Outsourcing local democracy? Evidence for and implications of the commercialisation of community engagement in Australian local government

Abstract

Participatory governance practices are enjoying popularity, not least in local government. Councils are encouraging communities to be involved in local decision-making on a multitude of issues. This popularity is driven by legislative environments that require local governments to undertake some of these processes, and also by communities *and* practitioners—parties that derive income from participatory governance. An industry is emerging: one characterised by the market imperatives of demand and supply, with frameworks, strategies and processes, staff, training courses and conferences. This industry warrants investigation so its impacts upon local democracy can be understood. Following a theorisation of local democracy and community engagement, the paper describes the community engagement industry, presenting evidence about council activities, providers and professional associations to establish that the commercialisation of engagement is a significant phenomenon in Australian local government. It then discusses the possible risks to local governance and local democracy.

Keywords: Commercialisation; community engagement; local democracy; local government; public participation.

1. Introduction: From local democracy to a community engagement industry?

Australia's 537 general-purpose local governments (DIRD 2017) are increasingly characterised by direct community involvement in their decision-making processes. This has seen the introduction of mandatory requirements for engagement in the planning and reporting regimes of state and territory governments (Tan and Artist 2013). It has been driven by demand from communities themselves (Bishop and Davis 2002; Herriman 2011; Pillora

and McKinlay 2011). It has been buoyed by broad normative support, specifically under the banners of *inter alia* 'networked community governance' (Stoker 2004; 2006) and 'participatory governance' (Aulich 2009). And it has been justified on instrumental grounds using the argument that closer consultation with the community results in better policy outcomes (Head 2007, 243). This expanded community involvement in decision-making, widely known in Australia as 'community engagement', is now considered a fundamental element of the public-local government democratic relationship (Aulich 2009; Bell and Hindmoor 2008; Dean 2016; Jacobs 2014; Quick and Bryson 2016; Shipley and Utz 2012).

Arguably, in its current form community engagement appears as different things to different stakeholders. To council employees it appears as legislative requirements, the focus of the latest state government or organisational initiative, position descriptors and trainings that in many instances have to be complied with (see, for instance, DLG [NSW] 2013; DLG&C [WA] 2016; DP&C [Tas] 2013; LGASA/GoSA 2015; Victorian Government 2018). To the community it appears as opportunities to 'have your say' on various policies and plans in the form of surveys, online discussion forums, pop-up events, community reference groups and letterbox flyers (Rowe and Frewer 2005). To these stakeholders, and taking up the recommendation of Hendriks and Carson (2008, p. 308) to 'watch this space' in their examination of the commercialisation of deliberative practices at that time, we can add the market, or what in our discussion we are denoting as the community engagement industry. For this stakeholder, community engagement appears as products and services, designed to assist in facilitating local participatory democracy, which are manufactured and offered up by private providers to be procured by local governments. It has previously been recognised that the relationship between community engagement and the market is an uneasy one (Hendriks and Carson 2008; Lee 2015; Lee et al. 2015). However, it can also be argued that the relationship warrants continued and careful scrutiny, particularly when viewed from a

perspective that assumes the good in local democracy, both in and of itself, and also as an element of Australia's—indeed any polity's—broader democracy.

The commercialisation of community engagement is an issue which has gained some attention in recent years in the international literature. In the United States, Lee (2015, 128–92) argued that 'engagement practitioners are consistently preoccupied with managing the relationship between their civic passions and their clients' business interests', also suggesting that consultants 'market' community engagement as holding a sacred social value that rejects political and economic logics as 'fossil values', despite the commercial motivations at play when trademarking deliberative processes such as '21st Century Town Meetings ®', 'Choice Dialogues™', 'Deliberative Polling®' and 'Fast Forum Opinionnaires®' (Lee et al. 2015, 130). Similar observations have been made about practice in Quebec (Bherer et al. 2017b), Italy (Lewanski and Ravazzi 2017), France (Mazeaud and Nonjon 2017) and the United Kingdom (Chilvers 2017). Frequently identified is the 'secondary industry' of support products, such as software for coordinating engagement and stakeholder databases, software and websites for online engagement and specialised facilitation materials (see, for example, Hendriks and Carson 2008, 297; Leighninger 2011).

