The practice of public engagement on projects: from managing external stakeholders to facilitating active contributors

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Abstract

The premise of public engagement is to invite community members into the project's decision-making processes. In project management research, public engagement is usually addressed under the umbrella of stakeholder management, which, although a useful perspective to adopt, has its limitations. In this article, a processual view is advocated, which treats public engagement as dynamic and emergent. Drawing on ethnographic data, we demonstrate how observing public engagement "in the making" helps explain the politics behind engagement efforts. This allows for conclusions to be drawn about the practice of engagement that reflects the evolving needs of stakeholders and how best to manage them.

Keywords

public engagement, power relations, ethnography, stakeholder management, Hong Kong

Introduction

In line with the ideals of "inclusive governance" (see Lane, 2005), public sector clients in many countries allow members of the public, who may be affected by their projects, the opportunity to affect the project outcomes. To do so, public engagement mechanisms are set in place to promote information flow between parties with the aim of facilitating collaborative decision making

(Innes & Booher, 2004) that incorporates legitimate decisions into the project. Such actions take on many forms across the world and the extent to which engagement activities are mandatory varies across jurisdictions. In general, though, public engagement involves three chronologically distinct elements: “public communication,” “public consultation,” and “public participation” (Rowe & Frewer, 2005). These elements are distinct in that the public needs to have the project information communicated to them, and be consulted on the relevant details, before they will be able to participate in the decision-making process.

Within the project management literature, public engagement is often subsumed under the broader umbrella of stakeholder management (e.g., Heravi, Coffey, & Trigunarsyah, 2015; Johansen, Eik-Andresen, & Ekambaram, 2014). With their foundation in resource-based theory, traditional stakeholder management approaches typically judge stakeholders based on their actual and potential influence on a project and allocate resources to manage them accordingly. In the associated literature, it is frequently argued that stakeholder management directly influences the success or failure of a project (Nguyen, Chilese, & Rameezdeen, 2018; Turner & Zolin, 2012), and stakeholder engagement is often justified by how it may affect project outcomes (Di Maddaloni & Davis, 2017; Mok, Shen, & Yang, 2015; Tantalo & Priem, 2016). The public is commonly referred to as “external stakeholders” to the project (Freeman, 1984; Winch, 2004), and significant research efforts have been put into identifying and describing who the stakeholders should be, and why and when they should be given consideration in decision-making processes (Littau, Jujagiri, & Adlbrecht, 2010; Mitchell, Agle, & Wood, 1997).

The above approaches have found traction and have led to tangible improvements in practice. Yet, in categorizing and evaluating the actors by how they and their interests may potentially impact project outcomes, these stakeholder classification approaches skim over how interests are negotiated in the first place. In particular, they fall short in explaining how processes of negotiation lead to stakeholders making claims on a project. In other words, stakeholder management becomes mostly preemptive in assessing the potential risk that stakeholders may impose on project delivery. There is little in this line of research that allows for explanations of what happens as public engagement processes unfold.

This article examines the formal arrangements of public engagement for urban development projects in Hong Kong with particular focus on the "public forum," which is a popular mechanism for informing and soliciting feedback from the public. Our aim is to explore how the process of public engagement is influenced by the way actors come together and what actors are able to achieve within a certain space and time. This challenges traditional approaches to stakeholder management research by focusing on how stakeholder networks evolve. Rather than treating stakeholder groups in isolation, we demonstrate how managing stakeholders involves managing compounding series of actions and reactions by individuals as they interact with each other throughout the engagement process.

We begin with a broad review of public engagement research within the project management literature and outline how it commonly falls under two dominant approaches of stakeholder management. We then go on to make a case for the potential for processual research in this domain, and the "sociology of translation" lens (Callon, 1986a; Callon, Law, & Rip, 1986; Latour, 1986) is put forward as an alternative approach to study public engagement by exploring stakeholder relationships "in the making" rather than in hindsight. This is followed by a methodology section, which describes how data were collected using a range of ethnographic techniques, including participatory observations, interviews, and document analysis. Drawing on an ethnographic "thick description" (Geertz, 1973), we present and interpret a series of interactions that transpire at a public forum event in the form of a vignette. We then discuss how these interpretations challenge conventional views of public engagement practice and stakeholder management more generally. We conclude by showing how this type of thinking can advance an agenda of processual research in the project organizing domain and reflect on the implications for management practice.

Studying Public Engagement—A Case for a Processual Research Approach

As public engagement has increasingly been recognized as a relevant and meaningful component of project delivery, it has gained attention within the project management research domain. Research efforts typically conceptualize public engagement using either a relational or a risk management approach to stakeholder management. The former incorporates public engagement into the remit of stakeholder management by labelling the public participants as "external stakeholders" (Freeman, 1984; Winch, 2004), and justifies engagement efforts in the same manner as one would justify general stakeholder management efforts (e.g., Rowlinson & Cheung, 2008; Turner & Zolin, 2012). That is to say, it assumes that managing stakeholders proficiently would give the client organization an advantage by successfully building relationships to allow the organization to be better prepared for the future. In this manner, public engagement is seen as a trust-building exercise between project owners and the public (e.g., Leyden et al., 2017). Conversely, the risk management approach justifies the need to conduct public engagement on the basis of the negative impacts that may befall projects if it is not carried out (e.g., Close & Loosemore, 2014; Cuppen, Bosch-Rekveldt, Pikaar, & Mehos, 2016). Undertaking public engagement is assumed to be a deterrent against disgruntled members of the community forming protest groups, causing a political upheaval that may delay the project or otherwise tarnish the client organization's reputation. These studies view public engagement as part of the project's risk management strategy (e.g., Loosemore, Raftery, Reilly & Higgon, 2012) and tend to concentrate more on conflict management and impression management aspects (e.g., Tam, Zeng, & Tong, 2009; Yu & Leung, 2015).

