

Infertainment and Participation: Challenges to Community Engagement

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Abstract

The modern nation-state is increasingly under pressure within the framework of the processes of economic globalisation. The use of fear of the 'other' is not a new concept in the history of nations, but this paper will argue that the convergence of sophisticated technology, monolithic media and weak governments gives rise to the use of fear as 'Infertainment', a way of containing the citizen as well as entertaining them in the process. It will also argue that infertainment is a visible threat to the processes of democracy.

As a counterpoint to this threat is the development of a continuing exploration of the processes of people's participation as a way of strengthening communities and building partnerships between government and the community. This paper will critically examine the ongoing developments in participatory methodology and the problems that arise from the loose framework within which it operates. It will further draw from practice in different parts of the world so as to highlight best practice in what we call STEP (Strategies and Techniques for Empowering Participation).

Introduction

The modern nation state is increasingly under pressure from the processes of globalisation, particularly economic globalisation. While there are debates about the nature of changes to the nation state, what is clear is that spheres of influence of the state are decreasing and the loyalty and allegiances of citizens are being divided across many areas. Sophisticated technology, monolithic media and weaker governments characterise the new world order. Governance issues are increasingly complex and entangled with many global economic interests.

The 21st century is characterised by fluidity and change. Identities, local, state, national, cultural and regional have gained particular significance as anchoring points. This paper will explore the challenges that globalisation poses for governance within the nation state and the implications of this for citizen participation and democracy. The author introduces the notion of 'Infertainment' to denote a concept of information, entertainment and fear as a tool of control and containment by the nation state. In particular, Infertainment involves the creation of real or imagined threats, particularly from the 'other'. The other is defined in many ways and is often those who are different and marginalised. The contention of this paper is that this weakens democracy, social

capital and citizenship, leaving communities vulnerable and ill equipped to face a global era. The global society will have serious consequences for social and economic inequality and consequently on human development. (Bauman 1998; Beck 2000). While advantaging those at the centre of new information and finance-based power, it will disadvantage those who are not part of that process (Hurrell and Woods 1995). This emphasises the importance of building social and human capital ensuring citizen participation and empowerment.

Globalisation

Globalisation is a phenomenon that involves complex processes and transactions that have been operational across the world for centuries. Increasingly quick and voluminous transactions have been taking place in the movements of people, ideas, cultures, and media as well as in international institutions of governance. Different models of analysis have been suggested for the understanding of this phenomenon (e.g. Wallerstein's Centre-Periphery theory to Appadurai's theory of 'scapes'); however this paper does not enable a full consideration of them (Wallerstein 1990; Appadurai 1990). A useful method of looking at the historical process of globalisation without value judgments involves the extensity of global networks, the intensity of global interconnectedness, the velocity of global flows, the impact propensity of global interconnectedness (Held et al. 2004) acknowledging the multiplicity of actors and flows.

The second half of the 20th century and the beginning of the twenty-first century have displayed enormous increases in all these dimensions, increases that were directly impacted on by two new phenomena. The first of these is modern communications and other technology. The sophistication and the immediacy of today's technology enable the time-space continuum to be compressed to a very great extent and the rate and intensity of global flows to be dramatically increased. Particularly in the case of economic globalisation, this means that the flows of finances across the globe can be almost instantaneous, and the impacts of these flows can be equally swift (Waters 1995; Beck 2000).

The second phenomenon is the creation of international institutions of financial governance. The 'Bretton Woods' organisations, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, are creations of the world's richest nations and act as the cutting edge of economic globalisation across the world (Soros 2002; Beck 2000). Countries of the *Majority World* (of income-poorer, less industrialised nations) that are hugely in debt to these institutions are forced to go through a process of Structural Adjustment, or restructuring on market principles, to alleviate some of their indebtedness. Countries of the *Minority World* (of income-rich, highly industrialised nations) are lured into the process through the competition for Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). Country credit ratings such as those provided by Moody's of London are a driving force in the development of

policies in countries that are in the market for FDI, and these ratings tend to directly support neo-liberal policies. In either case, governments are being forced to enter into processes that impact hugely on their citizens, and into policies that may not be in the interests of the weaker sections of their societies. Beck (2000) reminds us that from now on, what happens in the planet is not only a limited local event and that “all inventions, victories, catastrophes affect the whole world, and we must reorient and reorganise our lives and actions, our organisations and institutions, along a ‘local-global’ axis” (p. 11). Negotiating the local-global axis is the nation-state, which is faced with challenge of gaining legitimacy and using its resources to ensure citizen loyalty.

