

Public Participation Organizations and Open Policy: A Constitutional Moment for British Democracy?

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Abstract

This article builds on work in Science and Technology Studies and cognate disciplines concerning the institutionalization of public engagement and participation practices. It describes and analyses ethnographic qualitative research into one “organization of participation,” the UK government-funded Sciencewise program. Sciencewise’s interactions with broader political developments are explored, including the emergence of “open policy” as a key policy object in the UK context. The article considers what the new imaginary of openness means for institutionalized forms of public participation in science policymaking, asking whether this is illustrative of a “constitutional moment” in relations between society and science policymaking.

Keywords

open policy, public participation, constitutional moments, organizations of participation

Introduction

The shift from a focus on the public understanding of science toward public engagement with science has been widely announced and described (e.g., Thorpe

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& Gregory, 2010; Tlili & Dawson, 2010), though the distinctiveness and the comprehensive nature of this shift have been called into question (e.g., Irwin, 2006; Pieczka & Escobar, 2013; Wynne, 2006). This move has been accompanied by the increasing institutionalization of participation in Western Europe and North America, illustrated by the routinization of practices of public engagement and participation within key science policy organizations—including government departments (Pallett & Chilvers, 2013), learned societies (e.g., Bickerstaff, Lorenzoni, Jones, & Pidgeon, 2010), and universities or research institutes and research councils (e.g., Irwin, 2006)—the ubiquitous use of the language of dialogue and engagement in key policy documents and pronouncements around science policy (e.g., H M Treasury, 2004; House of Lords, 2000), and increasingly the expectation that some form of wider engagement will be part of most government decision-making processes concerning science and technology (e.g., Brown, 2009; Munton, 2003).

This institutionalization has been accompanied or even enabled by the professionalization of public participation, with an influential elite community of experts charged with overseeing, facilitating, and reporting on participation events (e.g., Chilvers, 2008b; Gisler & Schicktanz, 2009). Furthermore, an as yet underexamined trend has seen the creation of international, national, and subnational “organizations of participation” as centers of best practice. Such organizations span different policy domains and national contexts, including technology assessment bodies like the Danish Board of Technology and the Rathenau Institute in the Netherlands, bodies concerned with health care topics, and bodies orchestrating public participation in science policy topics more generally, like the U.K. government-funded body Sciencewise, which is the focus of this study.

Sciencewise was created in 2004 as part of the 2004-2014 Science and Innovation Investment Framework (H M Treasury, 2004). It initially operated in a similar way to its forerunner, the Committee on the Public Understanding of Science, offering small grants for public engagement projects related to science policy, but was later relaunched in 2007 as an expert resource center for public dialogue. In this role the program supported public dialogue projects in partnership with government departments and research councils, which would directly feed into science and technology policy decisions. The third contract period of the Sciencewise program (2012-2015) developed against a landscape of broader shifts in U.K. government structures and in meanings of democracy, from large-scale reform of the civil service and approaches to policymaking, to the prospect of Scottish Independence. There was much at stake in contemporaneous and sometimes competing claims to democratic process and to democratic accountability and legitimacy, from the emergence of the “open policy” narrative, to the 2011 Localism Act, which was intended

to devolve power to local authorities and communities but was undermined by concurrent cuts to local authority budgets and other centralizing impulses in government. Substantive debates too about the role of evidence in policymaking, precisely who could speak in policymaking processes and what was considered to be credible evidence simultaneously presented opportunities and threats to those advocating citizen participation, and held the potential to radically alter practices of policymaking and implementation.

This article adopts a view of democracy not merely as a description of a mode of governance or even a normative goal for governance and decision making, but rather as an essentially contested concept (Gallie, 1956), whose meaning is evoked and debated in a variety of contexts with different effects. As recognized by theorists from philosophy (e.g., Dewey, 1927), planning (e.g., Healey, 2012), STS (science & technology studies; e.g., Jasanoff, 2012), human geography (e.g., Purcell, 2013), and beyond, democracies are ever changing or “in-the-making,” and the pace of change is rarely linear or constant. Democratic and political structures respond to the changing social values and commitments of their citizens over time (e.g., Jasanoff, 2011) as well as the gradual diffusion and acceptance of new knowledge and ideas (e.g., Owens, 2010), sometimes still leading to instances of relatively fast democratic change when the opportunities, skills, infrastructures, and attitudes necessary for change are in place. Jasanoff (2011) has described such developments as “constitutional moments,” brief periods in which the basic rules of political practice are rewritten, altering relations between citizens and the state.

Practices of public engagement and participation are one arena in which the arrangements of the state and understandings of democracy are debated and transformed, offering a possible site for inquiry into constitutional moments. Furthermore, Irwin (2006) has argued that scholars need to empirically study and theorize the institutionalization of practices of public participation that has been observed by academics and other actors. Responding to this call this article addresses questions about changes in democracy and governance through focused ethnographic research in the micro-spaces of one specific organization of participation, as a case study of these institutionalized practices. In doing this it shows the importance of understanding events occurring at a fine-grained spatial resolution, as well as the fine-grained temporal resolution that Jasanoff (2011) explores. The focus of the article is on the interplay between developments in the Sciencewise program and developments at the national scale in the open policy agenda, which the program attempted to intervene in and was also influenced by.