Contributions to the debate from Australian scholars have thus far included Hendriks and Carson's (2008) discussion of the 'deliberative democracy market'. This examined 'an Australian inventory of 80 Deliberative Participatory Processes (DPPs) convened between 1975 and 2006'; of which 60% [n = 48] were 'organised by a consultant' and of which 'over 36' were conducted for the Western Australian state government by one consultant in particular (Hendriks and Carson 2008, 299–300). Alongside providing a critical and comprehensive examination of the possible effects of the commercialisation of deliberative democracy, Hendriks and Carson (2008) depicted practitioners as being driven by business imperatives on the one hand and being champions of deliberative democracy on the other.

They argued that commercialised practice had not, at that time, had a deleterious impact upon deliberation at the micro, or procedural, level and that those commercially engaged in deliberative democratic practices 'are more akin to a "community of practice" (CoP) … rather than a marketplace' (Hendriks and Carson 2008, 304). Yet on a less sanguine note, they also conceded that there could be possible negative implications of commercialism for democratic governance, including fostering elitism, homogenising public deliberation, reducing the meaning and practice of public deliberation, depoliticising public deliberation and detracting from more systemic, or 'sustained', practices internal to a variety of organisations—public, private and non-profit (Hendriks and Carson 2008, 307–308).

This article contributes to the discussion in three main ways. First, we 'set the scene' by placing community engagement in the context of the democratic practices of Australian local government more generally. Second, we explore the extent of commercialisation of community engagement as an element of Australian local government, taking up the aforementioned challenge of Hendriks and Carson (2008, 308) to 'watch this space', but with a remit beyond deliberative practices to include a broader range of participatory practices and across a range of local government jurisdictions in Australia. Third, we extend Hendrik and Carson's (2008) discussion of possible risks to local democracy by taking a critical and strategic approach to investigating the phenomenon in local government, rather than looking merely at deliberative practices. This article is divided into four main parts. First, local democracy is conceptualised to serve as a foundation for the discussion. Second, we place the practice of community engagement within this conceptualisation. Third, following from Hendriks and Carson (2008) we present evidence about the 'demand' side of the industry—engagement practices as an element of local government operations—drawing on a survey of four of the seven local government jurisdictions—New South Wales (NSW); Queensland; South Australia and Victoria. We also provide evidence from the 'supply' side of the

industry—providers of community engagement goods and services—utilising data from a survey of community engagement practitioners, and examine the professional associations that support them. Fourth, we examine the potential risks for local democracy arising from commercialisation, standardisation and a diminution of governance and community capacity.

2. Setting the scene: Conceptualising local democracy

The political theories of local government and, by association, local democracy, are active fields of scholarly inquiry, even though scholars have long commented that it has been neglected in Australia (Halligan and Paris 1984; Johnson 2001; Smith 1996). Contemporary scholars (see, for example, Hindess 2002; Pratchett 2004) are frequently led to the liberal canon on the topic, in particular the work of J. S. Mill (1865) in *On Representative Government*. Both Hindess (2002) and Pratchett (2004) concur that Mill (1865) advances two fundamental justifications of local democracy. First, local government frees up central government from local issues, ensuring that local matters are handled by those actually interested in or affected by them, such that central government can concentrate on affairs of state. Second, both authors concur that for Mill (1865, 271) local representative bodies can be 'school[s] of political capacity and general intelligence' for local leaders who then rise to higher tiers of government.