The state and the citizen

The notion of the contract between state and society continues in the relationship between the state and its citizens. In the traditional context of citizenship, three types of rights were guaranteed to citizens of the nation-state: civil, political, and social.

Civil rights included protection of the individual freedoms of person, speech, property etc. Political rights enable the citizen to participate in the political system of governance. Social rights refer to the guaranteed levels of social wellbeing as well as ways of dealing with social inequality (Marshall 1992). Delantey (1996) reiterates that modern citizenship reached its fullest expression in the social citizenship of the welfare state. Essentially the state guaranteed all three forms of rights to its citizens in return for the right to govern within a democratic framework.

The process of economic globalisation undermines all the rights of citizens, both directly and indirectly, through control over the nation-state in terms of its autonomy, or capacity to act independently and pursue its domestic and foreign policies, as well as its sovereignty, or legitimacy to rule over its citizens and its affairs (Held 1995). One of the outcomes of the pressure from the above sources is the decrease in the provision of public services by the state.

Over the past two decades there has been a process of ‘de-stating’, involving withdrawal of the state from its traditional functions within the market place. Liberalisation, deregulation and privatisation have been the major processes of enforced change that has involved cuts in public spending, credit restraints and rapid expansion of the market. This has resulted in increasing inequality in wages and working conditions through greater labour market flexibility and decentralised bargaining processes. The emphasis on less public expenditure and a declining role of the state as provider of welfare has meant that the nation state is less able to ameliorate the worst effects of such marginalisation. In terms of the Majority World it has meant greater exploitation of the cheaper labour force by transnational companies without mutual obligation (Falk 1999; Farrar and Ingliss 1996; Galligan et al. 2001).

Power, or the lack of it, has increasingly become the indicator of the new world built on economic rationalist lines. It is important to note that the term 'power' is used both in the sense adopted by critical thinkers such as Gramsci, who argues that dominant groups in society use a combination of consent and coercion methods to maintain power or *hegemony* in society, and also that adopted by Foucault, thinking of power as a force causing domination which permeates all of society (Foucault 1986; Gramsci 1971).

The areas in which individuals and communities have been significantly impacted on by economic globalisation can be enumerated as follows:

Lack of power over resources

Having a measure of control over vital resources is crucial to the ongoing quality of life of citizens. Increasingly, these resources are controlled by powerful elites and a great proportion of the community does not access them.

Lack of power over decision-making

There are many decisions which impact on the lives of communities over which they have little control. Decisions taking at the economic, political and social levels impact at the very core of our lives such as the food we eat, education and unemployment.

Lack of power over relationships

Relationships refer to the means in which we interact with each other at different levels. Interaction often requires processes, protocols, information and skills such as communication. Relationships often also involve relative power positions. Increasingly communities have lost power in relationships within key institutions of society through controlled and highly technical processes. There is often lack of transparency, lack of information and complicated procedures and protocols that ensure that those in the know maintain their relative power in the relationship.

Lack of power over information

We are living in an environment of mass information, often referred to as *info-glut*. The amount of information can be overwhelming but often it is not appropriate information. In addition, there are problems with access to tools of information and requisite know-how to access information. A good example of this is the use of the Internet, which requires access to a computer and then to the knowledge to operate the software.

A natural and logical consequence of the loss of power among individuals and the community is an increasing level of frustration and fear that can easily be turned on the 'Other'. Fear is a powerful tool for any leader to use where he or she can demand the utmost loyalty of their 'in' group while doing absolutely nothing to satisfy their felt needs. Fear is a strong motivator of selfish actions and takes away from the notions of the "public good".

