# WHO AND WHAT ARE THE PUBLIC?

**A series on studying the public**

# INTRODUCTION

The idea of the public is both intuitive and yet highly contested. The etymology of the term suggests that 'public' describes something 'open to general observation', or something 'concerning the public as a whole'. However, we all understand and study the public in very different ways, from nationally representative surveys, to studies of small, localised groups. Acknowledging these varying perspectives matters because it is common for references to 'the public' to be used when demonstrating the legitimacy of conflicting views. Politicians, commentators and activists therefore all evoke this idea, but are we clear about what we mean by the term? And what are the implications if we think about this idea in different ways?

Prompted by these thoughts, we recently brought together scholars at the University of Sheffield to think about the idea of the public. In a discussion led by Dr Simon Rushton and Dr Lisa Stampnitzky, we explored who constituted the public, who was included and excluded in this conception, and how contrasting views of the public are inter-related. Below our speakers have summarised their comments, and we have distilled a number of questions for further discussion and debate.

**Dr Kate Dommett**
**Dr Nikki Soo**

Photo Credit: Sarita Panday

# 'THE PUBLIC', PARTICIPATION, AND THE ETHICS OF ENGAGING WITH COMMUNITIES

Dr Simon Rushton looks at the way researchers engage the public and thinks through some important differences in approach.

*Politicians, researchers and the public: Implicit hierarchies*
Generally, we ought to be suspicious of politicians appealing to the views and wishes of 'the public'. For one, we might doubt that the view of such a diverse body could ever be simply and clearly defined. For another, we might raise an eyebrow at the implicit separation between the politician and public and wonder how the speaker thinks about the hierarchy between themselves and the public.

But as researchers of politics, are we always any better at interrogating what we mean by 'the public'? Most of us probably have an intuitive sense of what the public isn't – we might also consider political elites to be something different, for example – but perhaps a less than fully conceptualised version of what the public is.

At the same time, we are increasingly engaging in (and encouraged to engage in) forms of interaction with the public at various stages of the research process: from co-designing projects with the public at the beginning of the research process, to holding public engagement events to disseminate our findings at the end. Are we, here, at risk of falling into the same trap as the politician: thinking of ourselves (as professional researchers; as 'experts') as apart from (in some ways maybe even superior to) the public?

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This implicit inequality might not be such a problem if our public engagement efforts are simply about informing the public of our findings once we have completed our research. But it is certainly a problem if engaging with the public is to mean something more - as it should for those of us who are interested in genuinely participatory research, in which professional and non-professional researchers work (so far as possible) at 'eye level' to co-design research and co-produce knowledge.

*From 'researching the public' to 'researching with a community'*
Although my work has moved in a more participatory direction in recent years, I don't think of myself as someone 'researching the public', but rather as someone conducting research in (and, importantly, with) particular communities.

In part this distinction between 'public' and 'community' is a question of scale. There are, of course, established and robust methods for researching 'the public' en masse, most obviously through opinion polling. My own current projects in Nepal and Colombia, however, operate at a much smaller scale – the level of the village or neighbourhood. The participants in these projects are people rooted in space and time to a degree that a more amorphous 'public' may not seem to be.

Beyond scale, thinking about researching a community is also, for me, an important reminder of an ethic of engagement. When we arrive to conduct research in a community, the simple recognition that we are arriving in a community is itself an important one. The mere presence of researchers has an impact on the life of that community, for better or worse. That impact potentially continues long after the researchers have left. Communities have their own histories, their own pre-existing power dynamics, and their own knowledge and expertise. All of these things will inevitably be more fully understood by the members of that community than they ever can be by outside researchers, even those that consider themselves experts.

*The benefits of research*
Such an ethic of engagement in a community is not only about recognising and respecting that community and being aware of the potential negative consequences of the research process, but is also about thinking carefully about what our research has to contribute to the life of the community. As professional researchers we are, perhaps, liable to overestimate this. This can lead us to assume that community members want the researchers in their community – that they will be grateful for our presence and will clearly see the benefits our work will bring.

This assumption is not always well-founded. Community members are rarely sitting around waiting to be researched. They are getting on with their (often busy) lives. They likely don't care about research for its own sake. They don't have the same incentives as professional researchers. They are certainly unlikely to read the journal articles and monographs that we write after we leave.