Both these arguments see the justification for *local* government as residing principally in its benefit to *central* government—or what Chandler (2008, 355) refers to as 'the triumph of expediency over ethics'. Alternatively, Haus and Sweeting (2006, 267) provide a succinct *ethical* foundation for local democracy:

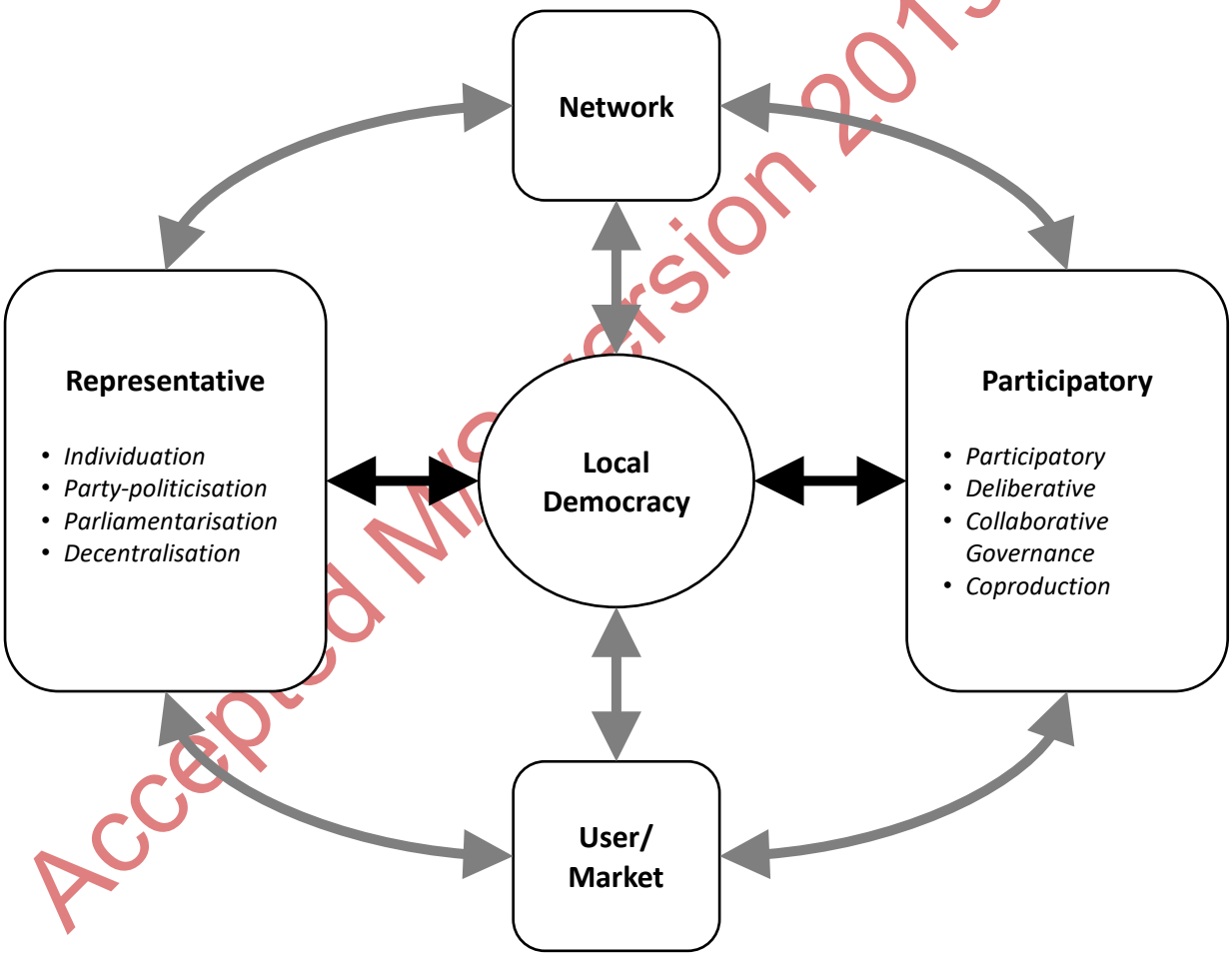
> We take democracy as the idea to promote a common good under circumstances where there is no strong pre-existing agreement on what this common good is, what it entails and how it can be promoted – with the significant qualification that this promotion is not imposed on society by force or manipulation, but is subject to public justification… Democracy is thus intimately linked with the question of what is 'good' for the members of a political community, and considering local democracy implies that

> local government, like governments at upper levels, has a process of collective self-determination as its normative core.