While both of the above approaches have led to useful findings, they each have their limitations. The stakeholder relational approach falls short in its attempts to address the fundamental clash between the goals of public engagement and the goals of the project. The goals of public engagement include sharing the privilege of decision making with the general public (Rowe, Horlick-Jones, Walls, & Pidgeon, 2005), whereas the goals of the project are to meet a set of pre-established outcomes as set by the client or project sponsor (e.g., Turner & Zolin, 2012). The two are misaligned and may be in direct conflict with each other. This clash in goals is recognized and taken as the foundation for studies that apply a risk management approach. Yet, in emphasizing the participants' abilities to negatively affect a project, these studies downplay the collaborative aspects of public engagement that are essential for allowing decision making to be shared (cf. Innes & Booher, 2004).

The challenges of reconciling the cause and effect of public engagement may be attributed to the tendency of project management research to focus on how public engagement influences project outcomes (e.g., Johansen et al., 2014; Yang, Shen, Bourne, Ho, & Xue, 2011). Conceptualizing public engagement in this way relegates public engagement efforts as secondary to the main functions of project delivery. It also abstracts and reduces the engagement process to dependent variables, such as "success" and "efficiency," which are judged in hindsight (e.g., Heravi et al., 2015; Yang et al., 2011). Considering that the public engagement process runs concurrent to the overall project, a research agenda focusing only on assessing the impact of public engagement in hindsight foregoes the opportunity to explore the dynamic connections between the two as collaborative decision making takes place.

Furthermore, stakeholder management models tend to focus on the identification, classification, and categorization of stakeholder groups. As such, they rarely regard managing stakeholders as a dynamic process (Eskerod & Vaagaasar, 2014). Hence, relatively little attention has historically been paid to the practice of engagement and what takes place between managers and participants in formal engagement settings. In recognition of this, there have been recent calls to move to a stakeholder relational ontology that allows for the examination of how roles and relations between stakeholders co-evolve (e.g., Missonier & Loufrani-Fedida, 2014). Such calls echo those that advocate a pluralistic approach to project management that likewise incorporates process research (e.g., Packendorff, Crevani, & Lindgren, 2014; Sergi, 2012).

An alternative, which we follow here, is to take a relational and co-productionist view of public engagement, recognizing that public engagement is constantly in the process of becoming (Chilvers & Kearnes, 2016). Such a view acknowledges the co-evolution of stakeholder identities and the project over time, and is able to go beyond traditional assessments of dyadic stakeholder relationships to capture the dynamic and emergent nature of stakeholder networks (Missonier & Loufrani-Fedida, 2014). This view is best executed through a processual research agenda that can "catch reality in flight" in order to study "temporal interconnectedness" (cf. Pettigrew, 1997).

The Politics of Engagement

While collaborative decision making may be the overarching espoused aim for public engagement (Innes & Booher, 2004), research findings point to a misalignment of goals between parties that leads to potential confrontations and conflicts between stakeholders (e.g., Teo & Loosemore, 2011). For the project team, the public engagement process is used to garner support, collect opinions, and address grievances about the project. For community members, the public engagement process is used to voice complaints, lobby for change, and negotiate benefits for themselves or on behalf of their community. In other words, the participants enter the process with the expectation that they can exercise their power to affect the outcomes of the project in, for them, meaningful ways (Nguyen et al., 2018).

The fact that the public engagement strategy is normally orchestrated by the project owners (e.g., the type of information presented and the level of feedback documented) puts the client organization in a powerful position. Yet, the power of certain interest groups should not be underestimated, given their potential ability to bring proceedings to a halt (e.g., Teo & Loosemore, 2011). Indeed, incorporating the views of powerful actors, as well as a varied and disparate cohort of other stakeholders, presents a complex set of managerial challenges (e.g., Yu & Leung, 2015). This is further expounded by the frequently acrimonious stance of these stakeholders, both toward the project and each other (cf. Winch, 2004).

A Sociology of Translation

Due to its emergent, dynamic, and value-laden nature, we conceptualize public engagement as a social phenomenon that is experienced collectively, yet interpreted individually. We propose a social constructionist approach, which acknowledges engagement as constantly "in the-making" (cf. Chilvers & Kearnes, 2016) and embraces the viewpoints of multiple parties. This allows for the capture of experiences of different participants, without casting as “out groups” (cf. Teo & Loosemore, 2011) those whose perspectives differ wildly from the norm.

A majority of the commonly used stakeholder management models apply a perspective taken from resource dependence theory, defining power as something that is possessed and can be used to bring about desired outcomes (Aaltonen, Kujala, & Oijala, 2008). We challenge the usefulness of such a definition and instead adopt Latour and Callon’s constructionist conceptualization of power relations to understand how actors exercise their power to “translate” the task at hand to align with their own interests. Latour posits that the exercise of power should be treated as an effect rather than as a cause. He points out the seemingly paradoxical notion that “when you simply have power—*in potentia*—nothing happens and you are powerless; when you exert power—*in actu*—others are performing the action and not you” (Latour, 1986, pp. 264–265). Hence, the power of an actor can be observed in the actions performed by others, actions which consciously or subconsciously translate the actor’s intent into tangible outcomes. This translation is processual in nature and it requires the researcher to “follow the actors” (Latour, 1987) to capture their actions.

A series of translations takes place when actors (or in Callon’s lexicon, “entities”) within a network form associations and alliances with each other. During this process, certain entities control others and form the foundations of power relationships. Callon (1986a) identified four “moments” of translation: problematization, interessement, enrolment, and mobilization. *Problematization* describes the way one entity seeks to become indispensable to other entities by defining problems and then suggesting that these problems could be resolved if the other entities were to follow certain channels, or what Callon terms “obligatory passage points.” *Interessement* describes a progression of events where the first entity seeks to lock in the strategic location of each of the other entities, which defines their relationship to the problem and the paths they should take. However, merely setting up obligatory passage points and then locking in other entities through interessement may not necessarily lead to the other entities taking any action. To do so, the enrolment of other entities is necessary. Therefore, *enrolment* denotes the set of strategies that an entity uses, which leads to other entities accepting their designated roles. Finally, *mobilization* describes the actions taken by the first entity to make sure that whoever speaks on behalf of each of the entities is loyal to the new alliance formed and seeks to represent the cause that they claim to represent. The distinguishing characteristic in analyzing this process of translation is the recognition and exploration of obligatory passage points, which describe crucial points that bring entities together to form a system of alliances or associations (Callon, 1986a; Law, 1986).

