



Metropolitan Police Authority

**THE TRIANGLE OF ENGAGEMENT:
AN UNUSUAL WAY OF LOOKING AT THE
USUAL SUSPECTS**

John May

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THE TRIANGLE OF ENGAGEMENT: AN UNUSUAL WAY OF LOOKING AT THE USUAL SUSPECTS

ABSTRACT

This paper, written primarily for practitioners and commissioners of public participation and community engagement, introduces the ‘Triangle of Engagement’, which postulates that the higher the level of engagement required from participants, the fewer people there are who are willing or able to make this commitment. Some of the implications of this model for the practice of public participation are then considered.

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents a new theory for the practice of public participation, the Triangle of Engagement. Unlike most thinking about public participation the triangle focuses on the participants themselves instead of on the motivations and objectives of the practitioners. The relevance of the new theory is demonstrated by applying it to the real life problem of the “usual suspects” – the individuals who (depending on your point of view) either clog up much public participation and prevent the voices of the real community from being heard, or else are the best hope we practitioners have of engaging the public in meaningful dialogue about policy issues.

Increasing the numbers of people who take part in public consultation and community engagement is regarded by many as a desirable aim of public policy. This may be for political or ideological reasons – to develop democracy by empowering more citizens – or for marketing reasons to do with understanding customers and aligning public services with customers’ needs and wants¹. But whatever the motivation the intention is the same: to get more citizens involved in local governance, at whatever level.

THE ‘USUAL SUSPECTS’

This desire for ever greater numbers is reflected in the common attitudes towards those members of the public who do actually get involved, the ‘usual suspects’. Public participation practitioners and their commissioners tend to use the ladder of participation or one of its later developments as their conceptual framework (see Appendix), and indeed it is invaluable for many planning purposes. But the ladder is very much focused on the practitioner and the commissioner, not the participant. If practitioners give any real thought to the participants the chances are that they will denigrate or dismiss them. This is especially true of the most committed, the most engaged members of the public: the “usual suspects”. Rowe and Shepherd are writing in the extract below about the NHS, but the basic attitude can be found in any large public agency

¹ For a further discussion of the role of marketing in local government in particular see May and Newman (1999)

“Health authorities have recognised the political capital to be gained from public involvement in health needs assessment and priority-setting exercises but have been able to limit public influence over service planning by using the issue of representation to delegitimise user views. User-group representatives have been labelled as “activists” and their views have been dismissed as not being typical of “normal users” ... public engagement activities have thus been used to enhance the credibility of commissioning organisations without devolving decision-making power to users.”
(Rowe and Shepherd, 2002, p. 279)

Similarly an Australian contributor to a local government online discussion forum has commented that

“... [denigrating] the members of the community that regularly provide local governments with unwanted feedback is a universal problem ... A few years back I made a video about the 'faithful few' who regularly attend meetings of Council, ask hairy questions and instigate special electors meetings from time to time. Most of my colleagues couldn't understand why I would want to find out about why these people did this. Clearly they "didn't have a life" etc ... [and] they are labelled 'the minority' because clearly, by their silence, the rest of the community is fine with what their council is doing.”
(Piasecka, 2005)

There is a kind of Catch 22 in operation here: public services want to engage with you if you are ‘ordinary’, but if you show interest in engaging with them then you must be ‘extra-ordinary’ ... and therefore they needn’t listen to you.

There is admittedly the very occasional voice expressing a contrary opinion. The public participation pressure group Involve recently wrote that