This definition highlights the normative ideal of democracy: one which values both process and outcomes. It also calls attention to the contested nature of the common good.

Haus and Sweeting (2006) continue by asserting that local democracy can be conceived in terms of four often overlapping types: 'representative', 'user', 'network' and 'participatory', as depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Types of local democracy



Source: Adapted from Haus and Sweeting (2006) and Sweeting and Copus (2012).

Figure 1 is relatively self-explanatory in depicting Haus and Sweeting's (2006) four-part typology of local democracy: While conceptually discrete, in practice the four types overlap.

Nevertheless, it is useful to flesh out these types as this demonstrates the intricacy of local democratic practices and allows us to place the commercialisation of community engagement within a broader context in the ensuing discussion. In Figure 1, local democracy of the representative type (at left) is exemplified in voting in elections for local representatives. In Australia, participation in representative democracy is highly variable. Voter turnout is weak in the states where voting is not compulsory—27.5% in Western Australia (WAEC 2014), 31.99% in South Australia (ECSA 2014) and 54.58% in Tasmania (TEC 2014) in the most recent elections. Haus and Sweeting (2006) also identify no less than four, more finely granulated representative types. First, where individual political leaders hold greater weight than political groups (for instance, mayors are directly elected in Queensland and in all Australian capital cities—see Sansom 2012). The second type is where party politics carries greater weight than individuals. In Australian local government, this type has been latent historically—see Halligan and Paris (1984). Third is where local governments follow the logic of parliamentarisation, with a 'government' and an 'opposition' characterised by machinations to achieve power, as depicted in the documentary 'Rats in the Ranks', which examined Leichardt City Council in Sydney, Australia in the lead-up to the 1994 mayoral election (Connolly and Anderson 1996). The fourth type is the 'decentralisation' of representation, where territorial subunits are allocated decision-making authority. While historically not a key feature of Australian local governments, some councils utilise special committees, precinct committees and advisory committees to perform aspects of this function; see Bolitho (2013).

Returning to Figure 1, the 'network' form of local democracy (at top) has emerged in response to increasing complexity in governance, institutions and networks, and it embraces the idea of collective decisions across a range of actors, not just those who have been elected, thereby recognising the complexity of multi-level governance (see Stoker 2004; 2006;

Sweeting and Copus 2012). In practice in Australia, network democracy typically appears as partnerships with community leaders, private business, community organisations and other government institutions, in particular other local governments and state associations for service provision and advocacy (see Gooding 2012).

At the base of Figure 1 is 'user-pays' or 'market' democracy, which for Haus and Sweeting (2006) has arisen influenced by New Public Management (NPM) (Diefenbach 2009; Head 2011) and public choice theory (Adams and Hess 2001; Johnson et al. 2003). For this type, marketisation and economic efficiency are regarded as optimal criteria to determine the common good and how it will be produced. The 'citizen' then becomes the 'consumer' or the 'customer', empowered to choose the service or product they desire. In practice this is reflected as organisational values focused on customer service and service choice. The central idea underpinning this type is that local government is the site of aggregating and sorting individual preferences, which decide the *provision* of services desired by the local citizenry. Yet local government need not *produce* these services, which ought to be allocated to the most cost-effective provider, including (for instance) the private sector, a hybrid entity (again, see Dollery and Johnson 2005) or, in the case of co-production, the citizenry (see Alford and Yates 2016).