During the process of translation, the alliances within a network are transformed from one social world to another, or from one form to another. In Callon's own words, "[t]he notion of translation recalls all the work and the consent that was granted, that was needed in order to achieve the seemingly natural order, where each element relates with the others" (Callon, 1986b, p. 28). When the translations become successful, all that would be left to be observed would be tangible results (Callon, 1986b), for example, a technical drawing, a project schedule, or a development proposal. The process of translation can thus be explained as the transformation of parts of a power network into more stable materials. When they become stabilized within the power network, the materials they are associated with are "black boxed" (Callon, 1986b; Callon & Latour, 1981; Latour, 1987). Conceptualizing engagement "in the making" entails observing the practice of engagement and capturing ways in which translations take place. This, in turn, sheds light on how power relationships are formed, before they become stabilized within the power network and are turned into "black boxes."

The Case for Adopting the Translation Model

There are four main advantages to applying Latour and Callon's conceptualization of power to study public engagement. First and foremost, the translation model recognizes that public engagement allows parties to come together to make decisions about a project, but that the process is full of struggle. It then allows for this struggle to be attributed to a misalignment in goals and makes available a system that describes this struggle in terms of the way power is exercised. Second, a sociology of translation does not privy one group of entities over another. It is not concerned with which parties should have influence over the project, such is the remit of "relational" stakeholder management approaches (e.g., Rowlinson & Cheung, 2008; Tantalo & Priem, 2016); or which party should be controlled for a project to run smoothly, such is the aim of risk management approaches (e.g., Cuppen et al., 2016; Yu & Leung, 2015). Instead, equal attention is given to each party that is involved in the project, as the focus is on the connections between parties, rather than on the characteristics of each party. This allows biases toward any one party to be avoided. Third, a sociology of translation acknowledges that the public engagement process provides the opportunity to openly make critiques, and that for the process to be truly democratic, it is important that it too is open to critique (Chilvers & Kearnes, 2016). Finally, a sociology of translation not only recognizes, but embraces change. In other words, this model of power acknowledges the impermanence of informal social situations to capture power relations at play.

Both Latour and Callon have applied the translation model to examine the processes of democratic decision making (cf. Callon, Lascoumes, & Barthe, 2009; Latour, 2004). It has subsequently been applied in the project organizing domain at different abstraction levels. For example, Irwin, Jensen, and Jones (2013) posited that a public engagement event may be viewed as a chain of crucial translations as a "larger public is translated into a smaller group of people who will then take part in an engagement exercise in order to articulate their view on a specific 'engagement matter'" (p. 126). An example more grounded in practice is that of Tryggestad, Georg, and Hernes (2010), who conceptualized translation as the transformation of project ideas into project plans, and then finally into their built form. While acknowledging both these interpretations of translation, we here seek to apply the concept to one specific type of public engagement event: the public forum.

Public engagement encompasses the coming together of multiple social worlds. It involves the inclusion of a large cohort of stakeholders, who break from their usual living routines to come together to discuss a particular project within a well-defined timeframe. The public forum, in turn, acts as a physical nexus where previously unrelated stakeholders congregate to learn about the project and exchange views. The forum setting provides sufficient room for stakeholders to gather, but due to the potentially large number of attendees, incorporates restrictions on the types of interactions that can take place between the participants. To ensure that the event runs in a timely manner, extensive preplanning takes place and the event format needs to be choreographed.

We apply the moments of translation, that is, problematization, interessement, enrolment, and mobilization, as per Latour and Callon's methodological approach to interpret some of the actions taken by individuals at a public forum. However, following Star and Griesemer (1989), we accept that translations are conducted simultaneously by individuals from multiple social worlds. As such, we do not only navigate one entity's (e.g., the public engagement manager) course in history. Instead, we adopt the "anti-reductionist," "ecological" perspective proposed by Star and Griesemer (1989) to capture multiple entities' attempts to defend their interests as they interact with other participants. In consequence, our observations target how multiple entities create their own obligatory passage points and defend them against other translations threatening to displace them.

In summary, our adaptation of the translation model puts focus on the examination of multiple, simultaneous social interactions between actors from different social worlds. Because each entity that takes hold of a task shapes the task to align with their own interests (Latour, 1986), the management of public engagement involves multiple and continuous attempts to align the interests of different entities through actively seeking to enroll them into a power network as prescribed by the manager. The inherent challenges of incorporating divergent views of stakeholders presents a power struggle between managers and the stakeholders, which is generally not accounted for in stakeholder management approaches.

Research Methodology

To capture public engagement in the making, we dismiss the idea that social behavior falls under predefined categories. We employ ethnographic techniques to conduct participatory observations at public engagement events and provide "thick descriptions" (Geertz, 1973) that capture the experience of an insider at these events. Resting on the “peculiar practice of representing the social reality of others through the analysis of one’s own experience in the world of these others” (Maanen, 1988, p. xiii), ethnography is a personal and reflexive exercise that nonetheless forms the base for wider comparison across settings. Hence, an ethnographic account does not only acknowledge that reality is socially constructed, multifaceted, unstructured, and nuanced, it also emphatically embraces this richness and messiness. Reflexivity on the part of the researcher is key to stimulating the process-thinking capacity of ethnographic research (Vignehsa, 2015).

The research reported here departs from the traditional project-centric approach to ethnographic studies in the project organizing domain (Pink, Tutt, Dainty & Gibb, 2010) to instead adopt a sociopolitical view that takes into consideration the wider system within which public engagement is embedded, and to convey these “lived-in” experiences as part of a cultural scene. In the following sections, public engagement in Hong Kong is conceptualized as a phenomenon linked to a system consisting of temporal, social, and political elements. It is a “place” tied to a specific sociotemporal cultural landscape, and one which we shall present as an “ethnographic place” (Pink, 2009). Pink’s conceptualization of an ethnographic place sees place as an “entanglement” of different elements, which include persons, objects, trajectories, senses, and dialogues. The researcher is emplaced into this world and tasked with conveying an ethnographic representation of other people as emplaced persons.