The article begins by describing the development of the Sciencewise program in the context of the institutionalization of public participation in the

United Kingdom. The program's interactions with the emerging open policy agenda are then explored and analyzed in terms of what they reveal about institutionalized practices of public participation. The final section develops this analysis further by considering whether the organizational- and national-level changes observed during the period of research could be considered part of an emergent "constitutional moment." In doing so, the article asks what this can add to our understanding of changing democratic practices and structures, such as the institutionalization of participation, in the United Kingdom and in other national and transnational contexts.

The Institutionalization of Public Participation

Sciencewise was chosen as a case study for this research as an archetypal example of the organizations of participation that have been created as part of the professionalization and institutionalization of public participation, in Europe, North America, and increasingly further afield. The program was set up by the U.K. government in 2004 as a body to oversee "public dialogue" processes related to science policy and is run as an arm's-length government program by a consortium of organizations overseen by the Department for Business Innovation and Skills. Since 2007, Sciencewise has also been increasingly drawn on internationally as an example of innovation and best practice around public participation, for example, by the Japanese Government, and has also experienced increasing influence within the U.K. government. This section describes the Sciencewise program's development in the context of the institutionalization of participation in the U.K. government, before detailing the research design and methodology that form the basis for the findings outlined in the remainder of the article.

In April 2012, the Sciencewise program was relaunched under a new management contract, which was to have significant implications for subsequent Sciencewise activities and organizational learning processes. Until this point there had been considerable uncertainty about Sciencewise's future due to the dissolution of many other government advisory bodies by the coalition government, and the program's strong associations with the former Labour government. However, the new invitation to tender for the running of the program (BIS, 2011), released in October 2011, affirmed a commitment to the continued running and enlargement of the program, at least until 2015, with high-level support from the then Universities minister David Willetts. The program contract was awarded to Ricardo-AEA, the new merged identity of AEA-Technology, a private management contractor (formerly the United Kingdom's Atomic Energy Authority), which had been in charge of the Sciencewise program since 2005. But this time Ricardo-AEA also entered

into a formal partnership for the running of the program with the British Science Association (BSA)—a long-running and prominent charity working in the area of science communication and engagement—and the “think and do tank” Involve—a small but innovative British NGO with expertise in public participation in a range of contexts.

The primary result of the 2012 relaunch was the increased size of the Sciencewise program, both in terms of the number of actors involved and the number and breadth of the program’s activities. Sciencewise was able to carry out a greater number of public dialogue projects—on topics including shale gas extraction, mitochondrial transfer, and flood risk assessment—also creating a need for more project evaluations and case studies, and the number of “thought leadership” pieces commissioned also increased. Written into the initial proposal document by the three partners were also a number of additional activities that were new to the program. These included the creation of a “community of practice” of interested civil servants, a high-profile science policy horizon scanning process, the addition of a citizen group to the program’s advisory bodies, and the creation of a new activity called “high-level networking” in order to promote public dialogue at the highest levels of government, including the Cabinet Office and the Government Office for Science (where the Government Chief Scientific Adviser resides).

This apparent embracing of the rhetoric and practice of public participation in science policymaking seems at odds with a British political culture, which has been characterized as retaining elitist and deferential tendencies (e.g., Jasanoff, 2005). Direct forms of public participation in science decision making have not been a common feature historically of the governance of the modern liberal state, which has instead classically looked to science and scientific expertise both for an apparently objective and legitimate basis for policy decisions and for neutral and independent judgments of the consequences of state decision making (e.g., Ezrahi, 1990; Jasanoff, 2012; Jasanoff & Wynne, 1998). Throughout much of the 20th century expert judgment and knowledge alone were generally considered to be an adequate basis for decision making. Specifically, Jasanoff (2005) has noted a strong reverence in Britain for government expert advisors who have demonstrated years of public service, while other studies have illustrated the reliance in the United Kingdom on methods like cost–benefit analysis and technology assessment in solving complex decisions, such as the development of nuclear power plants and associated infrastructures (e.g., Irwin, 1995; O’Riordan, Kemp, & Purdue, 1988; Wynne, 1982). Welsh and Wynne (2013) characterize the dominant way of making sense of citizens and their role in science and science policymaking in the United Kingdom between the 1950s and 1990s—which they term an *imaginary*—as being passive nonentities, unable

to play any meaningful role in decision making other than expressing grateful acceptance.

By the year 2000, there appeared to have been some changes in this state of affairs with the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee producing a report titled “Science and Society” (House of Lords, 2000), which called for direct dialogue with the public to become an integral part of science policymaking. At the time, as well as in later accounts, this report was viewed as a pivotal moment in democratic practice around science policy in the United Kingdom, setting in train the institutionalization of a more dialogic form of public engagement with science and science policy (e.g., Bickerstaff et al., 2010; Miller, 2001). This turn toward more deliberative forms of public engagement was in part a response to the public science controversies of the 1990s around BSE, the MMR vaccine, and Genetically Modified Organisms among others, which had been damaging to government credibility and legitimacy. This move was also stimulated by the work of academics in advocating for (e.g., Irwin, 1995; Wynne, 1996) and developing new approaches (e.g., Schot & Rip, 1997) to deliberative public involvement in policymaking. It has also been argued that the turn toward public deliberation, and particularly the focus on reaching consensus as a key aim in these processes, was part of the broader development of the post-Fordist public and the politics of New Labour and the Third Way in postindustrial British politics (e.g., Thorpe, 2010; Thorpe & Gregory, 2010).

