

Participation processes and government communications:

‘Does it improve democratic quality?’

If you set yourself a goal to improve the rapport between government and communities, you need to know what exactly you’re trying to achieve. In this article I look at this challenge through the lens of democracy itself. This lens makes us ask one simple question when designing and evaluating government outreach initiatives: ‘Does it improve democracy?’

Whether you involve people in your policy or project (through classic ‘citizen participation’) or get yourself involved in what happens in society: it is about the rapport that you as a public servant or government official build with citizens, companies and organizations. And increasingly also with various networks in society.

In these networks, the government is only one of many participants. That alone creates more different contact points. Moreover, traditional channels of communication are eroding; from political parties and unions to church, and from newspapers and broadcasts to “the expert”. What replaces these channels - if anything - is much less tangible. At the same time we observe a self-reinforcing trend of individuals and groups that represent a (shared) interest mobilising themselves and influencing their government's actions. They want a say in what matters to them. They want more control. And to achieve this, they use their own channels:

- **Facebook**, or a neighbourhood forum, for local area planning;
- **Twitter**, at mother’s sickbed, as it emerges that the implementation of 'healthcare choices' does not appear to address mother’s needs;
- **WhatsApp**, in a parents’ group, if the school cancels too many lessons;
- **Referendums**, in the decision-making phase of an Act of some kind.

This desire to have a greater say also includes taking initiative to do things differently, hoping or even expecting that the government will join in. These initiatives include residents’ associations, neighbourhood crime watch groups, energy cooperatives and community care. What all these initiatives have in common is clear: they are about strengthening connections between people and working for the common good.

People are not static entities - they form their connections as they see fit. That's the condition humaine, and it’s capricious. The advantage of networks is that they easily adapt to that capriciousness. Networks are agile, flexible and fast.

It also makes connections between people in these networks and the government more complicated than ever. Because a just and legitimate state is the opposite of capricious. The state

is 'static' in the proper sense of the word: reliable, predictable and recognisable, thoughtful and slow.

Rapport between the capricious community and the static state

The government is always busy connecting the capricious community and the static state. And because the trusted old communication channels are eroding, this means finding and employing new paths and channels to establish contact. These need scrutiny: digging new channels, paving new roads and making new connections - we need a means to judge whether a government agency is doing well. When can you say it's 'good governance'? With all those connections in all those capricious networks, the number of potential engagement opportunities is endless. So how does a government know which opportunity to address and improve?

We have a nifty tool for this: democracy. We can use democracy as a guide for process design and as direction for improvement. The central question you ask is: 'Does this improve democracy?'

Sometimes it gets better...

Asking this question really does make a difference. It does when a government agency overcomes internal hurdles and obstacles and allocates money to truly help a family with complex problems. It does when a councillor does whatever it takes to realise a sustainable community centre and her officials act according to the spirit rather than the letter of the regulations. That's when they invent creative solutions instead of new 'paper'.

Workarounds for the greater, public good. They're often great. Results! Problems are solved! Faster! And with more commitment. We develop workarounds, we're innovating, researching and learning. And that is good. It results in systems that are better suited for the task and that serve society better. And that's exactly what you want in a democracy.

And sometimes it gets worse...

Workarounds are sometimes also something else, such as when the shortest path to a solution avoids the hassle of the discouraging and controlling effect of bureaucracy. If residents settle something with their MP, the planning authority may be given the task of simply 'taking care of it' and then - let's say - the body that regulates listed buildings is bypassed and loses its say.

And what about the city council entering a joint venture with a property developer to develop a new neighbourhood shopping centre together? That will benefit the pace, but the local authority and residents' committee are sidelined.

What if the local authorities made all these calls? Then you no longer have to meet at the metropolitan level and make difficult choices about dividing the big budget. Aren't these local professionals better suited to do this? But how do we justify those choices? And what if budgets are exceeded?

If you find that you're avoiding "the hassle" associated with conflict of interest, you must be alert. Because conflict of interest is exactly what "public interest" is made of. Democracy is a way of working to balance all interests in your decisions. Including those of minorities or minority issues. If that hassle does not prompt you to think, and instead you simply come up with a "workaround", you're not working on democracy: you're compromising it.

The way it's done

A government is not only responsible for the contents of its decisions. It is also accountable for the way these decisions are made and implemented. Political scientists refer to this as 'procedural legitimacy'. Without procedural legitimacy, democracy is fishy. Do not all involved parties get access to documents? Only hear the big screamers? Is tax money spent in shady ways? Can you only participate in the project if you agree?

Communication and participation: the way you reach consensus and implement plans, and the rationale behind the selection of the groups and individuals you involve in this all need to be done right. If they are not, your policy plan may be brilliant according to the experts but you should be concerned about its democratic virtue.