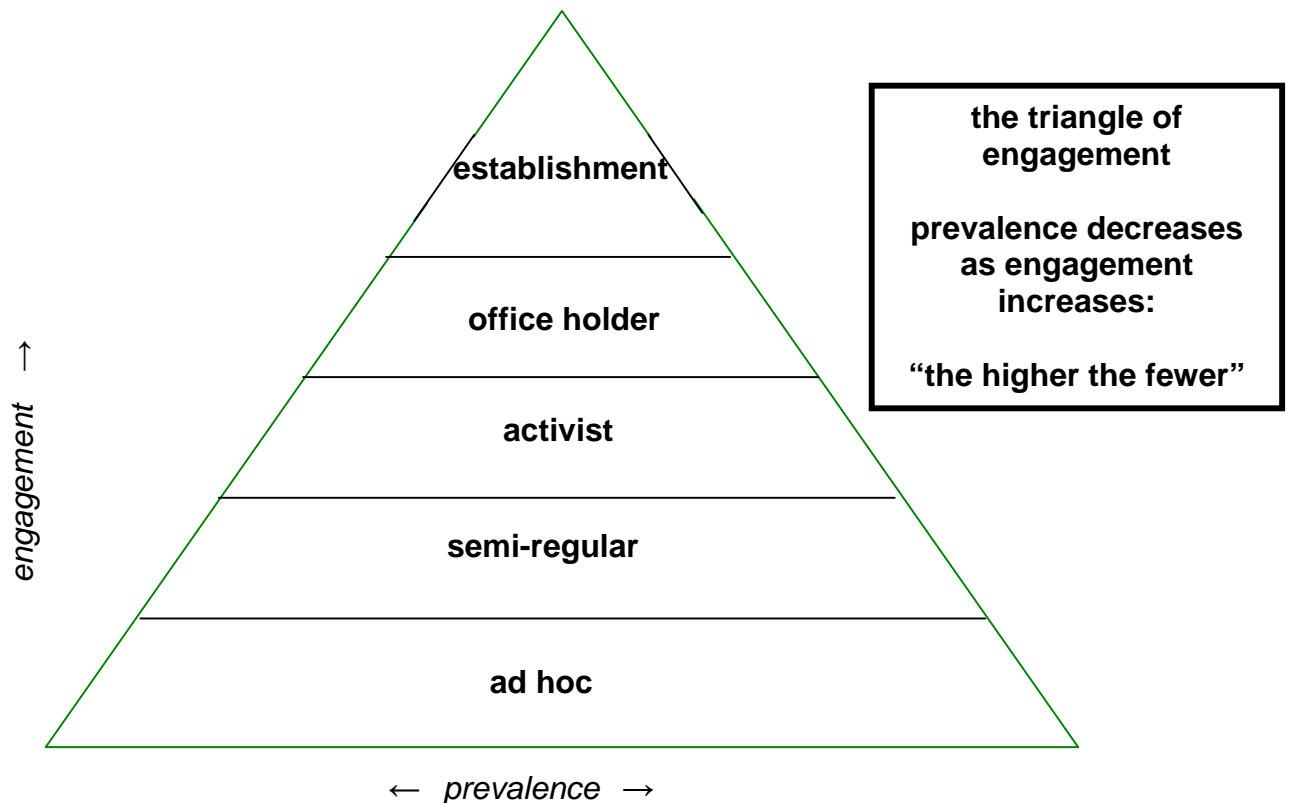
“Organisations sometimes try to avoid involving ‘the usual suspects’, which has become a term of denigration for people who habitually give time and effort to what they see as their civic responsibilities. Describing someone as a ‘usual suspect’ should never be grounds to exclude them from a process ... “
(Involve, 2005, p26)

The ‘faithful few’ or ‘usual suspects’ have two important characteristics that are key to a new understanding of public participation. These characteristics are number, and engagement. The usual suspects are few in number, and have a high degree of engagement, as opposed to most members of the public who have a relatively low degree of engagement.

Plotting levels of engagement against the numbers involved (the prevalence) gives rise to a new model, the triangle of engagement (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1

THE TRIANGLE OF ENGAGEMENT



Triangle of Engagement © John May, 2005

Key

- Establishment:** the highest level of public participation, e.g. Metropolitan Police Authority member, local Councillor, School Governor, non-executive director of an NHS Trust, lay member of a Non-Departmental Public Body (“quango”). Involved ex officio
- Office-holder:** Chair/Vice Chair/Secretary/Treasurer of a community group such as a Community Police Consultative Group, Residents Association, patients forum or a non-locality based interest group such as a minority ethnic association. The ‘usual suspects’ tend to come from this layer of the pyramid
- Activist:** as the name implies, but without taking on the executive responsibilities of office. Some people on this layer might qualify as ‘usual suspects’
- Semi-regular:** engaged enough to attend more than one event or take more than one opportunity to have their say
- Ad Hoc:** the majority of the public, who will engage if and when the issue is sufficiently pressing and/or it is on their doorstep. May or may not also engage in passive continuous monitoring of the service