Reflecting on his work in rural Haiti, Paul Farmer wrote that

"*Although we conducted research and published it, research did not figure on the wish list of the people we were trying to serve. Services is what they asked for, and as people who had been displaced by political and economic violence, they regarded these services as a rightful remedy for what they had suffered.*" - Pathologies of Power (2005)

Farmer and his colleagues were medics, able to deliver vital health services to the communities in which they were working alongside their research. As researchers of politics, we have to work a little harder to ensure that our work provides some benefit to the communities in which we work.

Sometimes our narrative of benefit is a relatively indirect one: our findings might (we hope) help improve or change policy in ways that are good for the community, and also other communities like them. This narrative may even be true. But it can, understandably, be difficult for community members to envisage what this policy change might actually mean for them. Sometimes they might be sceptical about whether politicians will ever really make changes in response to the things that 'ordinary' people say. Sometimes (certainly something we've faced in our work in Nepal), the opposite problem might occur: community members might over-estimate the likely impact of the research, assuming that researchers from the West have the ability to make things happen and that any needs they express will necessarily be fulfilled by policymakers. Steering a path between this cynicism and hope is a tricky task. But we should certainly have a clear and realistic view of what the research might deliver, and be able to satisfy ourselves and the community that it really is worth them spending their valuable time participating in our study.

Increasingly politics researchers – even those not explicitly working in a participatory manner - have looked for more direct ways of delivering some benefit back to the community, for example by 'closing the loop' and returning to the community at the end of a project with findings and recommendations. This is noble and often worthwhile. But again, we need to be realistic about what we have to offer. Are we merely presenting back to them things they already know about themselves – and already know in much more depth than us? Or are we really able to deliver something new and useful?

A third way, and a far more participatory approach, is to involve the community from the beginning in designing the project, to make sure that it reflects that community's priorities and that they can see a path to some positive outcomes that matter to them. This is the ideal for participatory researchers, but one that is not always simple to square with the requirements of funders, who will usually want a clear understanding of the key research questions, activities, timelines, budgets, 'pathways to impact' and so on before agreeing to fund a project.

A fourth way – the route taken by Farmer and his colleagues – is to try to deliver some more direct and tangible benefit alongside the research. Our projects in Nepal and Colombia have attempted to do this through providing training to participants in the research (see this blog post by my colleagues Sarita Panday and Jiban Karki: http://siid.group.shef.ac.uk/blog/participatory-video-making-experiences-from-nepal/), in this case training in making documentary films. The feedback from our participants was that they found this a hugely rewarding (and enjoyable) experience.



Photo Credit: Sarita Panday

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In follow-on work returning to the same remote villages, we are now able to use these same participants again as members of our research team. The aim in these projects is to combine these four narratives of benefit, from indirect policy impact through to direct skills building, to ensure that these communities are vindicated in their decision to support our research.

These communities aren't a homogenous 'public' to be researched. They are complex and often challenging places to work. We will always be outsiders. For these communities, agreeing to be part of our research was a leap of faith. However hard we try, we can never entirely eliminate the hierarchies that exist in these researcher-community relationships. But we do need to be mindful of them and to account for them. Constantly remembering that the people we are working with aren't just 'the public', that they are a community, is one step towards that ethic of engagement.

# WHO/ WHAT/ WHERE IS THE PUBLIC?

Dr Lisa Stampnitzky looks at the significance of studying what is made public and what is not public, and the ramifications of this distinction on how we understand knowledge in the public realm.

My work is very much concerned with the "public" as a realm, or sphere of knowledge and exchange, rather than "the public" in the usual sense (as a synonym for the population, the citizenry, or the populace. My work engages with the "public" as an arena of knowledge and political debate, with a particular focus on what is publicly "known," and how the realm of public knowledge exists in a socially, politically, and historically constructed relationship to the "private" and the "secret."

My current research focuses on the socially, politically, and historically shifting nature of what can be acknowledged and debated in public. I am working on a book project, How Torture Became Speakable, that looks at this question in relation to post-9/11 debates about state violence and torture. The key question for this project is not whether the U.S. engaged in torture, or why they did so, but rather, why the use of torture was acknowledged and debated publicly. This poses a puzzle because based upon both past history, and the scholarly literature on human rights and international norms, we would expect that, if a self-identified liberal democratic state such as the U.S. were to engage in torture, that they would make every effort to keep this out of the public realm, and under a cloak of deniability. The fact that there have been repeated public debates over the permissibility of torture since 9/11, and that state actors have (to some extent) acknowledged its use, thus provides a puzzle to be explained with the framing question, what is spoken about in "public", and what is not.