At the right of Figure 1 is 'participatory' democracy, which is generally juxtaposed against the 'representative' type, but (again) is internally disaggregated into 'participatory', 'deliberative', 'collaborative governance' and 'co-production'. It is with this quadrant of Haus and Sweeting's (2006) schema that this article is centrally concerned. Nevertheless, it is worth underscoring that, while Haus and Sweeting's (2006) account is useful, they do not discuss the commercial element of participatory practices as an element of local democracy, by which we mean the commercialisation of services and products that facilitate local democracy, and to which we turn our attention directly below. Arguably, this disregard is

common amongst discussions of democracy generally. For instance, Keane's recent (2009) articulation and exploration of 'monitory democracy' neglects the commercialisation of participatory practices. Other key theorisations—for instance, of participatory democracy (Pateman 1970; 2012) and of discursive democracy (Dryzek 1990)—are also silent on the topic of commercialisation *per se*. Instead, as Hendriks and Carson (2008, 295) noted, these accounts exhibit a tendency to present the market and deliberation as 'contrary worlds', where 'the market is seen as something that represses or even corrupts the public sphere'. Our discussion argues that existing conceptualisations of local democracy need to broaden to incorporate the commercial element, as evidenced in the existence of the community engagement industry discussed below.

3. Community engagement as an element of local democracy in Australia

We use the term 'community engagement' to include all activities where the local government invites or partners with the community, including deliberative methods. The phrase 'community engagement' has been selected over other variations due to its prevalence in the local government sector and despite there being a multiple of variants (see, for example, Head 2007). Reflecting this ambiguity in nomenclature, even a cursory glance at the local government acts of Australia's local government jurisdictions demonstrates that the terms 'public consultation', 'community participation' and 'public participation' are deployed interchangeably with each other and with the term 'community engagement' (*Local Government Act 2009 (Qld); Local Government Act 1989 (Vic); Local Government Bill 2018 (Vic); Local Government Act 1999 (SA); Local Government Act 2017 (NT); Local Government Act 1993 (NSW); Local Government Act 1993 (Tas); Local Government Act 1995 (WA)*). Regardless of the term used, a widely accepted definition is 'the involvement of the community in decision-making' (Rowe and Frewer 2005, 253; IAP2 2016). While this definition seems relatively straightforward, it is ambiguous: Who are the community? What

types of decisions? How much involvement? However, in this context we place these considerations to one side (see Aulich 2009 for a discussion) to examine the commercialisation of community engagement and its implication for local democracy.

4. Evidence of the Australian Local Government Community Engagement Industry

As noted in our Introduction, the state and territory governments have, perhaps inadvertently, been the most significant proponents of the local government community engagement. Australian local governments are required to adhere to an increasing number of statutes, ranging from land-use planning to health to the environment, long-term strategic plans and road closures, as stipulated by ensembles of legislation across all local government jurisdictions and not least of which are the local government acts (for an overview, see Tan and Artist 2013). Regardless of the varying levels of prescription contained in the statutes across Australia's seven local government jurisdictions, the volume of engagement requirements placed on local governments has expanded (Aulich 2009).

Here, following from Hendriks and Carson's (2008) examination of 80 Deliberative Participatory Projects (DPPs), we examine three components of what we are labelling the 'community engagement industry', namely demand for engagement services, supply of these services and the continued growth in professional associations of these services.

4.1 Demand for engagement: Census of local government community engagement

Estimating the actual number of engagement processes as an indicator of the demand for them is methodologically problematical for several reasons. First, as we have already flagged, the definition of what precisely constitutes community engagement is fluid. Second, while local governments, as democratically elected statutory corporations are more, rather than less, accountable to their sovereign state parliaments and their communities, this by no means entails that as organisations they are completely transparent: individual councils, and individual public servants within them, can choose to exercise some discretion in what they

publicise, particularly over time. Third, because community engagement processes can be delivered by a party external to local government, there can be a degree of obscurity when it comes to documenting the detail of specific instances of engagement.