The subsequent institutionalization of deliberative approaches to public engagement with science policy in the United Kingdom during the 2000s, or the “new scientific governance” (Irwin, 2006), has raised new challenges for academic inquiry and analysis. It has been argued that it is no longer sufficient for scholars to only develop new methodologies for or to evaluate individual instances of public participation—though such studies are still valuable—but scholars must also engage with the effects of this institutionalization itself, and explore why in many cases the rolling out of participatory processes has failed to create meaningful changes in broader styles and cultures of decision making as had been hoped for by earlier advocates (Chilvers, 2013; Wynne, 2006). Thus, this article does not take a normative position on the observed institutionalization of participation, but rather takes it as an object of study, requiring critical and reflexive analysis.

STS scholars have argued that the framing of the scientific issues under discussion in participatory processes has implications for the kinds of citizens or publics which are imagined and brought into being through the process (e.g., Irwin, 2001; Marres, 2007). Constructions of publics within participation processes as variously innocent citizens (Irwin, 2001) or general, affected, pure, and partisan publics (Braun & Schultz, 2010), to cite a

few examples, actively constrain action and discourse, and can even tacitly exclude certain groups from the process. However, others have stressed that participants in such processes are rarely passive and frequently refuse to perform the roles allotted to them, in some cases successfully reframing or undermining the initial process (Felt & Fochler, 2010).

Another key focus in this literature has been on the narrowing set of methods that are considered to be best practice in public participation (Chilvers, 2008a; Cooke & Kothari, 2001), leading some to analyze the development and effects of these methods or “technologies of participation” (e.g., Lezaun, 2007; Lezaun & Soneryd, 2007). This narrowing of methods has also created an increasingly exclusive group of participation experts or mediators, with the power not only to define what constitutes good and bad participation, but also to design and carry out participation processes, and to speak on behalf of citizens in the context of science policy (e.g., Chilvers, 2008b; Gisler & Schicktan, 2009; Osborne, 2004).

Relatedly, scholars have explored the institutional or organizational dimensions of public participation processes, to account for its broader effects and influence on policymaking. Wynne has argued that the continual reinvention of deficit model assumptions within powerful institutions commissioning and responding to public participation processes shows the impacts of entrenched power relations as well as the need for improved institutional reflexivity (Wynne, 2005, 2006, 2008, 2011). Both Wynne and Irwin have engaged with the U.K.’s Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council as analysts and advocates (e.g., Doubleday & Wynne, 2011; Irwin, 2001, 2006), concluding that emerging approaches to public engagement in the organization and more broadly in government represent an uneasy mix of old and new assumptions about the public and the appropriate modes of engagement. Bickerstaff et al. (2010) found a similar institutional intransigence in their study of the Royal Society’s public engagement activities, where they concluded that limited attempts at innovative forms of public engagement were undermined by tacit assumptions and cultural orderings of different kinds of knowledge within the organization.

This article aims to contribute to this growing literature on the organizational dimensions of public participation by offering in-depth ethnographically informed insights into the organizational contexts of institutionalized practices of public participation, while other accounts have resulted from more short-term projects or academics’ reflections on their own engagement work. The second key contribution to this literature is to consider the institutionalization of participation in the context of shifts in democracy and policymaking practices at the level of the state, exploring the interlinkages between

the “new governance” and the specificities of national political culture and history, and connecting processes of change at multiple scales.

The analysis offered in the remainder of the article results from in-depth qualitative research in and around the Sciencewise organizational network throughout 2013 and with additional research in 2014. This work forms part of a broader study into processes of organizational learning in and around Sciencewise, and consequently data collection was aimed at gaining insights into learning processes in contrasting organizational spaces and activities, from more formal management spaces to more peripheral and informal activities. Participant observation, semistructured interviews, and document analysis were used to follow organizational learning processes through four contrasting organizational spaces: the formal management space(s) of Sciencewise; a public dialogue process that aimed to identify new and emerging challenges for science and technology policy; a seminar series hosted in Whitehall on the topic of evidence in policymaking, which was cosponsored by Sciencewise; and a new Sciencewise project to create a community of practice of civil servants interested in public engagement.

I carried out participant observation of four public seminars, four internal Sciencewise management meetings including a team planning day, two community of practice meetings, three meetings associated with a public dialogue and expert elicitation process Sciencewise was involved in, two Sciencewise webinars, and further informal online interactions. The nature of my participation in these settings varied from passive note-taking with only informal interactions with other participants in some settings, to more active involvement in others, such as being an official note-taker in the expert elicitation process, and being actively involved in group planning activities at the Sciencewise team day. Furthermore, in many of these encounters I was also called on to introduce my research project and offer early reflections and findings.