The shape of the triangle of engagement is determined by two important properties. First, there is the obvious fact that it rises from base to apex. Similarly, there are different ways for the public to participate, as shown in Figure 1, and each requires a different degree of engagement – the higher up the triangle the greater the demands on the participant's time and energy. The usual suspects tend to come from the 'office-holder' or 'activist' layers of the triangle.

Location on the triangle is partly under the control of the participants, who may or may not choose to do all the homework associated with gaining a greater understanding of the issues, who may or may not attend all possible public meetings, engage in all possible lobbying opportunities, meet with all possible stakeholders etc. However, the way the agencies treat engaged members of the public also affects the degree of engagement, and therefore the amount of time and energy, required. Agencies are used to a bureaucratic culture, which is characterised by formal procedures, committees, meetings, extensive internal dialogue, consensus building and so on. These processes are above all else time consuming. To be treated as an equal requires that the member of the public play by the bureaucratic culture rules, and this requires a considerable commitment of time and energy.

Take for example Mrs. Karen Clark (a real person who has agreed to being used as a case study for this paper), who is very active as a volunteer in various capacities in the sphere of police-community relations, including being Chair of the Kensington & Chelsea Police Community Consultative Group and Vice Chair of the Holland Park Sector Working Group. In these two capacities Karen finds herself invited or co-opted onto numerous other bodies in the local area (and is beginning to be drawn into pan-London activities as well).

These other bodies are generally run by, and largely composed of, agency staff. Karen's contribution - as a volunteer let us not forget - is equivalent to about 2/3 of a full time post, much of which time is outside office hours. Add in reading and replying to emails, studying papers for meetings and so on and full time equivalence is soon reached. It is hardly surprising that there are so few people at the office-holder level of the triangle if this is what they can expect!

The second important property of a triangle is that the width of each successive layer decreases as the height increases. Similarly, the number of potential participants, of people able and willing to engage, shrinks with each ascending layer. Indeed the phrase "the higher the fewer" could have been coined with the triangle model in mind. One could almost imagine that there exists the same fixed stock of engagement at each level of the triangle, which is spread thinly over a lot of people at the lower levels but spread thickly over a few people at the upper levels.

The general point is borne out by a number of empirical studies. The Electoral Commission (2004), for example, found that three quarters of those surveyed wanted "to have a say in how the country is run", but only around one in seven were politically active. 58% of the respondents to a MORI survey would like to know what their Council is doing, but only 20% wanted more say in

what it does (Page, 2005). 82% of the respondents in the same survey were in favour of extending Community Partnerships to a wider area, but only 26% said they would personally be interested in getting involved (and only 2% did actually get involved). West (2003) estimates the proportions as 10% 'activists', 60 – 70% 'ordinary local people who might get interested if directly asked' and 20 – 30% 'refuseniks' who simply don't want to get involved.

I do not propose in this paper to estimate the proportions in each layer of the triangle of engagement, other than to make two observations. First, that the composition of each level (but not its relative size) changes with time. Most people have more capacity for engagement at some times of their lives than at others, which is why the usual suspects tend to be older rather than younger, and tend not to have young families or elderly dependents. What matters for the present purpose is that prevalence decreases as engagement increases: the higher the fewer.

The second observation is that the constant slope of the sides of the triangle is almost certainly a crude approximation. The chances are that the true slope is a concave curve, such as the hyperbola produced by the reciprocal function, but this is harder to visualise than a straight line of constant slope, and is definitely beyond this writer's abilities to sketch! The principle of the higher the fewer is however valid with either slope.

SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

This section looks at a number of the practical implications of adopting the triangle of engagement and finishes by posing an unresolved question, on which readers' views are asked.