The Ethnographic Place: Public Engagement in Hong Kong

As an ethnographic place, public engagement in Hong Kong has a roaming geographical "space" to which it belongs, and a certain "place" in the collective consciousness of its citizens. The geographical space is a set of venues that are deemed "neutral" and "appropriate" for large gatherings mainly selected on the basis of pragmatic concerns of how to provide the most efficient and effective setup for interaction (e.g. Lim et al., 2005). The place, on the other hand, goes beyond these pragmatic concerns. What public engagement means to the people of Hong Kong has accumulated from the public's attitude toward the government's role in public policy making over the span of decades. These attitudes have been imprinted on the public's collective memory and has influenced their views about what types of issues are important to them, and how they expect to be consulted on such issues (e.g. Cheung, 2011; Lee et al., 2013; Ng, 2008a).

Prior to 1997, Hong Kong long held a reputation for a laissez-faire approach to governance, including the governance of planning issues, and practicing a form of "positive non-intervention" (Jessop & Sum, 2000). As a result of British colonial rule, which lasted from 1841 to 1997, the administration of land was formulated around the need for an ease of total control from a distance (Nissim, 2012). Decisions were monopolized by the executive-led government without consideration for democratic processes (Ng, 2008b). But when the transfer of sovereignty over Hong Kong from the colonial British government to China took place on 1 July 1997, a new administration was created, that is, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government. The new administration gave more opportunities for political debate at every strata of government. As a result, decisions were often challenged by local politicians, civic groups, or the Director of Audit (Nissim, 2012). It was during this postcolonial period of political change that previous forms of public engagement began to be challenged by the public.

Since the early 2000s, government departments have increasingly been responding to public pressure to become more proactive in the way they approach the public with project proposals (Lee et al., 2013). However, under Hong Kong's executive-led government, civil servants still have the capability to set the agenda for, and pace and scale of, development (Ng, 2008a). Hence, the level of engagement for projects is up to the discretion of individual government departments, many of which have a track record of avoiding engagement with the public on more contentious projects (Cheung, 2011). Ultimately, while there are some standard "handles" at each public engagement event that dictate its structure and format, the strategy and goals for public engagement are set by the project team on a case-by-case basis.

Although there are no formal guidelines for how public engagement should be conducted in Hong Kong, reviewing recent public engagement processes shows that the protocol for public engagement is set to either two or three general stages, depending on the size and complexity of the project. Each stage usually consists of a combination of several types of activities: a roving exhibition, where the plans are put on display; a series of gatherings in a more intimate setting to garner views from the community (such as focus groups or community workshops); and a large-scale public forum.

For a three-stage public engagement strategy, Stage 1 aims to gauge public sentiment on the preliminary proposal or feasibility study of the project. By Stage 2, a preliminary design would be completed and ready to be presented to the public. The public engagement team may choose to target specific areas of the design for discussion, or they may seek to collect feedback about the design in general. After feedback is collected, another round of technical assessments takes place, and an updated plan is presented in Stage 3 for further comment. At the end of each stage, a consultation report is generated by the project owner, which is published online. After the third stage, the feedback gathered during the public engagement process is incorporated into the final design, which forms the project team's formal application to the Town Planning Board.

Not surprisingly, the development and execution of public engagement in Hong Kong is contentious, with government being criticized for their heavy-handed approach to managing engagement efforts. They have, for example, been accused of dominating proceedings by setting the agendas for consultation and selectively reviewing feedback from the community (Cheung, 2011). It has even been argued that public engagement exercises are used as a "tool of hegemony" to control aspects of planning policy (cf. Tang, Lee, & Ng, 2012). These factors have led to an antagonistic stance between the government and the public (cf. Tam et al., 2009; Yu & Leung, 2015). The corollary is that public engagement operates within a tense political climate where the project team is given the freedom to interpret how public feedback should inform project development. Yet, in so doing, they are under enormous public scrutiny.

Data Collection

The research drew upon an iterative-inductive approach (O'Reilly, 2005). From March 2013 to April 2016, several forms of ethnographic methods were used by the first author to gain an understanding of the public engagement phenomenon in Hong Kong:

(1) Participatory observations were conducted at 17 formal public engagement events, each typically lasting 2 – 3.5 hours. These took various forms but consisted mostly of community workshops and public forum events organized by the government.

(2) Thirteen contextual interviews were conducted, ranging from 30 to 90 minutes in duration. These interviews targeted professionals who self-identified as having extensive experience

strategizing, organizing, or conducting public engagement processes. The primary aim of these interviews was to scope out the various approaches taken when managing public engagement processes. In all, the interviewees represented seven government authorities and governmental development corporations, including the Hong Kong Housing Authority, Hong Kong Airport Authority, Urban Renewal Authority, Planning Department, and West Kowloon Cultural District Authority.

(3) To gain an in-depth understanding of how engagement efforts are managed, a series of seven ethnographic interviews were conducted with three representatives of a large consultancy firm that manages public engagement on behalf of a variety of public sector clients, tracking the processes of two major ongoing projects they managed over a period of 14 months. Ethnographic interviews build on the premise that prolonged contact and a strong rapport with interviewees culminate in a high level of mutual trust and understanding that allow the researcher to authentically characterize the intent behind their actions. Hence, they incorporate the ideological underpinnings of an ethnographic approach to conducting interviews (Spradley, 1979).

(4) In addition to the above, a desktop review of current and recently completed public engagement efforts was conducted to gain an appreciation of the historical development of public engagement in Hong Kong. This included a review of published consultants' public engagement reports, Stages 1 through 3, for 17 urban development projects from 2009 through to 2016.