Infertainment

Despite the increasing global nature of the forces that shape people's lives, human needs are essentially local and personal. The global forces are international and impersonal and the consequences of lack of human fulfilment are irrelevant (O'Brien et al. 2000). Laclau (1990) points out that *dislocation* occurs in contemporary societies due to the nature of global social change. Thus, contemporary society is characterised by a move away from class-based political allegiances such as trade unions, to the rise of other arenas of social conflict such as those of gender, 'race', ethnicity or sexuality (Laclau 1990). Dislocation causes insecurity and fear. Social psychology informs us of the need of individuals to belong, identify, and have safety and security and to be able to contribute to their community (Vaughan and Hogg 2002).

The use of fear to bring people together against a real or imagined enemy is not a new tool in the hands of the elite. What is new is the level of sophistication and effectiveness through the ability of technology and the media to turn reality into public entertainment and a feeding frenzy of issues. I have developed the word *Infertainment* as one that represents the use of fear by the powerful to contain the population at one level as well as to keep them entertained at another. A mind with the time to think rationally without being fearful and anxious is one that can start to ask the right questions. Infertainment helps to provide a moral background where hatred and fear can be justified and acted upon with impunity.

Infertainment can be seen in its most overt forms during struggles for political power across the world, some examples of which include the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party in India (religious fear), the ultra-right in Germany and Austria (racial intolerance) as well as the US elections built around the war on Iraq and the fear arising post-September 11.

The rise of Pauline Hanson in Australia is another example of fear of the 'other' being used to build political power. In the mid 1990s Hanson's One Nation party became a key influence in Australian politics purely by using the notions of fear and blame to 'scapegoat' Asians and indigenous people. McMaster (2001) quotes Pauline Hanson in her maiden speech to the Federal Parliament warning the Australian nation on the danger of being swamped by Asians. At the time Hanson was perceived as being of the extreme right and, though she had the silent

endorsement of the Liberal Government for a while, public pressure forced the Prime Minister John Howard to distance his government from her racist policies. Today, Pauline Hanson is quite redundant in the context of Australia, as her policies and outbursts are the clear, if muted, policies of the government led by John Howard. The same policies of fear and blame were used by his party to win federal elections, playing on fear of the demonised asylum-seekers in the media hype of the 'Children Overboard' affair.

The role of the media in creating an atmosphere of fear is crucial. Its ability to reach mass audiences and sell particular kinds of messages assist in the governance of Infertainment. This is made possible due to the highly concentrated ownership of the media and the global nature of media networks (Appadurai 1996). Numerous writers have pointed to the racialised messages that frequently occur in the media (Jakubowicz and Goodall 1994; Stratton 1998). Stratton (1998) has identified that the media in Australia is highly racialised and contributes not only to a culture of fear but also towards maintaining a particular type of dominance and monoculture.

Infertainment and participation

The question that arises from the analysis of economic globalisation and fear relates to the future direction of the nation-state. The role of the nation-state is in a state of flux having to straddle and survive against global forces and to maintain the loyalty of its citizen base.

In this context, the use of Infertainment proves to be a useful tool since it promotes divisive politics in return for short-term political gain. It embodies the politics of exclusion and leads to increasing conflict, destabilisation and rifts on the lines of religion, ethnicity, identity, class, gender etc. Combined with an environment of increasing inequality across and within nation-states it can result in unleashing powerful forces of destabilisation. *The Human Development Report* enlarges on this:

“Social tensions and conflicts are ignited when there are extremes of inequality between the marginal and the powerful. Indonesia shows what can happen when an economic crisis sets off latent social tensions between ethnic groups — or between the rich and poor ...

Recent research on complex humanitarian emergencies concluded that “horizontal inequalities” between groups — whether ethnic, religious or social — are the major cause of the current wave of civil conflicts. Inequalities — and insecurities — matter not only in incomes but in political participation (in parliaments, cabinets, armies and local governments), in economic assets (in land, human capital and communal resources) and in social conditions (in education, housing and employment)” (UNDP 1999, p. 36).