To address these issues, a 'census' of community engagement activities in local government was developed and conducted in April 2017. It asked councils in NSW, Queensland, South Australia and Victoria 14 questions pertaining to their community engagement practices. A total of 175 responses were received from the 352 councils invited to participate, a response rate of 49.7%. Four principal results relevant to our discussion were gleaned from the survey. First, the (self-reported) mean number of engagement processes per annum was 29.4 per council, with this number being higher for capital city and metropolitan councils (44.1) and lower for other council types—regional, rural and remote—as defined by the Australian Classification of Local Governments (DIRD 2017). Second, the most commonly used engagement methods reported can be considered as traditional: 82.3% of respondents reported that their councils used online surveys; 73.7%, advisory/community reference groups; 70.3%, public meetings; 69.1%, drop-in sessions and 67.5%, open houses. Third, half of councils reported not having any dedicated community engagement staff, with numbers lower in rural and remote councils. Fourth, only 22.9% of councils reported undertaking 'all' of their own planning, delivery and engagement activities; 62.3% reported planning and delivering 'two-thirds or more' of these activities themselves; 10.3% reported undertaking 'about half'; and 4.0% reported undertaking 'about one third' of these activities. This indicates that a significant, although not definitive, component of all community engagement activities are outsourced, albeit based upon a self-reporting survey. Nevertheless, the response rate of 49.7% across four jurisdictions is a significantly more robust cohort than the 80 instances of DPPs qualitatively interrogated by Hendriks and Carson (2008).

4.2 *Private supply of community engagement: Practitioner survey*

To examine the principal focus of Hendriks and Carson's (2008) work, namely the 'supply' side of the community engagement market, a community engagement 'practitioner survey' was developed and deployed in August 2017 as an online survey, promoted through professional associations and social media networks. It was open to all Australian residents who self-identified as community engagement practitioners. The sample was self-selecting and, as such, the exact size and distribution of people undertaking community engagement activities as part of their activities was not estimated by the survey. Moreover, it would be difficult to estimate the population utilising other methodologies. For instance, there is neither a direct career path nor compulsory accreditation or licensing processes for community engagement practitioners (Hendriks and Carson 2008).

A total of 375 responses were received. Of the 373 who were employed, 58.4% self-reported as local government employees; 12.3% as state government employees, 2.67% as being employed by a not-for-profit organisation and 0.5% as being employed in higher education. A total of 24% stated that they were self-employed, owner-managers or private sector employees charging a fee for undertaking this activity. This conforms to the definition for deliberative services offered in the market put forward by Hendriks and Carson (2008, 295).

Practitioners were asked what methods they had designed and delivered in the previous 12 months, the current 12 months and those they were intending to use in the future. Online surveys dominated (56.8% for past use, 69.6% for present use, 52.8% for intended future use). Other popular methods included small (30 people or fewer) workshops and summits (48% for past, 55.5% for present, 42.1% for intended future); advisory/community reference groups (53.9% for past, 54.4% for present, 43.2% for intended future use); public submissions (45.3% for past, 53.1% for present, 38.9% for future intended use); and public

meetings (51.7% for past, 50.9% for present, 38.9% for future intended use). There was no significant difference between respondents from the public or private sectors, suggesting that skill sets of public practitioners and private consultants may not vary. Four of the five most prevalent methods used by practitioners in this survey (online surveys, advisory/community reference groups, public submissions and public meetings) matched those from the Australian local government community engagement census discussed above.

Practitioners were asked about their experience or exposure to different sectors, as either a public or a private practitioner. The findings suggest a degree of transience in the population. Most of the community engagement practitioners had experience in public institutions: 82.1% in local government, 45.9% in state government, 14.9% in federal government, 38.4% in not-for-profit and 32% in the private sector. The results by industry type were similarly varied: 25.3% for infrastructure, 22.1% for planning, 21.6% for environment, 14.9% for health, 13.3% for disaster and emergency response and 9.1% for higher education.

When asked about the approximate number of community engagement processes they had been involved in the last 12 months, participants responded from nil to 250 (presumably for those in large organisations in oversight or assistance roles), totalling 5,619 processes in the previous 12 months for all respondents.[1] The average number of processes across all respondents was 15.74. However, the average for *private* sector practitioners was higher, at 23.86.