Means for Presenting Findings

The thick description presented in the following vignette describes a participatory observation by the first author at a public forum for Stage 3 public engagement of Project L. Although we focus on one public forum event, the account draws from a multi-sited approach (cf. Marcus, 1998), which allows for comparison across the participatory observations of public forums for different projects to uncover structural patterns between what is observed. The observation was chosen because it in many ways exemplifies the experiences of the researcher in attending these types of events. Project L had controversial and contentious elements that were not resolved by the time of the public forum. The public participants present at the public forum represented a wide network of stakeholders that had their own distinct rules for membership and subscription. Furthermore, the event followed the same set format as most government-led public engagement events, and the public engagement efforts for Project L were characteristic of numerous projects of similar size and scope that were ongoing at that time. In staying true to the ethnographic tradition, the voice of the first author is used extensively in the thick description to showcase heremplacement into the public forum event.

Findings and Analysis

While public forums are discrete episodes where stakeholders come together, a complex system exists behind the scenes that relates to an underlying network of power (cf. Clegg, 1989). It follows, that to make sense of what happens during the public forum, it is necessary to also make sense of the processes that lead up to the event. Any evidence of power play observed at the public forum cannot be untangled from its surrounding network, and no single relationship makes sense until it is explained as part of the network in which it is embedded. Therefore, before presenting a thick description of the public forum, we examine the public engagement strategy employed on the project.

The data for this portion of the research findings are gathered via ethnographic interviews with three members involved with the project: Project L's client representative, the lead planning consultant, and the project manager in charge of the day-to-day execution of the public engagement contract. Published project documents, meeting minutes, and public submissions responding to the prior stages of public engagement were also examined. In the following section, excerpts from interviews are presented with reference to a wider context that places each interview in relation to the network of events that comprises the project. In so doing, we seek to identify how resources within the power network are positioned to analyze the social relations that constitute effective agency for key actors (Clegg, 1989).

Public Engagement Strategy for Project L

Project L belonged to a wider expansion and revitalization plan that was underway during the data collection period involving the provision of 460,000 new dwellings to be built within the period of 2016 to 2025 (Transport and Housing Bureau, 2015). Project L comprises the development of two large, neighboring parcels of land totaling around 200 hectares located in the New Territories of Hong Kong. The existing land use includes open storage yards, warehouses, rural industrial uses and workshops, rural residential, agricultural land, and livestock farmland. It is located adjacent to an existing urban development to the north, a country park to the south, and rural developments to the east and west. Plans for the development of the two sites were announced following a 2012 feasibility study by the Civil Engineering and Development Department, which labelled the existing area as "degraded brownfield land." Stage 1 of the public engagement efforts officially commenced in April 2013 and Stage 3 concluded in April

2016. Each stage spanned approximately 2–3 months in duration, with a period of around 1 year between stages to allow for analysis of the feedback collected and development of revised plans that incorporated the feedback.

The public engagement strategy of Project L was based around a series of focus groups with major stakeholder groups, cumulating in large-scale public forum events that marked the conclusion of each official stage. The interviews were conducted in 2015 after Stage 2 of the official public engagement period had been completed. The timing of these interviews is worth noting because the interview quotes reflect the cautious optimism of the interviewees as they reflected on the successes of Stage 2 while anticipating possible challenges in Stage 3.

The stakeholders of Project L were categorized by the public engagement team into five main stakeholder groups: farmers, open storage business operators, local residents, green lobby groups, and professional institutes. In addition to the five focus group meetings, representatives of the groups also approached the team to request follow-up meetings to discuss specific issues further. As a result, throughout Stage 2, twenty additional follow-up meetings were held. Reflecting on these additional meetings, the leading planning consultant commented that:

> " … the more the communication, the more they understand the rationale behind our plan, and they see also our willingness to communicate and our understanding of the issue, (…) and then, sometimes it's kind of a political show to some of the representatives, it gives them some status." [Julia, Director, January 2015]

Julia (all names are pseudonyms) identified two strategic advantages for committing to extensive communication between her team and stakeholder groups. Firstly, it made it easier for the public engagement team to promote a set of plans that was agreeable to both parties, despite not necessarily being able to meet individual goals. Secondly, showing a willingness to communicate engenders trust among the stakeholders. Julia also noted that members participating in these stakeholder meetings seemingly gained status within their own social groups. Because attendance allowed participants to become the main informant to their social group, these follow-up meetings became a way for them to leverage power among members of the group, which alludes to a power network outside the confines of the project.

Additionally, individuals were considered more likely to speak openly in closed meetings without having to defend their stance against other stakeholder groups.

> " … if we have these stakeholders that we have met very frequently, and they start to feel that oh, we put our heart into helping them with stuff, then they will be willing to speak honestly. For example, when we went to Stage 2 engagement, there were some people who were very honest; they would say that 'actually we don't mind if you demolish us, as long as you also compensate us.' So, we will also collect these very honest, very blunt comments." [Angela, Town planner, May 2015]

Besides establishing a more effective communication flow, this tactic allowed participants to voice their personal concerns before the larger public forum, which in turn allowed the public engagement team more control over the topics of discussion at each gathering. It also provided more opportunities for discussing detailed issues before the final, main, and very public event—the public forum.

Public Forum, April 2016

The public forum held on April 2016 was the final official public engagement event for Stage 3 of Project L, and as such, represented the final chance for public participants to make their opinions heard and have their feedback recorded officially. This public forum followed a very similar format to all other public forums attended during the study. In brief, public forums are usually held in a civic building, such as a lecture theater, school hall, or community hall, which the organizer deems to be neutral. They take the form of an open-mic session, which begins with each participant being given feedback forms to fill in. Completed feedback forms are entered into a ballot box and drawn out at random. Those selected are invited to come forward to a microphone stationed at the front of the room and are given two to three minutes to elaborate on the comments made on the feedback form. An expert panel consisting of academics and professionals is seated behind a long table at the front of the room and are on hand to respond to the public's comments or to answer their questions. An event host is in charge of introductions, timekeeping, and overall management of the event. As the event host is often at pains to explain, the ballot system for admitting different views to the forum has been deemed as the fairest way to ensure an equal representation of views under the prevailing time limitations. All comments and feedback gathered via the ballot box are recorded by the public engagement team, regardless of whether the participants are given the opportunity to speak.