On the other hand, the strength of the nation-state lies within the solidarity of its citizens and the sense of collectivism shared by them. Citizenship is about participation, not just rights and duties (Delanty 2000). Putnam (1993, 2000) defines that pluralist democracy needs the prerequisite of high levels of *Social Capital*, based on *Trust* and *Participation*. He also sees this as providing benefits in areas across:

- pluralist democracy
- physical health
- happiness (self-rated) and mental health
- public safety, vandalism and crime
- economic performance and efficiency.

The World Public Sector Report recognises that:

“Democracies are not immune to the corrosive influence of unaccountable forces, which can turn democratic regimes into oligarchies of wealth or kleptocracies at worst. When this happens, a spirit of venality slowly pervades the system, as citizens lose interest, become the passive onlookers of a game played out by only a few. Democracies survive and thrive by empowering their citizens ... A proactive civil society is crucial to the vitality of democratic governance” (UN 2001, p. 75).

Community engagement presents as one way forward. One definition of community engagement used by government is that it:

“ ...refers to the connections between governments, citizens and communities on a range of policy, program and service issues. It encompasses a wide variety of government-community interactions ranging from information sharing to community consultation and, in some instances, active participation in government decision-making processes” (Qld Dept of Premier 2003).

In terms of working towards a proactive civil society, community engagement needs to be focussed towards the last part, that of active participation. The long-term sustainability of the nation-state lies in the politics of inclusion and participation as a means of engaging the citizens in governance. Individuals by virtue of citizenship have the right to take part in the life of their community and become involved in decisions that affect their lives. Definitions of participation are varied. A group of experts appointed by the United Nations defined participation as:

“The creation of opportunities to enable all members of a community and the larger society to actively contribute to and influence the development process and to share equitably in the fruits of development” (cited in Midgley 1986, p. 24).

Arnstein points out that participation is not easy to achieve and involves a transfer of power. She states:

“That citizen participation is a categorical term for citizen power. It is the redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens presently excluded from the political and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future” (1971, pp. 71-2).

Participation can serve a *developmental* function and an *instrumental function*. Developmentally, it can raise individuals' awareness, confidence and esteem to be able to act and to make a difference. It can bring together people and establish a sense of belonging and community. Instrumentally, it can result in the action to resist or encourage change (Dalton 1996).

This second function has been subject to considerable debate as to whether or not community participation can achieve real improvements in social conditions. On the one side, pessimistic views of participation have argued that it is not possible to sustain a constant form of activism across all affected sectors. Some have argued that a broader-based cooperation across local, national and international levels is needed if any structural social change can occur. The optimistic viewpoints have argued that without a process of consciousness raising and people's involvement it will not be possible to achieve any change at all. The proponents of this view have pointed to the successes of solidarity in a number of social and political gains throughout history. The process of participation has enabled people to engage in issues, avoid apathy and most importantly share information and develop skills. Whatever its function, it is important to note that participation takes place in a context which shapes the opportunities for and places constraints on people's active involvement (Kenny 1999; Ife 2001; Dalton 1996; UNDP 1999).

The most significant danger to participation is the loose framework within which it operates. Internationally, the term is used for any form of group action, ranging from overt manipulation across to projects involving citizens at every level of decision-making. Arnstein presents the ladder of citizenship participation as delineation of the wide range of uses the term participation is used for: *Non-Participation* (which comprises manipulation and therapy); *Degrees of Tokenism* (which includes informing, consultation and placation); and *Degrees of Citizen Power* (partnership, delegated power, citizen control). She further states that:

“Participation without a re-distribution of power is an empty and frustrating process for the powerless. It allows for the power-holders to claim that all sides were considered, but makes it possible for only some of those sides to benefit. It maintains the status quo” (1971, p. 72).

This view of participation has been endorsed by other writers including Mowbray (1995), Kenny (1999) and Tomlinson (1999).

