

In brief...

Telecommunications and the future of democracy
Preliminary report on the first U.S. Citizens' Panel

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U.S. science and technology institutions and decision-making processes stand out among industrialised nations for systematically excluding lay citizen voices. The ordinary argument for ceding judgement and influence to elite representatives of the *producers* of science and technology, while excluding everyone else who will be affected, is that lay citizens have neither the competence nor passion to be involved.

On April 4th 1997, a 15-member citizens' panel, representing a cross-section of the Boston area (USA), issued a call for protecting personal privacy on the Internet, mandating community involvement in telecommunications policymaking and returning a percentage of high-tech corporate earnings to communities and non-profit organisations. This was the first systematic attempt in the United States to solicit informed input from ordinary citizens, including six who had never previously used the Internet, half of whom had also never used a computer, on the complexities of current telecommunications and technology policy. Innumerable doubters contended that a participatory process invented in Denmark (where, as the stereotype would have it, 'everyone is white, tall, blonde, educated, affluent, and civic-minded') could never work in the United States. Americans are too apathetic, too ill-educated and too different from one another. For instance, a project director at the (now-defunct) U.S. Office of Technology Assessment insisted that the agency had tried repeatedly to involve ordinary citizens in its report review processes, but that citizens simply refused to participate.

This Citizens' Panel decisively proves the sceptics wrong. All 15 members attended both the preparatory background weekends and the final forum. The panelists listened closely and asked one astute question after another. Indeed, because the background weekends had effectively brought the lay panel 'up-to-speed' on telecommunications issues, their questions were sometimes more technical than the experts' testimony!

Given the chance, our Citizens' Panelists competently assimilated a broad array of written and oral expert and stakeholder testimony, and then integrated this information with their own, very diverse life experiences to reach a well-reasoned collective judgement. Their conclusions pass a 'reality test': they are more grounded in the daily experience and concerns of everyday people whereas expert conclusions usually are not. To me, this stands as strong evidence for both the need and practicability of democratising U.S. science and technology institutions and decisions across the board. Our relatively low budget, compressed time schedule, and steep learning curve for a first-time U.S. event led to a number of weaknesses which future US emulations should easily overcome.

- There was not enough time and staffing to support adequate consultations between the project director and the project steering committee (a diverse group of knowledgeable stakeholders chosen to help ensure impartiality in the organisation).
- The expert panel was reasonably well balanced between academics, industry, government and public-interest groups. But as a rule of thumb, I believe that there should be a minimum of three very different expert opinions presented on each contested issue. On at least one sub-issue, computers in schools, we fell far short of this ideal. Our lay panel heard three very similar, upbeat presentations by outspoken proponents of computers in education and not a single off-setting critical perspective. There is, of course, no way to know if the lay panel would have reached different conclusions had they heard a more balanced set of experts.
- The budget for this pilot Citizens' Panel was about U.S. \$60,000. European consensus conferences have typically cost U.S. \$100,000 – \$200,000. Some of the latter, larger costs reflect the fact that the European versions have been nation-wide and have thus needed to include reimbursement for participants' travel and lodging. I estimate that a nation-wide U.S. Citizens' Panel would cost on the order of U.S. \$300,000 – \$500,000. That's a lot of money, but still trivial compared with the expenditures and social impacts that are at stake in major technology policy decisions.
- Lacking government sponsorship or a budget to pay expert honoraria, we were unable to secure a commitment from most of our expert witnesses to attend for two days. Thus we had to omit a key component of the Danish consensus conference methodology: the lay panelists' open cross examination of all the expert witnesses assembled together on the second day. Our process seems to have worked reasonably well without this step, nonetheless it was an unfortunate omission. Cross-examination gives the lay panel a chance to play off expert witnesses against one another and thus to take their own knowledge and judgements to a higher level of integration.

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The full text of the Citizens' Panel report and additional background information is available from the Loka Institute web page at www.loka.org