The public forum for Project L was held in a large town hall auditorium and was attended by around 500 participants. The atmosphere as participants arrived was relatively calm. Unlike some other events witnessed by the first author for similarly sized projects, there were no protest groups or rallies stationed outside the venue. The participants arrived in large groups and many of them gathered outside the venue and took group photos to mark the occasion. The following account details a series of social interactions that were observed once the proceedings had begun. These interactions are depicted as a scene, showcasing a sequence of actions involving multiple entities within a tightly defined physical setting:

> Several local organizations and concern groups had rallied up their members to enter their names into the ballot box to increase the chances that one of their representatives may be selected to speak. It so happened that in the early stages of the proceedings many of the selected speakers only had relatively minor issues to voice, and some of the issues raised had also started to repeat themselves. A number of members in the audience began to show impatience that their names were not drawn, and audibly vented their frustration from their seats.
>
> This situation was sustained until at around the 90-minute mark when a member of the audience wearing a brown shirt and a red cap got up from his seat and strolled to the front of the room. Stationing himself at the microphone stand, he interrupted the person that was speaking, saying: “Excuse me, excuse me; I wish to say a word or two.” The event host tried to intercept this intrusion, but the audience member pressed on, in a calm but assertive voice: “This is the third round of engagement; your team has already covered many of the issues raised so far; you can just refer to the report, instead of wasting our time. You should allocate this time for new issues. As it stands, I might have to wait until 6pm, and still not be given a chance to speak!” A portion of the crowd cheered and applauded loudly. The host responded by wondering aloud: “The way we pick speakers is by using a random ballot system, and with so many people,

there is indeed no guarantee that you will be picked … ” The event host paused for a moment. Then he asked those who “desperately want to speak out” to raise their hands. He counted, “looks like eight, nine people? I cannot see over the back there too clearly. Ok. Those people who raised their hands, you come down to the front for me.” The way he said this sounded more like a command than a request. “I will make sure you have the chance to talk; I will slot you in,” he declared.

The host continued the proceedings while they gathered themselves to the front row, and once all had seated themselves, he announced: “This is my proposal. There are 14 of you here now, you will write another ballot and put this in a separate box at the front. I will alternate between the two, such that the process will now be, to pull out two from the general box, two from this new box, and then I will still invite the relevant community leaders to come and speak; I believe they represent the locals and they should be given a chance to speak. Now, you have to understand that you have been given a special privilege. I cannot guarantee that you will definitely get a chance to speak, but you have jumped the queue already. Is this acceptable to you?” The front row said yes. “Now, one more thing. This government event is held so that the people can express their concerns, so we should allow for those who have very serious concerns to speak. But this depends on if the rest of the participants agree to let you speak.” Addressing the audience, he asked: “Is this ok?” And we clapped in support of the proposal.

> As promised, the event host drew two ballots from the original box and then reached for the new box. As he was about to pull out a ballot from that new box, he said: "Before we start, I need to say something." He straightened himself slightly, paused, and said in a firm and no-nonsense tone: "This only worked because you raised your concern in a civil manner and we were able to negotiate and communicate so that we can all come to an agreement. This teaches us that we can handle these events in a calm and civil way. I also want to say that, the first person who will be picked from this box, I request that they make a statement of gratitude on behalf of the front row to the rest of the participants, since they are the ones that allowed you to have this special privilege." When the first speaker stood up to speak, she duly expressed her thanks on behalf of the front row to the audience, and we responded with a brief polite round of applause.

Drawing on the sociology of translation lens, this scene may be interpreted as a demonstration of power-in-play and as an enactment of moments of translation, namely problematization, interessement, and subsequent successful enrolment. It consisted not only of an enrolment of the host by the audience member wearing a red cap (RC), but also of a compound series of enrolments by, and of, multiple entities. Such an interpretation takes as its base assumption that the event functioned is an obligatory passage point within a translation process, and that the attendance by each participant marked their willingness to enter into the enrolment process. RC spent the first 90 minutes faithfully playing the specific role assigned to him, which is that of a passive audience member until called upon to speak. However, upon assessing the likelihood that his personal goal may not be satisfied within the course of the event, RC acted to abandon the role assigned to him and sought to recast the way in which the situation is problematized by the event host. He quite literally ‘interessed’ the proceedings by interpositioning himself at the edge of the stage between the host and the audience and speaking out of turn, thereby actively preventing other possible actions (such as the continuation of the event) from taking place. Through enrolling the use of the microphone, he successfully enrolled the host into his way of thinking. In turn, the host sought to enroll the rest of the audience by seeking to align the interests of multiple parties. The audience at large, though armed with limited resources for expressing themselves, still employed the means available to them (e.g., clapping, cheering, muttering their dissent) to respond and participate in the enrolment process, and to represent their own interests.

It is important to remember, however, that Callon’s (1986a) description of the moments of translation is chronological; that is to say, they are enacted in the order of problematization, interessement, enrolment, and mobilization. This logical progression makes sense when constructing a story to describe the forming of power networks from the point of view of one protagonist through a longitudinal temporal framing device, as was the case in Callon’s original study. Our interpretation of “moments of translation” takes an ecological view that acknowledges multiple networks as being simultaneously formed by multiple entities (Star & Griesemer, 1989). Viewing public engagement processes as diverse and emergent (cf. Chilvers & Kearnes, 2016) acknowledges that people, things, and situations are constantly in the process of being translated. This, in turn, means that marking the exact moment translation activities commence, or speculating as to their consequence, bears little theoretical relevance. Hence, the above scene may be seen to capture entities in the midst of enrolling and being enrolled by others, just as it captures the task of public engagement itself being translated. For example, RC's attendance may be explained as the successful mobilization of the concern group to which he belongs, by ensuring appropriate representation of their cause at the event. His participation may, by the same token, be validly explained as the successful enrolment by the public engagement team into their engagement process. Hence, the public forum, embedded within a network of physical locales and tactile rules, becomes a nexus where multiple translations may be readily observed. The implications of this are further elaborated in the discussion that follows.