I therefore suggest we give ourselves the following assignment: **Government engagement must contribute to the quality of democracy.**

This assignment provides a solid foundation for the design and execution of a broad variety of communication and participation forms and processes. It offers an angle to critically review new and existing collaboration formats and tools. Participation is not an end in itself; reinforcing democracy is. The adoption of this assignment has yet another advantage: 'preventing hassle' can never again be the sole goal of participation and communication. In fact, we can start seeing public interest as a symptom of democracy again and even seek it out and use it as a channel to disagree with one another. Because that reinforces democracy.

Participation forms such as advisory councils, neighbourhood co-operatives, community sounding boards, panels, but also 'ordinary' consultation as well as decision making in the Lower House: all are ways to channel and ingest the public's voice and influence. Do these improve democracy? The channels we pick for communication, from invitation to explanation: do they strengthen our democracy?

The lens

The next question follows naturally: when do we actually consider something democratic? To assess government engagement and outreach from that perspective, we can pick the trusted lens of democracy up again. Through that lens you can observe a number of values that make a process democratic. The more you respect them, the more democratic the process.

Some examples of these values are:

Inclusion - Is this format truly accessible to all stakeholders?

Deliberation - Is the way in which consultation, discussion and decision-making are conducted completely sound?

Transparency - Is it clear who consults and decides and how, where and when this happens?

Public control - are the checks and balances in order (power and counterpower)? Is there a balance between responsibility and participation? Who is allowed to make decisions?

Efficiency - how much money, time and energy does it demand;

Democratic skills - do all participants have the tools they need, is everyone capable of truly participating and bearing responsibility for the joint decision and its implementation - and if not, has this lack of preparedness been taken into account?

Sometimes values reinforce each other but they can also be contradictory. In that case they can even compromise each other. For example, the inclusion value (involve as many people as possible) and the efficiency value (be economic with time and/or public money) are often at odds with each other.

Another example is deliberation (properly weighing arguments) versus inclusion, where expressing anger or sadness, or extensively focusing on the interests of a particular group, may sometimes take priority while "factual" considerations are less successful and fail to get people's attention.

Different values can be of different importance on a case-by-case basis. People with little education often consider freedom of expression the most important benefit of democracy (read: inclusion and deliberation), while the higher educated tend to point out consultation and objection in political decision-making (which is more about transparency and control). The challenge is to create a variety of engagement formats that maximises democratic quality within the existing constraints.

In short, the values certainly do not constitute a 'checklist'. They are ingredients of democracy for which we need to determine the right mix time and again, accepting that we cannot achieve perfection.

Practicing with the lens

Practice makes perfect. Let's consider a number of examples.

Elections: this 'instrument' scores quite high on the efficiency scale (it costs residents little time and delivers clear information, although organising it is expensive). It also scores quite high on transparency (elections in the Netherlands are honest and verifiable - although what happens after the elections is often far from transparent). Elections rank very low on deliberation (you can only select one name, without explaining or discussing your considerations).

Co-creation: is often not efficient (as it takes a lot of time) and transparency is often weak. Deliberation however tends to be high and there is plenty of room for public input.

Classic participation: does well on the inclusion scale (everyone is allowed to speak but not everybody is able to, so participation skills require attention), but is usually low on deliberation. Control generally doesn't score well either.

Kitchen table discussion: maximum points for inclusion: it's really about you.

Deliberation and control can also score well here, provided an open discussion takes place about what you need. Transparency tends to be weak. Efficiency is a possibility: a custom plan can be cheaper and more time efficient. It does require well-developed skills, both from the professional and the citizen.

The conclusion urgently presents itself. With so much variety in participation formats, types of assignments and people to engage with, you need to pay close attention. For each engagement format, a different value may 'score' better. Because of this, look for fitting and '(more) democratic', not hip and new. Innovating ways to engage is not an end in itself; strengthening democracy is.

With this, I have reached the end of my speech. Shall I just summarise it in one sentence?

A government that truly wants to build a rapport with communities looks through the lens of democracy and strives to improve democratic quality. (And keep in mind: hassle is a symptom of democracy!)

Marije van den Berg

Leiden (the Netherlands), november 2017



Marije partners with innovative decision makers to look for new forms of government and steering in the network democracy. She helps government institutions achieve goals democratically through networks. Marije is expert in all shapes of participation and outreach and likes to boil this down to a very basic goal: improvement of democratic quality.

marije@whiteboxing.nl

www.whiteboxing.nl

[@marije](https://www.instagram.com/marije)

+31 (0)6 46741903