Some of the implications of the triangle of engagement model are that:

- the usual suspects should be cherished, not blackguarded
- their capacity for engagement needs to be strengthened, and it is the responsibility of those who commission public community engagement to do this
- there is no 'phantom army' of real people obscured from view by the usual suspects
- representativeness is not the only criterion to use when seeking to engage the community – capacity for engagement is just as important
- there is a trade-off between representativeness and capacity for engagement ...
- ... although there are ways of enlarging the pool of participants at the higher levels of engagement
- a small number of participants does not necessarily mean that a community engagement exercise is a failure
- 'consultation fatigue' strikes differentially, not uniformly.

And a question: does the triangle of engagement apply to the special cases of hard to hear groups and businesses as well?

Cherishing the usual suspects

The new theory represented by the triangle of engagement gives rise to an unusual way of looking at the usual suspects. Far from blackguarding them practitioners and agencies alike need to recognise that these people are rare, highly committed, valuable and in need of cherishing. Most people, most of the time, have better things to do with their time than give considered views on public services. Surely those who are willing to do so deserve better than to be called names. Even the public themselves have a more generous attitude towards the usual suspects than many agencies do:

“Citizens commented that it was difficult to maintain participation efforts, and that there was a tendency [on the part of members of the public] to rely on a few committed individuals ... Although ... people often complained that ‘the same people dominate everything’, it was clear that the efforts of local leaders and activists were also appreciated.”

(Lowndes, Pratchett and Stoker, 2001, p447)

Strengthening the capacity for engagement

But that is not to say that the usual suspects have to be accepted as they are, without question or change. Many of them are in need of support, both of a practical kind – the facilitation of attendance at meetings by paying travel or carer expenses for example, or the provision of paid secretariat support for community groups – and also of a more personal nature such as training in committee behaviour and procedure, representational skills and public speaking. Indeed one could say that part of the problem with the usual suspects is that although they have the passion and commitment needed to sustain engagement many of them lack the kind of ‘social capital’ that Robert Putnam has described in his book ‘Bowling Alone’ (Putnam, 2001).

By the same token it now falls to the public agencies to supply the usual suspects with the training in community participation, in the skills of committee membership, of taking turns, negotiating, bargaining and other interpersonal skills that previously might have been provided by churches, trade unions, clubs and societies.

Building up communities’ stocks of this kind of social capital is not just altruistic (although society as a whole can be expected to benefit). It is also enlightened self-interest on the part of the agencies, because it will make it far easier to find citizens who are both willing and able to engage with them in a meaningful way. It will harness the passion and commitment to mutual benefit.

Changing to this new way of looking at the usual suspects will require a major shift in the thinking, attitudes and behaviour of practitioners and agencies alike. A checklist for public participation initiatives, based on Putnam’s idea of a “social-capital impact statement” (Putnam, p. 413) and derived from the triangle of engagement, could be a useful tool to help the change process along. The questions in Figure 2 below could usefully be asked at the planning stage of every new public participation initiative.

FIGURE 2

A SOCIAL CAPITAL CHECKLIST FOR PUBLIC PARTICIPATION INITIATIVES

- which citizens are the focus of the activity?
- what practical support is being offered to citizens as individuals to enable their involvement?
- what practical support is being offered to groups of citizens to enable their involvement?
- what training will the agency provide to enable the participants to interact with it more effectively?
- how far will any training be transferable to other situations in the lives of the participants or their communities?
- in short: how will the initiative contribute to the creation of social capital?

The 'phantom army'

Decrying the unrepresentativeness of the usual suspects, the people who actually put their heads above their community parapet, implies that there are in fact plenty of other community members whose views are being wilfully drowned out by the activists. If only, the practitioner and commissioner argument runs, we could get through to the real community directly. The reality, as the triangle of engagement shows, is that this phantom army of community members whose voices are being muffled simply doesn't exist. The people who come forward for engagement at a medium to high level are the only ones available for engagement. (But see the section on enlarging the pool, below.)