The research design could be described as a multi-sited ethnography, an approach increasingly drawn on by STS scholars (e.g., Ellis & Waterton, 2005) and others (e.g., Marcus, 2007) in order to understand complex processes that are themselves multisited. Furthermore, the other common feature of this approach is the use of further methods such as interviews and document analysis to extend and triangulate findings from participant observation, but with the ethnographic aim of gaining a fine-grained understanding of organizational practices and shared (tacit) understandings. Therefore, I carried out semistructured interviews with 27 actors from in and around the Sciencewise program, who were selected to ensure coverage of these four organizational spaces, as well as different roles within the program including government civil servants; Sciencewise management actors; Sciencewise

engagement practitioners, academics, and NGO actors working closely with Sciencewise; and market researchers employed to carry out public dialogue processes. Contact with interview respondents snowballed from two initial close contacts within the Sciencewise program, but I deliberately sought to gain a diversity of perspectives through my interviews and came into contact with virtually everyone working as part of the Sciencewise program at some point during my research. Following a simple and adaptable interview schedule, questioning in these interviews was focused on attitudes to and opportunities for learning and reflection, and also attempted to improve the researcher's understanding of processes of change and learning in the four organizational spaces. Interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes and were all recorded and transcribed to allow for close analysis.

Finally, I collected 150 documents related to the Sciencewise program, including the four main organizational spaces under study, and U.K. government approaches to policymaking. Participant observation notes, interview transcripts, and collected documents were analyzed together using an interpretive and inductive coding structure in the computer program ATLAS.ti, using sensitizing concepts like learning and reflection, but responding to new concepts that emerged from the data, such as "open policy."

The Push for "Openness" and "Open Policy"

Having operated at a low profile for most of its existence, during the 2012-2015 contract the Sciencewise program enjoyed greater recognition and policy influence both in the United Kingdom and abroad due to the involvement of better networked individuals in the program itself and also because of the opportunities afforded by the "open policy" agenda. This influence manifested itself in the improved ability of program actors to secure both formal and informal meetings with powerful government figures, including those in the Cabinet Office, as well as an invitation to contribute to a high profile seminar series titled "Future Directions for Scientific Advice in Whitehall."¹ This section explores the Sciencewise program's interactions with the open policy agenda with respect to the effects this had on public participation and policymaking practices, as one example of the relationship between institutionalized practices of public participation and broader democratic shifts at the level of the state.

The emergence of the idea of open policy was an important element of the civil service reforms enacted under the United Kingdom's Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government from 2010 onward and elaborated in the *Civil Service Reform plan* published in June 2012. The opportunities for Sciencewise signaled by the concept of open policy were grasped early on,

with a steering group document (only 1 month after the civil service reform plan was published) noting:

[O]ne query that has arisen from the Government Office of Science relates to the Civil Service Reform Plan. Changing Civil Service process has the potential to have a major impact on the introduction of new initiatives such as dialogue. One particular focus in the Reform plan is “open policy” with a reference to getting wide public input. At present the mechanism mentioned for this is “crowdsourcing.” (Sciencewise, 2012, p. 2)

A 2013 document laying out steering group priorities also recognized that “[t]his agenda offers opportunities and challenges for the use of public dialogue and for Sciencewise” (Sciencewise, 2013b, p. 2). There was a feeling, reflected in management meetings that the author attended as well as the program’s public documents, that these developments could enable the program to garner broader appeal and move beyond being a relatively little-known and marginalized government body.

Despite much private skepticism within and around the Sciencewise program about the government’s agenda, reflected in interviews and participant observation, high-profile discussions around open policy provided an opportunity and a ready audience for Sciencewise to restate the initial rationales for public involvement in science policymaking, and to put forward its public dialogue projects as examples of best practice. Many research participants also felt strongly that the concept fitted with their democratic values as well as seeing its potential to exert influence in government. Within Sciencewise the open policy agenda was seen as a way to facilitate greater access to the Cabinet Office—where the open policy team was located—and to frame public dialogue and engagement activities as a central and necessary part of civil service work, as was spelled out explicitly in some interviews and team meetings. Some of this engagement with open policy was done on an informal basis, drawing on the existing networks of members of the Sciencewise management structures, some of whom had connections in the Cabinet Office or the Government Office for Science, or were working with these bodies as part of other initiatives like the Open Government Partnership (which the partner organization Involve was helping to run at the time).

These informal relationships and private meetings provided the opportunity for some trial and error in how ideas could be presented and which arguments proved the most persuasive (Pelling, High, Dearing, & Smith, 2008) and also resulted in more formal Sciencewise activities. Initial contact with the Cabinet Office and other open policy advocates, for example, by inviting them to steering group meetings, influenced some of the public dialogue and thought leadership topics chosen in Sciencewise (e.g., Latta, Mulcare, &

Zacharzewski, 2013). Sciencewise also began to adopt the rhetoric and practices of open policy, for example, demonstrating transparency within its own organizational decision making by putting meeting minutes and evaluation reports online and incorporating a citizen representatives group into its oversight structures. In 2013, when the program decided to elicit external proposals for their next series of thought leadership reports, it was deliberately labeled as a “crowd-sourcing” exercise, using a key buzzword from the civil service reform plan.

Several documents, events, and online interventions were used to position Sciencewise as a gatekeeper of the definitions and best practice of open policy. Through close analysis of these texts and encounters, this research suggests at least four key strategic moves were made. First, actors emphasized the vagueness of other available definitions of open policy. A Sciencewise thought leadership piece titled “Experts, Publics and Open Policy,” which was co-authored by Sciencewise head of dialogue Simon Burall, STS scholar Jack Stilgoe, and Sciencewise/Involve researcher Tim Hughes, states: “‘Open policy-making’ does not have a widely agreed upon definition and, as with all such terms, there is a danger of it meaning everything and nothing at once” (Burall, Hughes, & Stilgoe, 2013, p. 5). This point was also made by the Sciencewise Chair Sir Roland Jackson in his talk at the Sciencewise-hosted “Experts, Publics and Open Policy” seminar at the House of Commons in January 2013 (Hughes, 2013; fieldnotes)—part of the “Future Directions for Scientific Advice in Whitehall” seminar series—and in his subsequent blog post (Jackson, 2013). The thought leadership piece in particular was central to Sciencewise’s response to the open policy agenda, giving the authors a chance to explore ideas around open policy beyond what was the official line at the time within the Sciencewise program and being reproduced in the edited book *Future Directions for Scientific Advice in Whitehall* (Wilsdon & Doubleday, 2013) and on *The Guardian* website (Stilgoe, 2013).