4.3: Professional associations for community engagement practitioners

We now turn to the third element of the growth of deliberative consultants investigated by Hendriks and Carson (2008) and apply this to community engagement in Australian local

[1] Some processes may be counted twice if different respondents are recounting the same process. The survey also included people practising community engagement in other levels of government beyond local government.

government, namely the professionalisation of the industry. It is worth underscoring that professional associations are responsible for structuring and regulating occupational practices through activities such as training and education, identifying competencies and standards, and sharing information (Noordegraaf 2007). In the community engagement industry, the growth of these activities, many of them attracting a fee for service to members, serves as evidence of their success. It also demonstrates their role in encouraging community engagement. In response to 'the rising global interest in public participation' (IAP2 2016) the International Association of Public Participation Practitioners (IAP3) was formed in 1990. The following year it commenced the publication of a biannual periodical and the year after that the first conference was held in Oregon with the organisation's membership having reached 300 (IAP2 2016). In 1996 the organisation dispensed with the last 'P' ('Practitioners') from its name to reflect its broader membership base, in 1998 the Australasian chapter began operations and in 1999 the organisation launched a five-day certificate course. In 2004 the Association's periodical was replaced by the *International Journal of Public Participation*, which was spruiked as designing to 'serve as a medium through which academics and practitioners would exchange information and ideas about public participation' (Beavis 2016).[2]

Since these relatively recent beginnings, the IAP2 membership, trainings, conferences and events have increased at an exponential rate. The 'Core Values', 'Public Participation Spectrum' and 'Code of Ethics of Public Participation Practitioners' are widely referenced and known by practitioners, and are cited as exemplary in the academic literature (see, for example, Head 2007; Nabatchi 2012). As shown in Table 1, international membership has reached over 4000, with more than half of these members from Australia and New Zealand.

[2] The *Journal of Public Deliberation* has since absorbed the *International Journal of Public Participation*. The journal promotes itself as a journal 'with the principal objective of synthesising the research, opinion, projects, experiments and academics and practitioners in the multi-disciplinary field of deliberative democracy' (JPD nd).

As of February 2016, the Australasian membership stood at 2795. Almost 29% (n=799) identified as members of the local government sector (IAP2 Australasia staff member 2016, per comm 25 February). It is fair to assume that those members who identify as being part of the private sector conduct business with local government as clients, indicating a high level of involvement by private community engagement practitioners in Australian local government, the international membership figures for which are provided in Table 1.

[Please Insert Table 1 about here]

Updating and expanding upon the discussion of Hendriks and Carson (2008, 303–304), the popularity of IAP2 membership in Australasia is also evidenced by the take-up of training run by the organisation. In the 2014/2015 financial year the organisation declared that 1981 people participated in 137 courses (IAP2A 2015), a number that has steadily increased since the courses were first offered. In addition to the training courses, annual conferences regularly attract over 200 participants and are where the best practice 'Core Value Awards' are presented. In 2014 and 2015, 9 of 21 of these awards were given to local governments or local government partnerships (IAP2A 2014; 2015). In addition to the annual conference there are symposiums, masterclasses and leadership forums. The annual income for the organisation in 2014/2015 totalled over A$1.9 million, of which A$1.5 million was attributable to training courses (IAP2A 2014; 2015).

While IAP2 is one of the most salient professional associations for community engagement practitioners, there are others. With a focus on the skill of facilitation, the International Association of Facilitators (IAF), formed in 1994, is a professional association that sets standards, provides accreditation, releases a newsletter, publishes the journal *Group Facilitation: A Research and Applications Journal* and runs conferences and events for

members in over 65 countries (IAF 2016). Additionally, the Australasian Facilitators Network (AFN) is an informal self-organising group with regular network events, an annual conference and an active discussion list with over 800 participants (AFN 2014). 'Engage2Act', which commenced in 2013, describes itself as a 'collective of individuals committed to progressing citizen engagement practice' (Engage2Act 2016). The purpose of this paper is not to map all the professional associations that are driving the practice of community engagement in Australian local government, but to draw attention to the proliferation of these activities. The role of professional associations and commercialisation in general has unexplored implications in the standardisation of community engagement and local democracy.