Representativeness and capacity

The representativeness dimension of community engagement is of course important and it is true that the usual suspects

“may have an organisational perspective on community needs ... may be biased towards the activities in which they themselves are involved ... [and may] often over-estimate problems facing [their constituents].”

(McKillip, 1998, p273)

But a focus on representativeness alone ignores another dimension which is of great practical importance – namely the capacity for engagement. The triangle of engagement focuses on the capacity dimension, and should be

used alongside other planning tools, such as the ladder of participation. The capacity dimension is made up of a number of factors, including time, intensity and the level of strategic or policy thinking required. It can be applied by asking these three questions at the planning stage and taking the highest score:

Q.1 What is the planned duration of the involvement?

- Long 3
- Intermediate 2
- Short 1
- Not applicable/don't know 0

Q.2 What is the planned intensity of the involvement?

- High 3
- Middling 2
- Low 1
- Not applicable/don't know 0

Q.3 How much of a contribution to strategies and/or policies do you want the community to make?

- Major 3
- Medium 2
- Minor 1
- Not applicable/don't know 0

Procedure: take the highest of the three scores and apply it to the triangle. A highest score of 3 suggests the top two layers of the triangle (establishment or office holder); a highest score of 2 suggests the middle two layers (activist or semi-regular); a highest score of 1 suggests the bottom layer (ad hoc); three 0's suggests that community engagement in this instance would be a waste of everyone's time.

The indicated level in the triangle indicates how many and what sort of people can be expected to engage. For example, if the intention is to set up a permanent or semi-permanent sounding board of some kind the duration will be quite long, the intensity required quite high and the aim will probably be to obtain input to strategies or policies. All these factors point to the upper levels of the triangle. Which means that the scope for recruiting members of the public will be severely limited, and in particular that the practitioner will end up drawing heavily on the usual suspects because there isn't anybody else. On the positive side it also highly likely that the desired level of commitment will be present.

If on the other hand the intention is a short and sharp market research type exercise then both the duration and the intensity will be low, and the opportunity for direct input to strategy or policy formulation will be negligible. This time the capacity factors point to the lowest level of the triangle, where there are a lot of people each with little capacity for engagement – at least on

this occasion. On the positive side, there will be an over-abundance of potential participants from which to select a representative sample.

Thus there is often a trade-off between representativeness and capacity. If there are a lot of people to choose from, as happens at the bottom of the triangle, then statistical representativeness is relatively easy to achieve with a random or stratified sample of the population for example. But the triangle also indicates that the capacity for engagement is going to be low, which severely limits the kind of question that can be asked and the nature of the debate that is going to be possible.

Conversely, the size of the participant pool available for the higher levels of engagement is much smaller, and the consultation or engagement practitioner has in effect to take what s/he can get.

All is not lost, however, and there are a number of ways of getting round the representativeness/capacity trade-off.

Enlarging the pool

A commonly used tactic for dealing with the issue of the relatively small size of the pool of participants is to side-step the trade-off between representativeness and capacity altogether (see for example Aspden and Birch, 2002, p. 63). This is done by splitting the engagement or participation exercise into two phases. The first phase draws a small number of people from the higher levels of the triangle to scope the issue, and to have some extended exploratory dialogue. This phase is often characterised by the use of qualitative research methods such as focus groups, and is tailored to the participants' capacity, not their representativeness.

The second phase then capitalises on what has been learnt in the first phase by using large scale consultation techniques such as surveys to validate the conclusions drawn from the first phase. This phase is less about debate and involvement and more about estimating the prevalence of a pre-determined selection of opinions or experiences and is tailored to the participants' representativeness, not their capacity.

Less well known as a technique for enlarging the pool is the random personal invitation technique, a tried, tested and effective mechanism for getting beyond the usual suspects, getting a more representative cross-section of "ordinary people" and thus to some extent resolving the trade-off between representativeness and capacity. Experience with a number of citizens juries and other innovative mechanisms shows that a telephone call or a personal visit to randomly selected residents, inviting them to serve their community usually produces an acceptance rate of around 10%².