This was an important strategy in allowing Sciencewise to define the term itself. As one interview respondent put it,

Nobody’s really sat down and tried to work out exactly what open policy-making is or . . . well there’s certainly no one view . . . so it’s there to be shaped and Sciencewise should have I think some role in doing that. (Sciencewise actor)

Similarly, another interview respondent said,

Still nobody knows quite what it means um . . . er . . . and of course that means there’s quite a lot to play for in terms of trying to establish what it might mean

or what it could mean, so we try to play our part in that, so that's still very much a process that's continuing. (Sciencewise management actor)

Second, attempts were made to suggest equivalence between open policy and public dialogue. As one Sciencewise management actor put it, they were trying “to take this view that Sciencewise does dialogue to the view [. . .] that what Sciencewise is in the business of doing is open up policymaking to the public voice, through doing deliberative dialogue.” The “Experts, Publics and Open Policy” piece drew this comparison out:

Both open policy-making and public dialogue share many of the same drivers, such as a shifting relationship between citizens and the State, and a changing role for Government in the 21st Century context. They both recognise, to a certain extent, that a top-down model of policy through central diktat is no longer sufficient and/or acceptable; both start from a similar position that policy and governance would be strengthened by the inclusion of a greater diversity of inputs and challenge into the process; and both are responding in part to the increasing complexity of society and the questions and issues that need to be addressed. (Burall et al., 2013, p. 7)

In these engagements Sciencewise actors also more subtly distanced themselves from definitions of open policy as competition and from the focus on outsourcing, which were also a strong feature of the civil service reform plan.

Third, they developed the embryonic idea from government documents, especially the reform plan (H M Government, 2012), of openness meaning more inputs into policymaking—for example, the thought leadership piece argued that “[o]pening up to a wider range of views undoubtedly strengthens the final policy, making it ultimately more effective and efficient” (Burall et al., 2013, p. 11), and Roland Jackson argued more strongly in a Sciencewise blog post:

Chris Wormald, Permanent Secretary at the Department for Education said, at the policy seminar held at NESTA on 8 January, that he saw open policy-making as about being open and about having different people making policy (e.g. IPPR or Demos). That, for me, does not go quite far enough, unless “different people” explicitly includes the public. (Jackson, 2013)

A fourth tactic adopted by Sciencewise actors to underline their expertise and experience was to historicize open policy practices and ideas, presenting open policy as the latest in a line of interventions in U.K. policymaking aiming to make it better and more authoritative, from the creation of bodies like the Food Standards Authority following the BSE crisis, to the creation in

2004 of Sciencewise to make deliberative public dialogue integral part of policymaking. For example, this line was adopted by the academic Jack Stilgoe in his introduction to the “Experts, Publics and Open Policy” seminar (Hughes, 2013; fieldnotes), where he spoke of the broader changes taking place in the civil service or being planned. He saw developments around open policy as indicating that policy debates had moved away from the technocratic approach advocated in the 1980s, but felt that the current move had not been fully realized or described. In particular, memories of the BSE crisis and the findings of the subsequent Phillips Inquiry were strongly evoked in this event, in the thought leadership piece (Burall et al., 2013), and in the accompanying post which Stilgoe wrote for the Guardian newspaper’s “political science” blog (Stilgoe, 2013), in part to underline the importance of institutional innovations around open policy.

Almost all my interview respondents felt that Sciencewise’s involvement in the open policy debate had substantially increased the program’s profile and influence in government. A “policy stakeholder” was quoted in the 2012 Sciencewise program evaluation (Warburton, 2013) as saying

[Public dialogue is] very important. And you may be familiar with the Civil Service Reform Plan. It has a renewed focus on open policy making, involving experts, public and other organisations. So there is impetus from the centre as well. . . . To improve policy outcomes and improve the communication of policy. (p. 20)

The July 2014 version of Sciencewise’s FAQs, a significant document laying out the program’s key principles, notes, “[P]ublic dialogue is increasingly being recognised as filling this evidence gap for policy makers and aligns with the Open Policy Making agenda of the Cabinet Office’s theme of Reform in Action” (Sciencewise, 2014b, p. 1). Open policy was also identified as the most important element of the government context in a “theory of change process” that the program underwent toward the end of 2013, as observed by the author. In February 2014, Sciencewise cohosted an event with the Cabinet Office’s Open Policy making team for civil servants, presenting a number of Sciencewise projects (among other examples) as exemplars of open policy and giving details of Sciencewise support available for future open policy projects (Sciencewise, 2014a).