Discussion

The public forum described represents a tangible nodal point within the public engagement process where entities have agreed to physically meet in the hopes of achieving their own goals. Each entity's participation in the forum marks their willing involvement with a specified power network. Once within this network, entities continuously make attempts to form alliances and enrol each other into their own interests. This leads to three main points for discussion: (1) the way events are enacted demonstrate an existing power network; (2) the rituals, symbols, and materials of these events are black-boxed manifestations of power in play; and (3) employing an ecological "translation" process lens challenges existing views on management practices by capturing how managers respond to the actions and reactions of individuals within the confines of the public forum's rules of engagement.

Travelling Through Existing Channels of Power Networks

Akin to Foucault's (1977) panopticon, the physical arrangement of the room, the ritualistic casting and drawing of ballots, and the controlled distribution of amplified sound, all contribute to automatize power by replacing a sovereign power source with established relations of surveillance and discipline. These devices confine communications between participants and event hosts to limited channels, which make the proceedings easier to control for the event host than the participants. The channels also include cultural practices sanctioned by normative moral values and various modes of formalized technical knowledge (Clegg, 1998). The general acceptance of the public forum format, therefore, is indicative of an established power network surrounding such events.

There are, however, times when aspects of these rules might be adjusted, following disagreement or negotiation between the host and participants. These rules have, over the different events attended throughout the study, been bent to varying degrees: people speaking out of turn or exceeding the time limit, people asking their companions (usually a spouse or friend) to speak for them because they had a cold or a sore throat, or simply because they claim that their companion is a better speaker; even people interrupting the proceedings. Interviewees recount one extreme case where the proceedings were forced to come to a halt due to a person in the audience hurling a chair across the room.

Minor adjustments to the proceedings may be accommodated with relative ease. However, the first author's participatory observations have shown that a major deviation from the rules requires an individual to first acknowledge, and then take actions to transcend, the established power networks. In so doing, this individual must break away from the range of generally accepted social behavior, which requires considerable effort and conviction. Here, as Clegg (1989) noted, those with more resources have more room to maneuver. Not only do they have more moves within the rules for interaction, but they also have more flexibility for interpreting these rules.

In the public forum setting, the above translates into event hosts being able to exert their power more readily than the participants. Yet, many of the advantages they have can be attributed to the imbalance and disequilibrium of power networks that are skewed in their favour, rather than to any inherent individual qualities they might possess. As a case in point, with the public forum orchestrated in such a way that communications travel through pre-established channels, the team members of Project L are able to achieve their own goals simply by travelling through these channels. These channels are disguised as established rules of the public engagement event, including rules for timekeeping, turn taking, and the distribution of amplified sound. As a member of the public, RC is required to make a concerted effort to break these existing channels to achieve his goals. To initiate a renegotiation of rules, he interrupted the proceedings by speaking over the event host without the aid of a microphone, and in an assertive enough manner for organizers to take notice. The fact that it was possible for him to do so challenges the rationalistic and rather static assumptions on agency that commonly underpin risk management approaches to stakeholder management, which raises questions regarding their predictability and ultimate usefulness. It also challenges the typical instrumental approach to stakeholder classification by illustrating the dynamic nature of stakeholder attributes.

A Public Engagement Event in the Making

The way that the public forum is run in its current format is a physical manifestation of successful previous enrolments. Each time an entity follows the role assigned to them, they proceed to contribute towards reinforcing a system of power that is already in play. Conversely, each time they challenge their roles, they seek to destabilize this system. The more frequently entities travel along specific paths, the more they become established channels, and the more difficult it will be for new entities to diverge from these paths. Over time, the general expectation for each entity's role develops into rules of practice, until most entities adhere to them, most of the time. In this way, the activities at these forums actively and continuously translate the processes for public engagement into what is known as the public engagement event. These activities cumulatively contribute to the dynamic-yet-patterned characteristics (Irwin, Jensen, & Jones, 2013) that may be witnessed across multiple public engagement events. They are dynamic in the sense that a wide and varied range of interactions are permissible. Yet, because how these interactions are enacted follow predefined rules, a pattern of behavior can partially be anticipated.

There are also instances where power is delegated into materials and artifacts. When this happens, instead of actively traveling through channels, an entity may now defer to the material. For example, the ballot system is a mutually agreed set of rules to ensure the procedure is conducted fairly, but it also acts as the means of controlling the order and direction of communication through relegating potential speakers to a randomized time slot. No participant at any of the events observed argued against the ballot system. This was already taken for granted, that is, it had been black boxed. The point of contention was how to conduct the ballot, which instead relates to the rules of practice. This behavior points to the acceptance of a power structure that encompasses a ballot system.

In summary, by examining a public engagement event in the making, we are able to isolate aspects of the power system that are stabilized, such as the ballot system. This is done with the understanding that these stabilized systems are composed of rules of conduct, which are constantly being contested. The management of public engagement events therefore involves the management of rules of practice.

The Mobilization of Multiple Interests

In order to translate between social worlds, an entity will seek to align the interests of other entities by first presenting their problematization of a situation, then seeking to enroll others into their way of thinking (Callon, 1986a, 1986b). The task of managing a public engagement process involves multiple and continuous attempts to align the interests of different entities through actively seeking to enroll them into a power network, as prescribed by the setup of the event. The scene presented in our vignette is, thus, a social performance showcasing multiple entities' attempts to lock in the interests of other entities, while simultaneously seeking to mobilize previously enrolled interests. It captures the processes of management across intersecting social worlds: the world of the event host and project representatives, the world of RC and his allies, the world of community groups with vested interests in the project, as well as the world of the disinterested bystander (as represented by the experiences of the researcher). These processes of management expose a dynamic range of actions and reactions by individuals, ranging from command and insurgence on the one hand, to persuasion and diplomacy on the other.