To return to the question of studying "the public," however, one of the most important principles grounding my research into these questions is the "public" and the "private", or the "public" and the "secret" are not strictly separate worlds, but rather realms that overlap and at times mutually construct one another. To illustrate this, I will discuss how I am studying "publicness" in my current research project. A key question, as mentioned, is what is, or can be, spoken about in public. Like most questions, this presumes an opposite- those things which cannot be spoken about in public. This helps us to think about several different categories of public/not public discourse.

There are things that are not spoken about in public because they are secret. Those that know about them are not allowed to speak of them publicly, and those that do not know about them, are unable to (e.g., the torture memos of 2002, which outlines the legal guidelines for use of torture on detainees in the war on terror, before they were released (in 2004)).   There are things that are not spoken of in public because they are in some sense "unspeakable"-- they invoke horror, they put their speaker into disrepute, or they have other social consequences that keep them out of public discussion.  This, to some extent, is the position that advocacy for the use of torture occupied in the US prior to 9/11.   And then there are things that are not spoken in public because it is assumed there is no need to discuss them—perhaps because it is assumed that the answers are known and completely settled—here, too, I might place the question of 'should we torture' in the US prior to 9/11.  And also the question of "is the US engaging in torture" , between 2001 and 2003—when, during this time, the hypothetical question of whether we ought to use torture became common, there seemed to be a common assumption that the US did not, in actuality, torture (so for example, at several points during this period, the New York Times puts forth some variation of the statement that , "of course, no serious observer suggests that the U.S. is actually engaging in torture" (even though of course, it was).

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I also want to question these distinctions.  As I have already suggested, the "public" and the "not public" are not completely separate realms.  Something can, in some ways, be public and not-public at the same time.  One way in which this happens is that there are multiple different practices/ repertoires / or degrees of "public"-ness (or lack thereof).  For example, in the case of public discourse about torture in the war on terror, we can distinguish between hints, allegations, open secrets, things that are known/yet not known (denied), exposures, acknowledgements, and contestations (e.g. of what counts as torture).

This then returns us to the question of who/what/where is the public.  What does it mean to say that something is publicly known or discussed?  Is this a matter of who knows it/speaks of it?  Or it is a matter of where?   I've been thinking of this in terms of discursive realms--- because while you might start by thinking, well there is the 'secret' (behind the walls of secret government offices, or the like)and the 'private' and the 'public' is the opposite of these, in practice I think it makes much more sense to think about there being multiple public spheres—and to keep in mind that not all of these are open to everybody.  And then there is the way in which these multiple public (and non public) spheres and multiple modes/repertoires of public-ness can and do overlap ---open acknowledgements exist alongside denials, and open debates over the permissibility of torture in the abstract exist alongside seeming ignorance that torture is actually occurring.  All of which helps to illustrate, if not to resolve, the difficulty of studying "the public"!

*Dr Lisa Stampnitzky is Lecturer at the Department of Politics, University of Sheffield. Her thoughts on the "public" is very much informed by a growing interdisciplinary literature on secrecy, transparency, and knowledge. This project has been funded by a research fellowship from the Leverhulme Trust ( RF-2017-121: How Torture Became Speakable).*

*An article from her current project, explaining why the US chose to acknowledge, and legally justify, practices of torture, has been published in the Sociological Review, and is available online here: https://doi.org/10.1111/2059-7932.12007.*

# CLOSING THOUGHTS

*Who and What are the Public?* is the first in The Crick Centre's series of think pieces on studying the public. Simon and Lisa's blogs show how different conceptions of the public can be, revealing the necessity for further reflection on the meaning of the term. Their writing highlights what is included or excluded when we talk about, think of, and research the public, demonstrating the value of thinking further about how we deploy this term. To this end, we pose some questions for further debate:

- How as researchers do we (and should we) engage with the public?
- How compatible are various forms of knowledge generated from different publics?
- How do the views and ideas of any given public come to gain legitimacy?
- Under what conditions can a view held by a minority of people become seen as the public view?
- How much do non-public views matter in a democracy?

We hope this will inspire and encourage others to share their thoughts on the public, marking the beginning of conversation on this theme.
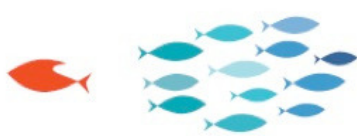
# READING LIST

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