Sciencewise’s interventions in the open policy debate also resulted in changes within Sciencewise or in aspects of the program’s activities, beyond what might be detected by only focusing on Sciencewise’s public dialogue processes individually. In particular, by attempting to manipulate definitions of open policy, Sciencewise actors also began to stretch their

own definitions of public dialogue and their understandings the program's role. One example of this is the increasing interest and investment in digital methods of engagement observed during the period of research (e.g., Jensen, 2014; Latta et al., 2013). The "Experts, Publics and Open Policy" piece (Burall et al., 2013) discusses not only the potential of public dialogue but also refers to other methods of engagement including coproduction and codesign in laying out a vision of open policy. It also reflected on the multiple ways in which the Government could know and respond to public concerns and attitudes:

Current public dialogue usually involves a relatively small number of people at a particular moment in the development of a policy. At the same time as the dialogue is taking place, Government is collecting evidence to feed into the policy using a wide variety of methodologies and information sources. . . . To better understand the role of public dialogue in open policy-making, we therefore need to look at moves towards openness in a more conventional advisory setting. (Burall et al., 2013, p. 5)

The following excerpt from the minutes of a steering group meeting also suggests that Sciencewise engagements with open policy were also important in the shift during the theory of change process toward defining Sciencewise's role as bringing "public voices" into policymaking, rather than just public dialogue:

[T]he use of the term "public voice" in several places in the document was queried—it may not be appropriate to claim that the outputs of a public dialogue are the (single) public voice. In response Simon Burall agreed that public dialogue is not bringing the (single) public voice to policy making. Rather the term was being used as shorthand in the context of open policy making, which can be seen as opening up policy to the public voice. (Sciencewise, 2013a, p. 5)

The adoption of the language of "public voices," beyond the relatively narrow definition of "public dialogue" which the program had previously been operating with (Chilvers, 2008a), has potentially significant implications for the future practice and effects of public participation in and around the Sciencewise program by encouraging the development of more flexible methods and approaches. This suggests that although the general trend in institutionalized participation has been toward a narrowing down of accepted methods and experts, there is the potential for impulses in the opposite direction to come about often as the result of interactions outside of organizations of participation themselves.

Precipitating a Constitutional Moment?

The period of research saw broad changes around meanings and structures of British democracy, from the emergence of the United Kingdom's first post-war coalition government in 2010 to the rising popularity of small political parties like the Green Party and the UK Independence Party. The specter of the 2014 Scottish independence referendum was also evident in government and Sciencewise discourse, stimulating greater unease about conventional democratic institutions and practices, and unsettling assumptions about meanings and forms of democracy in the United Kingdom. From 2012 onward the restructuring and reform of the civil service was an important factor in discourse and practice around policymaking and implementation, as well as broader discussions about democracy. Furthermore, the open policy agenda described in this article engendered a number of potentially significant changes in Government democratic and policymaking practices, as well as prompting transformation in existing institutionalized practices of public participation, and organizations of participation themselves, as shown in the section "The Push for 'Openness' and 'Open Policy.'"

It therefore seems appropriate to ask in this section whether the magnitude and nature of these changes qualifies the time around the period of study as a "constitutional moment." Jasanoff (2011) identifies two such moments in 20th-century U.S. politics: a pluralistic moment between 1940 and 1980 characterized by the enlargement of the public sphere to include new issues, viewpoints, and actors in regulatory decisions; and a neoliberal moment from 1980 onward characterized by a contraction of key parts of the state and a reversion to expert reasoning around important areas like bioethics. This section thus explores the main elements of a constitutional moment as a lens through which to take this analysis of the Sciencewise program beyond the micro-scale of ethnographic study. Through this discussion the article draws connections between developments in the Sciencewise program and developments at the level of the British state, drawing out more general lessons for those seeking to study or intervene in institutionalized practices of public engagement.²

There are three main characteristics delineating constitutional moments in Jasanoff's account: they result from collectively identified fears related to science and technology, and the perceived abuses of the state; they bring about some sort of reconfiguration in relations between the state, experts, and citizens; and they create lasting change in democratic structures and practices. With regard to the first feature, Jasanoff herself in a later piece has identified a widespread loss of faith in government and ideas of (technological and scientific) progress across Europe, North America, and the Arab

world (Jasanoff, 2012). This is supported by the broad sense apparent within the civil service reform and digital government movements that there was a need for governing institutions in the United Kingdom to evolve and alter their practices in order to retain legitimacy and credibility. Furthermore, for Jasanoff (2012) debates such as those around evidence-based policy, which have also accompanied the civil service reform agenda (e.g., Cabinet Office, 2013), are part of a broader reversion to technical procedures or fixes in response to the continual failures of the alliance between science, technology, and democracy. There were diverse ongoing debates and concerns around developments in science and technology, and crucially their governance, which played out through the Sciencewise program and beyond during the period of research, concerning, for example, data privacy and surveillance, GMOs in the food chain, futures of energy demand, supply, and infrastructure, and the consequences of an ageing population. The Scottish Independence referendum, continual battles around the role and form of the House of Lords, and the role and organization of local government could also be considered to be symptoms of the specific British crisis of legitimacy and democratic governance.