It is no coincidence that this is the same percentage that West (2003) described as 'activists'. The random personal invitation attracts people who

² Use of a market research company with experience of this type of recruitment to do the actual inviting is highly recommended.

for the most part lie outside the existing circle of usual suspects, but who have a similar capacity for engagement³. By offering the opportunity to go straight in at a high level of the triangle, albeit as an individual and not as a formally accredited representative, the random personal invitation effectively short cuts what can be the tedious process of joining a recognised organisation and becoming active within it.

An often overlooked advantage of the random personal invitation is that it taps directly into the population at large, and thus to some degree improves the representativeness of the set that is selected. In particular it is a very effective way of reaching the silent majority who tend not to belong to the kinds of community organisations that are on most engagement practitioners' lists.

A third approach to enlargement is to use existing contacts to recruit others who are personally known to them, and then the others to recruit still others – the process sometimes known as 'snowballing' (Goodyear, 1991, p. 232). There is independent evidence that this works. Economic and Social Research Council research looked at the issue of what motivates people to participate. It found that around 80% of participants were actively recruited by people they knew: social networks play a key role (Birchall and Simmons, 2002).

Although the first of these techniques side-steps the issue, the latter two have in common that they seek to enlarge the pool. Yet however effective they may be it needs to be remembered that, according to the triangle, the pool in question will never be very large – consisting of the 10% or so of the population that has the capacity, at this stage in their life cycle, for high levels of engagement. In other words one should not expect a positive response from more than about 10% of those approached by either of these two techniques. Nonetheless, for most of us as practitioners or commissioners any increase is to be welcomed. And of course even 10% of a large population is still a lot of people!

Measuring success (or failure)

Attracting large numbers of participants to community engagement is always going to be a hard task, apart of course from the spontaneous eruption of anger against some very local proposal. What often happens, especially when public meetings are used at the start of a process, is that there is an outer circle which drops in for a while and then drops out, and an inner circle which stays the course. Or that the core makes informal links with the wider community and acts as a channel of communication for and with them.

Traditionally both these scenarios have tended to be viewed as 'failures', either because the absolute numbers involved are small, or because of the high drop out rate. In fact neither should be regarded as a 'failure' of the community engagement or public participation process. On the contrary, the

³ Strictly speaking they have the *potential* for this level of engagement, since by definition they have not yet realised it by becoming usual suspects. But give them time ...

triangle of engagement predicts that this will happen. Evaluation by headcount alone is therefore not appropriate.

Consultation fatigue

The concept of ‘consultation fatigue’ is often used to explain low response rates to community engagement exercises, although some may doubt whether it actually exists, and argue that it is an excuse for a poorly designed project. The assumption behind it appears to be that there is an upper limit to the amount of consultation that any individual can tolerate, and that once this threshold is reached they will refuse to respond to any further invitations to participate – at least until they have recovered from their fatigue. It is also implied that all sections of the community are equally susceptible to this malady, and that once the first signs of consultation fatigue are noticed it is necessary to call a halt to all consultation for a while.

The triangle model on the other hand implies that, while it may be true that we all have a preset limit to the amount of engagement that we can tolerate, this limit is not the same for all of us. Those at the bottom level of the triangle will generally have a much lower threshold than those near the top.

It may be helpful to imagine that there is a fixed total quantity of engagement available to each level of the triangle. At the higher levels there are fewer people and hence more engagement per person. At the lower levels there are more people and hence less engagement per person. Consequently the individual stocks of engagement will be more quickly used up by those at the bottom (the large majority) than by those at the top⁴.

Be that as it may, the triangle model indicates that consultation fatigue, if it exists, will affect people differentially and not uniformly. If consultation fatigue strikes there is no need to hold back from all forms of engagement – only those aimed at the ad hoc and semi-regular levels of the triangle, such as large scale surveys. The people with greater capacity for engagement are rarely heard to complain of too much consultation. Indeed, the exact opposite is more usual.

Hard to hear and businesses – special cases?

Although businesses are not generally included as a category in the usual lists of hard to hear groups, when it comes to participation they do in fact closely resemble ethnic and faith minorities, young people, homeless people, LGBT people and the other categories that make up these lists. Both hard to hear groups and businesses are difficult to contact and involve in participation through the normal routes. In both cases participation is routinely conducted via a small number of community (or business) representatives because there are no others readily available.