There are three models of participation widely practised, of which the first two are more on the lines of tokenism than active participation (Gopalkrishnan 2004). They include:

Numerative Participation

This is the most common model of participation, where the effort is to obtain the maximum numbers of people. This is measured by number of people attending meetings, forums and activities or the number of people taking part. This does not say anything about the quality of participation, processes used and the way it addressed power imbalances. It is possible for participants to attend activities and not genuinely take part, not develop knowledge or skills nor engage as a group. The processes of participation may not be open or empowering. This type of participation does not place control in the lives of the people and does not necessarily encourage community capacity building.

Contributive participation

This refers to a situation in which the community or external stakeholders like companies, the state or other interests invest their time and resources in community activity. Often those contributing time and resources have a particular vested interest in securing participation. Examples are when mining companies set up advisory committees to placate anger over land rights of indigenous people or when village landlords invest money in committees as a way to secure local elections. The problem with this type of participation is that it lacks ownership by those taking part. Even where the contribution is from members of the community there are no guarantees that the community will be involved any further in the decision-making process. This process can often be seen in externally funded projects in the majority world where villagers are asked to contribute time, materials and labour without enabling them to participate in any significant way. Those who contribute the resources strictly control the processes of participation. This can be a paternalistic or tokenistic participation. Often this participation reinforces the position of those who already hold power. Contributive participation does not alter the social conditions in which people find themselves. Finally, this form of participation is dependent on external resources and is not sustainable if the resources are withdrawn.

Empowering participation

This form of participation is where all participants are involved at all levels of decision making. All participants are resourced sufficiently and make decisions in an informed manner. There is no emphasis on achieving maximum number of participation but rather on sustainability of

processes within the means and constraints available to the group. All those who take part own the process and the vision.

Empowering participation is genuine and emphasises addressing power imbalances in society. As a first step it addresses issues of inequality in the participation process by ensuring that each individual is able to participate effectively. This means emphasis on increased levels of knowledge and information, trust building, giving choice in what participants will and will not be involved in, ensuring everyone's interests are considered, ensuring that diversity of views are heard and that everyone has a say and ensuring democratic decision making.

A number of tools and methodologies are used across the world to try and ensure that empowering participation is achieved. These include Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), Participatory Action Research (PAR), Participatory Strategic Planning (PSP), People's Participatory Planning Processes (PPPP), Community Engagement Processes, as also Local Area Planning Processes like Watershed Management and Sloping Agricultural Land Techniques (SALT). Many of these draw from methodologies of the western corporate environments, modifying them to draw in a range of stakeholders and enable them to participate in decisions that affect their wellbeing. Each has its strengths and weaknesses, but all basically draw from a similar framework acknowledging the strength of community participation in decision-making (ActionAid 1996).

Ideally members of a community (where the term *community* is used in its broader sense and not just in a geographical sense) should welcome an opportunity to be part of a process of empowering participation. Often this is not the case, for a number of reasons that could include lack of confidence in the process, lack of awareness of the issues, refusal to participate in a process that endorses the status quo and legitimises unjust decision-making, and fear of conflict, among others. The many problems that hinder empowering participation draw from one factor.

Lack of commitment

Participation is essentially about a process of power sharing that can work against the interests of the *power elite*, whether in government or in any kind of agency. Many participatory processes are undermined by lack of commitment of the powerful to follow up effectively and really end by creating lack of trust and increased cynicism in the community. The processes of Consultation undertaken by politicians in Australia are a good example of this variety of lack of commitment. The author has also experienced extensive participatory strategic planning exercises in the Majority World that have been hijacked at the final stages by the emphasis of the funding bodies on product outcomes rather than due processes. Even in the processes of 'Community

Engagement' in the Minority World there is a reluctance to devolve power to the community, one that can be seen in government manuals on community participation and consultation that clearly signify the acceptance of the principle of citizens' involvement in policy-making but state that the decisions must finally be made by the bureaucracy and the politicians. The lack of commitment can also be on the part of people in the community especially where the benefit to them has not been clearly delineated or where the chances of achieving the desired outcomes are not seen as significant and there is no ownership of the process or the outcomes. The problems with commitment lead to lack of *due processes*, involving the taking of shortcuts in order to achieve desired products. The shortcuts could be in time, resources or involvement of all stakeholders, and could easily lead to marginalising the weaker sections of the community.