Analysis in this study and others suggests that open policy is not only a loose set of emerging practices, but could also be described as prominent “sociotechnical imaginary”; a collective vision of social life and order shaping the design and fulfillment of scientific and technological projects (Jasanoff & Kim, 2009), or in this case the practices of policymaking and generating policy-relevant evidence themselves. The open policy pronouncements made in the civil service reform plan (H M Government, 2012) and other statements from the Cabinet Office also had broader cultural resonances with transnational moves to openness in a range of domains, from academic calls for open access and open data, to hacker spaces or bodies like Wikileaks. Furthermore, this has been identified elsewhere as a significant trend in government, business, and media discourse and practice globally (Bowles, Hamilton, & Levy, 2014).

This imaginary was strongly expressed and reflected on by most of my interview respondents, with some actors in and around Sciencewise even suggesting that the move toward openness was inevitable. For example, the “Experts, Publics and Open Policymaking” thought piece states,

[B]ut beyond this, open policy-making is the explicit articulation of an inescapable trend in the future direction of policy-making and Civil Service reform. This is partly a result of changes in the expectations of citizens, and partly the result of technological changes, both of which mean that institutions are being scrutinised ever more closely. (Burall et al., 2013, p. 4)

Furthermore, an interview respondent thought that

the broader underlying . . . kind of, you know, movement in the world is towards more openness and participation and that people are much . . . they're kind of less willing to be deferential, they're less willing to kind of just let government decide. (Non-Sciencewise actor)

The precise meaning of openness in this imaginary, which was reflected in interviews, participant observation, and documents, is ambiguous and therefore highly contested, but it contains ideas of transparency and inclusion. Thus, there are elements of continuity with the deliberative democratic and consensus-politics imaginary that characterized the Third Way approach of the New Labour administration responsible for setting up Sciencewise (Thorpe, 2010). Furthermore, there were clear forerunners to these new objects of “open policy” and “open data” in the institutional innovations enacted by the Coalition and New Labour governments, including the use of focus groups in developing policy, and also legislation enabling freedom of information and the increased monitoring of government and media bodies (Bowles et al., 2014).

However, there are also several ways in which this more recent imaginary of openness as identified in this study is distinct. First, the imaginary of openness was strongly influenced by ideas about the new forms of engagement that might be facilitated by digital technologies, from collecting and analyzing public attitudes expressed on social media, to enabling more in-depth online conversations between citizens and policymakers. Second, the openness imaginary developed and travelled through different transnational networks. Several of my interview respondents referred to U.S. President Obama's inaugural speech in his first term of office, in which he committed administration to becoming the most open government there had ever been (Bowles et al., 2014), as an important spur for civil society action and for other governments to adopt the rhetoric and practice of openness. For example, the Open Government Partnership—an international initiative that Sciencewise program partners Involve were also working within—used this speech as a central justification for its founding and role. Furthermore, in the attempts by organizations like the Open Government Partnership to articulate a vision of open government and policy which would be globally relevant and credible, they adopted a formulation that most strongly reflected American political culture or civic epistemology. So instead of imagining democracy as a process of bringing citizens into policymaking and encouraging the generation of consensual outcomes, the openness imaginary emphasized the ability of all nongovernment actors to input into or influence

processes of government should they wish to and should they have the relevant knowledge or expertise to engage (Jasanoff, 2005). Third, this imaginary of openness was not only about democratic practice and accountability but also about improving policy practice and incorporating new methods and expertise from business (e.g., H M Government, 2012).

Notions of transparency and openness are closely linked to a desire to ensure the objectivity and accountability (in a democratic sense) of political representatives and also serve as ways of ensuring the objectivity of evidence and knowledge claims in the political sphere. Historians of science have shown how embedded ideas of objectivity are in visual methods and culture (e.g., Daston & Galison, 1992). Porter's (1995) account of the growing power of statistics and other numerical techniques as supposedly objective and self-evident policy objects hints at a similar idea of needing a clear line of sight to ensure objectivity. Furthermore, Ezrahi (1990) suggests that European and North American political culture of the 20th century was closely built on ideas of scientific objectivity and the supposed neutrality of machines, as a cultural resource to build the legitimacy of political actions. In terms of visibility, it was assumed that if the government machine was transparent, the actions of representatives would always be visible and therefore accountable, allowing the continual assessment of their competence. Looking at the U.K. imaginary of openness, which this study has identified in this way, highlights the links between moves to openness and debates about evidence-based policy, which were also prominent at the time of research. As suggested by some Sciencewise actors, this casts the discussion about open policy as the latest in a long line of innovations attempted to improve the democratic and substantive authority or legitimacy of policymakers, based on assumptions of objectivity and emotional detachment.

In reference to Jasanoff's second characteristic of constitutional moments concerning constitutional reconfigurations, several of the democratic and policy developments described in the earlier sections have the potential to reconfigure relations between experts, citizens, and the state. Civil service reform stimulated radical contractions in some parts of the British state, following broader cuts in advisory bodies and regional governance structures at the start of the coalition government's term in office as part of the broader retrenchment of the State (Rose & Miller, 1992). The related digital government agenda also stimulated reconfiguration in government practices of data sharing. In a more diffuse sense the open policy agenda has also reconfigured relations by creating new coalitions of civil society groups, for example, around the Open Government Platform, the potential for a broader variety of experts to become involved in government policymaking and the possibility

of a greater variety of opportunities for citizens to become aware of and engage in decision-making processes.