⁴ Interestingly, this arrangement produces the reciprocal function mentioned earlier. If the total stock of engagement is fixed and the same for each level of the triangle then “engagement x prevalence = constant”. Put another way, “engagement = constant divided by prevalence”, so that engagement varies as the reciprocal of prevalence.

The triangle of engagement predicts that for any section of society there is only a small proportion of the population that has the capacity for high level involvement. This appears to be empirically true for both hard to hear groups and businesses, although it may be that the actual percentage is less than the 10% or so that obtains in society as a whole. The unresolved question is whether the lower levels of the triangle apply as well. Assuming suitable techniques are used, do the lower levels of these special cases respond to engagement initiatives in the same way as the mainstream? Or are the special cases qualitatively different in that there are no lower levels to their triangles – it is the usual suspects or nothing? If so, practitioners and commissioners have a real problem and will find it virtually impossible to engage with these sections of society. If not, our comparative failure to engage with the lower levels is due to the use of inadequate or unsuitable techniques – something which can in principle be put right. My own guess, for what it is worth, is that the special cases are not in fact qualitatively different, but they are technically challenging. But what do others think?

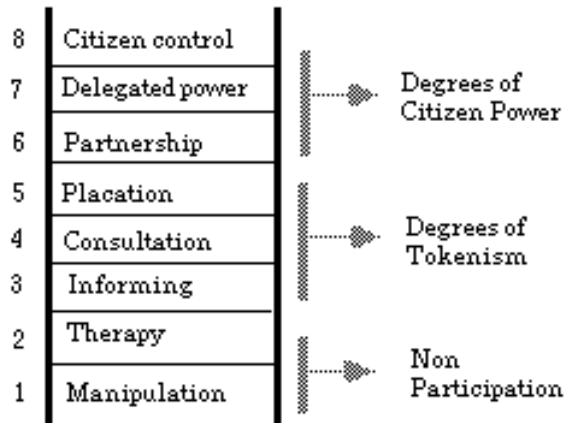
Conclusion

Consideration of the practical problem of the role of the usual suspects has led to the development of a new perspective on the theory and practice of public participation and community engagement, the Triangle of Engagement. The triangle uses the principle of “the higher the fewer” to account for some commonly observed features of engagement and participation practice, and also suggests ways in which practice might be improved in pursuit of greater and more effective involvement by groups and individuals in the governance of their communities.

APPENDIX

THE LADDER OF PARTICIPATION AND TWO LATER DEVELOPMENTS

Arnstein's Ladder of Participation



(Arnstein, 1969)

Wilcox's Five Participation Stances

<p>Information The least you can do is tell people what is planned</p> <p>Consultation You offer a number of options and listen to the feedback you get</p> <p>Deciding together You encourage others to provide some additional ideas and options, and join in deciding the best way forward.</p> <p>Acting together Not only do different interests decide together what is best, but they form a partnership to carry it out</p> <p>Supporting independent community initiatives You help others do what they want - perhaps within a framework of grants, advice and support provided by the resource holder</p>

(Wilcox, 1995)

IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum

Developed by the International Association for Public Participation

INCREASING LEVEL OF PUBLIC IMPACT				
INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
Public Participation Goal:	Public Participation Goal:	Public Participation Goal:	Public Participation Goal:	Public Participation Goal:
To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision-making in the hands of the public.
Promise to the Public:	Promise to the Public:	Promise to the Public:	Promise to the Public:	Promise to the Public:
We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for direct advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.
Example Techniques to Consider:	Example Techniques to Consider:	Example Techniques to Consider:	Example Techniques to Consider:	Example Techniques to Consider:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Fact sheets ● Web sites ● Open houses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Public comment ● Focus groups ● Surveys ● Public meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Workshops ● Deliberate polling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Citizen Advisory Committees ● Consensus-building ● Participatory decision-making 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Citizen juries ● Ballots ● Delegated decisions

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