Capturing individual actions of multiple stakeholders enables an ecological analysis of the translation process that does not assume an epistemological primacy for a specific viewpoint (cf. Star & Griesemer, 1989). This serves to challenge, and contribute to, the increasingly popular stakeholder saliency models that seek to classify stakeholders in terms of, for example, power, urgency, and legitimacy (e.g., Boesso & Kumar, 2016; Mitchell et al., 1997). Such models commonly seek to establish how the relative importance of a particular stakeholder changes as the project progresses through space and time.

The insights provided by our processual approach points toward the importance of also understanding how the classification of different stakeholders will need to be adjusted in accordance with their ability to mobilize their interests, and the opportunities provided for them to do so through their interaction with others. Put somewhat differently, within the Project L context, stakeholder saliency models would, for example, be useful in terms of dealing with the temporal mismatch between the information available to those directly affected in the short term (e.g., stakeholders whose estate is earmarked for demolition), and the stakeholders who will be affected in the long term (e.g., those who will ultimately move into the new development).

Understanding how these dynamics change over time is fundamental for successful stakeholder management. However, the underlying assumption is that there is a discernable timeline to show at what stages various stakeholders become legitimate, gain their voice, and acquire sufficient urgency and power to affect proceedings. Such a timeline would then be instrumental for managing project stakeholders. Our processual view questions the existence of such a timeline. Stakeholders are at times able to break with the established power network and they are therefore not easily classified into static categories that can be defined and bound in time. If they manage to intercept proceedings through the interessement and mobilization of others they can become more influential than the saliency models would predict.

Conclusion

The way public engagement is enacted today reflects the culmination of reactions to past events that has prompted collective action from the public. The production of engagement practices is therefore inseparable from power play and politics. As a contemporary assessment of public engagement processes, this study duly acknowledges the way societal expectations and dynamics have shaped the public engagement phenomenon. On the basis that historical developments of public engagement have been dominated by tension and conflict, we consider conflict of interests and misalignment of goals to be issues that lie at the heart of the public engagement discourse. Past management studies have attempted to normalize or otherwise adjust for these points of tension to enable public engagement to be judged on objective terms. This is not least apparent in studies that rely on a risk management approach to stakeholder management. Such research has tended to focus on the development of different types of tools and frameworks for assessing the attributes and characteristics of stakeholders (Aaltonen & Kujala, 2016) in order to minimize negative impacts on the project. Conversely, the approach put forward in this paper embraces multiple viewpoints on public engagement and places these points of tension at the center of its discussion and analysis. This approach critically evaluates the physical manifestations of inherent power struggles, and in doing so, provides insight into a heterogeneous power network that is normally enacted on implicitly, or intuitively, and has therefore largely remained understudied.

The use of stakeholder theory necessitates placing external stakeholders, such as the public, on the periphery of a project. Focusing on the complications and idiosyncrasies of these ecosystems rather than on how public engagement influences project outcomes allows us to make better sense of the interfaces between public engagement and the project through the eyes of different stakeholders. Hence, it allows us to study how various groups of stakeholders emerge at different points in time and how they at times will manage to disrupt established channels and get a voice that they would otherwise not have had through their enrolment of others. Such interactions challenge current stakeholder management models, many of which aim to identify project stakeholders and allocate resources to manage these stakeholders. Applying a processual approach to study these interactions allows us to more convincingly deal with heterogeneity within external stakeholders. It captures the multiple linkages in the networks to which stakeholders belong, how dependence among stakeholders is variable, and consequently, the variability in stakeholder salience.

Process research concerns the emergence and evolution of issues over time and allows focus on patterns of events leading to outcomes. Process research methods thus emphasize the importance of time and temporality in social settings. We have in this article attempted to illustrate how ethnographic techniques can be applied to processual research. In particular, we have argued that doing so allows for greater appreciation of how stakeholders are constantly jockeying for position and searching for means to increase and exert their influence. As with all types of research, there are, of course, limitations to the methods we have applied in this study. For example, a clear limitation of using ethnographic techniques to study management processes is the extensive time commitment it places on the researcher (cf. Wolcott, 2008). Other key concerns include the difficulty of gaining access to data and being in the right place (or, where the action is). Our response to these challenges was to construct an ethnographic place (cf. Pink, 2009) that allows for interpretation of data using a multi-sited strategy (cf. Marcus, 1998), which provided more flexibility in data collection.

The conceptualization of public engagement as a social phenomenon opens up multiple new avenues for organizational research, including new considerations on how managerial situations may be socially constructed. In particular, the shift outlined above serves to move the research focus from a positivist approach aimed at achieving predetermined results, to a constructionist approach aimed at understanding the motives behind social and managerial processes. Such an approach lends itself to an understanding of organizational processes not as a conglomerate of objects that we can strive to label, measure, and control, but as entanglements of overlapping social worlds that we can strive to understand and derive meaning from (cf. Hernes, 2008). This, in turn, predicates an understanding of power *in actu* (Latour, 1986) and challenges the way stakeholder management theorists commonly assign roles to stakeholder groups. Our vignette illustrates one way in which this can play out by illuminating the power struggle between the event host (the manager) and the stakeholders present. While the host was in a dominant position and the power network worked in his favor, event participants still found a way to break out of the established channels, alter the power balance, and lay alternative, potentially new demands on the project. This contributes to the project management literature in two ways. First, it points to that from the processual viewpoint managing public engagement events is predominantly about managing rules of practice. Second, it questions the common project-centric approach with its focus on dyadic relationships between the project and the stakeholders. Instead, it shows how stakeholder networks are emergent and dynamic in nature. Hence, we join the call of Eskeröd et al. (2015) in that project stakeholder analysis methods will benefit from a network approach.

We recommend further research work using an ethnographic approach to allow for a systemic analysis of organizational processes, such as public engagement processes, which takes into account the multiple social worlds with which the project interacts. Such research would not only extend current theoretical understanding of the interplay between the project and its broader external environment, but also contribute to project studies by extending the level of analysis beyond individual projects and challenging taken-for-granted concepts to explain individual and social behavior within the project setting (cf. Geraldi & Söderlund, 2018). On a more practical level, our findings lay a foundation for examining how stakeholder interests are negotiated and how negotiations between stakeholders affect the way they might lay claims upon the project.

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