Given that both of Jasanoff's constitutional "moments" spanned several decades, a consideration of the more historical institutional developments discussed in the section "The Institutionalization of Public Participation" will be necessary to allow a full exploration of this dimension. While many of the developments observed during the period of research may appear incomplete and remain highly contested, they represent a significant departure from the reliance on technocratic measures and methods or structured public inquiry processes that characterized science policymaking in the United Kingdom up until the 1980s. In particular, while the public were still viewed as ignorant (Wynne, 2006) or as a threat (Welsh & Wynne, 2013) during the period of research, the rights of citizens to be involved in decision-making processes and to challenge their outcomes had been tacitly accepted and extensively institutionalized, with significant implications for relations between experts, citizens, and the State, even if this is not always carried out effectively.

Attending to this larger temporal scale is also important in addressing Jasanoff's final characteristic of constitutional moments related to the permanence of the constitutional shifts observed, as it is difficult to predict how many of the structural and discursive reconfigurations of citizens, experts, and the state observed during the period of research will persist. The reduced size of the civil service will continue in the medium term, along with the digital government agenda. However, open policy within government is at the time of writing still nominally managed and led by a small open policy "team" within the Cabinet Office, so it lacks institutional permanence. It also unclear how long its central initiative, the Cabinet Office Policy Lab, will last and what broader effects it is likely to have in Whitehall. The future of Sciencewise itself is also uncertain, and it is unclear whether the program's new found level of influence in government would remain if the open policy agenda were dissolved in future. However, when considered over the timescale of several decades, many of the institutional features described in this study do appear to represent a relatively stable and distinct break from previous constitutional relations. Regular and substantive public participation has become a routinized and expected part of science decision making (Brown, 2009; Munton, 2003), and governing institutions are now expected to share a significant amount of information about their processes and effects to gain legitimacy and appear democratically accountable, rather than just being trusted on the basis of their membership and elite position. Furthermore, the open policy agenda has provided a potential opening for such commitments to travel beyond relatively marginalized programs and practices like the Sciencewise program and its public dialogues.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the institutional innovations and characteristics embodied by organizations of participation and the open policy agenda potentially comprise part of a broader constitutional moment in British democracy, characterized by greater institutional transparency and openness to new voices and perspectives—though this movement remains contested and incomplete. The analysis here also highlights important differences between U.S. and British political cultures influencing the adoption and translation of this most recent set of institutional innovations around open government. In a U.K. political culture, where 50 years previously citizen involvement in decisions around science and technology would have been almost unthinkable, recent moves toward institutionalizing public participation and openness have created significant new openings for the expression and fostering of new forms of public reason. In a U.S. political culture where the rights of citizens to know and challenge government information and rulemaking have historically been more solidly constitutionally enshrined (Jasanoff, 2006)—though unevenly practiced—the recent “opening up” of governing institutions has arguably served more to erode procedures and opportunities for accounting for public voices and public reason (Jasanoff, 2011). This international comparison could be usefully extended to consider constitutional changes in other European and Asian countries, for example, building on comparative work on contrasting interpretations of “consensus” in British and Danish political culture (Horst & Irwin, 2010), or building on recent attempts by the Japanese government to translate Sciencewise practices and discourse into its own policy and science communication practice.

This study also adds a further dimension to Jasanoff’s (2011) concept of a constitutional moment in highlighting the importance of shifts occurring at a much more fine-grained spatial and temporal resolution. While the general institutional trend is toward greater transparency and citizen participation, the article also hints at the diversity and nonlinearity of these organizational processes and highlights ambiguities in the interpretation and implementation of objects like open policy. Furthermore, I have suggested that it is not only processes which are evident at the level of the state which are significant, but the micro-spaces of policy seminars, organizational meetings, policy documents, or even informal encounters might also be important in spurring new ideas and practices. These more ambiguous and fluctuating practices will in some cases have meaningful and lasting

impacts on institutions and policy decisions, for example, in determining the future funding of bodies like Sciencewise.

This article demonstrates the value of in-depth ethnographic research in generating novel insights around institutionalized practices of public participation and engagement and considers how these institutionalized practices interact with other stable or shifting constitutional formations. However, it also shows the need for further ethnographic and longitudinal analysis in diverse organizations and around more informal instances of engagement, to allow in-depth consideration of the question of Britain's potential constitutional moment, and to enable comparison between different organizational, thematic, and national contexts. The specific category of "organizations of participation" like Sciencewise is also suggested as a fertile avenue for future study and comparison, given the apparent burgeoning of such organizations and their growing influence and importance around participation, science policy, and scientific processes.

To detect indications of a constitutional moment is not to claim that current shifts in British democratic structures and practices will necessarily support the creation of more just, inclusive, and promissory futures, as Jasanoff argues they should (Jasanoff, 2012). For Jasanoff (2012), the ultimate success and appropriateness of these changes should be judged as an attempt to construct a collectively credible "public reason" through institutions, practices, discourses, techniques, and instruments; an aim which still appears remote from the perspective of the open policy agenda. Her appeal to reason is not one which evokes classic ideas of rationality and utility, but rather an attempt to express the required intertwining of substantive and normative commitments within governance structures to create systems and objects which can at least temporarily hold things together in a way which is mutually accessible and credible. These are high standards for democratic governance in the so-called "knowledge society," but openness is potentially one idea around which such structures could be formed.

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Notes

1. See the edited collection that was produced as a result of this seminar series, Wilsdon and Doubleday (2013).
2. For a summary of the lessons for organizations of participation derived from this research, see the policy report by Pallett (2015).

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