the first ever mass street collection in the UK, the Saturday Lifeboat Fund, maps the evolution from large street collections to



new forms of fundraising such as challenge events and coffee mornings. Despite their long history, charity appeals face new challenges in a post-COVID-19 world. As high streets increasingly become more deserted in the UK and consumer activity moves online, the charity sector will need to adapt its activities to maintain their vital community services and to continue to fund research that benefits the public (Smith 2021).

What will the future of public engagement hold? The heightened focus on evidence in the public sphere offers an opportunity to integrate more sustainable solutions in society and to nudge more sustainable behaviours. However, evidence is only a catalyst for societal change when it resonates with people's values. There is a need to further investigate the way identity and socio-economic characteristics affect public responses to evidence and policy. Here, the arts, humanities and social sciences play a vital role in aiding understanding and connecting with the public through story-telling. Finally, public engagement cannot be one-way, instead engagement needs to include an open dialogue and ongoing collaboration between researchers and the public.

1 References

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