Strategies and techniques for empowering participation (STEP)

The author has been involved with participatory processes across countries in both the Minority and Majority Worlds and has seen many well-intentioned programs fail because of some of the issues listed earlier. One of the first lessons to be learnt from them was that the problem was not with the tools used as much as with the power imbalances between the community and the funding agency, as well as the lack of a clear commitment from both sides as to abiding by due processes as well as outcomes. One case in India was particularly of note, where, after a year of participatory strategic planning by the community, the funding agency put their foot down and forced the final plans to fit within their existing norms, under threat of defunding. In the process, the funders were able to claim people's participation, while continuing to function as they always had.

To overcome some of the shortfalls of existing participatory methods the author has developed a broad framework for the use of different participatory methodologies that can be applicable to differing environments. It involves abiding by a set of guidelines that can then ensure that both the process and the products are as envisioned by the participants. STEP provides the base for ongoing programs and responses to the larger environment through recognition of the history, culture and ethical base that has shaped the community. It helps the community to move towards the future with a clear plan and strategy.

Some of the guiding principles for STEP:

1. *Put the last first.* The process must ensure that the weakest and most marginalised members of the community are enabled to be part of the process. It is not about maintaining the status quo or rule by the majority, but about developing consensus, and being prepared to extend timeframes accordingly.

2. *The process has to begin with a clear written or spoken contract between all stakeholders.* Commitment to both process and outcomes has to be established in the initial stages of the participatory process. A clear understanding of power relationships and power sharing has to be incorporated at this stage; otherwise all future work is a waste of time and is likely to be counter-productive. The requirements of time, money and other resources have to be established.
3. *The process has to be situated within a time framework.* The history, culture and ethical framework of the community has to be brought within the framework to ensure that the starting point is an accurate one acknowledged by all the participants. Where there are clashes between cultural traditions and the larger environment, such as with legal issues, these must be clearly stated and the process must look at areas of concern.
4. *The process has to work towards a longer-term strategic picture, situating immediate concerns within the broader framework.* In building empowering participation it is extremely important to avoid knee-jerk responses to the immediate situation as these often lead to decision-making that will not benefit all the participants. Short-term concerns should fit within the longer-term decisions.
5. *Facilitators of the process should be from among members of the community, not the external stakeholders.* This is a major step towards the sharing of power and involves significant input of resources in training of facilitators and trainers. The outcomes will be in increased ownership of the process by the community.
6. *Draw from the toolbox of participatory methodologies or from corporate methodologies, allowing participatory decisions on Which and How.* There are a wide range of tools available and part of the process is deciding which methods suit the community best.
7. *Participation is about more time and also about more efficiency.* STEP would certainly involve more time to be given to the process than an elite-driven consultative process. However, it becomes far more efficient because of ownership of the process by the community, working towards achieving shared outcomes rather than withdrawing or actually fighting the process (Gopalkrishnan 2004).

STEP is about enabling the community to empower itself through true participation rather than being manipulated and tokenistic. It is about ownership of the process by the community and developing active involvement in community development activities in an ongoing manner. In this way, it works towards inclusive politics and challenges the use of Infeartainment by the elite.

Conclusion

The short-term benefits of exclusionary politics and the use of Infeartainment are proving very attractive to powerful elite across the world. Economic Globalisation and its impacts on the poorer

and more marginalised sections of society are significant and increases the levels of social unrest in civil society; unrest that can then be turned to advantage by those who seek power. All of these policies will lead to increasing tension and rifts in the nation-state, which is already under pressure from international forces to restrict its role to the minimal activities of policing and border-protection.

In this environment, it becomes more of a necessity for governments of democratic nation-states to seriously look at processes that genuinely bring together citizens in the politics of inclusion. STEP and other participatory methodology should be used as frameworks that build the strength of the nation-state in the form of increased citizen participation and involvement in decision-making. The new millennium and the new global order raise new challenges that have to be met with the inherent strength that lies within the concepts of people coming together for a common cause. As the old adage goes "United we stand, Divided we fall".

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