5. Discussion: Risks to local democracy from the community engagement industry

While a community engagement industry clearly exists, whether the commercial interests of practitioners are putting local democracy at risk is still a matter for debate. As we have noted, Hendriks and Carson (2008) depicted deliberative democracy practitioners as simultaneously driven by business imperatives and yet champions of deliberative democracy. They argued that commercialised practice had not, at that time, had a deleterious impact upon deliberation at the micro, or procedural, level and that those commercially engaged in deliberative democratic practices 'are more akin to a "community of practice" (CoP) … rather than a marketplace' (Hendriks and Carson 2008, 304). Yet they also proffered two ideal scenarios. In the first—an idyllic one—commercialisation leads to healthy competition between private providers of deliberative products and processes, drives down prices and fosters innovation and excellence, alongside a proliferation of these through communities of practice and associated training *and* healthy secondary markets. In the second—dystopian—one, the label of deliberation is appropriated by 'various sectors' where bad deliberative practice undermines not only the efficacy therein, also of the profession *writ large,* of deliberation and

of democracy more broadly. Moreover, Hendriks and Carson (2008, 305–306) suggested that elements of *both* of these scenarios were then evident, and that there might be no less than five possible negative implications of commercialism for democratic governance. These are: first, the fostering of elitism by professional associations exercising market closure, thereby undermining deliberative democracy—a situation of profound irony; second, 'homogenisation', where 'off-the-shelf' solutions are inappropriately applied at the expense of due diligence of the particularities of individual situations; third, a reduction in the intrinsic richness, or 'meaning' of deliberation per se; fourth, a 'depolitising' of issues (federalism, class, gender) inside banal (our word) deliberative frameworks; and fifth, a detracting from more systemic, or 'sustained', practices internal to a variety of organisations (public, private and non-profit) (Hendriks and Carson 2008, 307–308).

These observations are of considerable interest. However, the work of Hendriks and Carson (2008) in relation to deliberative practices—and noting that their sample had an over-representation from (Western Australian) state-sponsored deliberative process—is by no means directly transferrable to the focus of our discussion, namely the impacts upon local government if the community engagement industry *writ large* continues to commercialise. Moreover, the broad schema of local democracy *and* its place in intergovernmental relations put forward in section 2 of this article must be kept in mind if we are to take a strategic approach to understanding the phenomenon. Conceived of as such, the three areas of commercialisation, standardisation and strategic capacity now fall into focus.

5.1 Commercialisation: Balancing democracy and profit?

In this article we have established that a considerable portion of engagement activity undertaken by Australian local governments now consists of councils buying community engagement commodities from private providers. It can be argued that this phenomenon—by no means absolute, but tangible—renders the service more cost-effective than local

governments providing their own practitioners. As such, it conforms to tendencies in public sector organisations to outsource, thereby providing greater flexibility in operations, particularly in terms of budgets. This is especially the case for local government, where financial capacity is highly variable across different types of local government (metropolitan, rural, remote). However, this confluence between the market and democracy is widely recognised as uneasy (Bherer et al. 2017a; Cooper and Smith 2012; Hendriks and Carson 2008; Lee 2014; 2015), predominately for the reason that commercial providers may risk undermining the democratic purpose of participation in the face of maintaining client satisfaction. Cooper and Smith (2012) and Hendriks and Carson (2008) believe that non-profit producers, such as academic institutions, are less likely to compromise democratic process and outcome in the face of clients' wants. Yet this view naively assumes that academic institutions are less concerned with commercial outcomes. Notwithstanding different motivations for different types of providers, commercialisation does pose the potential risk of the interests of the client over-riding those of the community. Moreover, any attempt to mitigate against this risk by way of oversight from (for instance) local government managers or elected officials might stymie the *raison d'être* of both community engagement—to elicit the views of the community in comparatively unmediated forms—and the operation of the market, in that private providers would be obliged to conform to one or more reporting regimes.

5.2 Standardisation: Raising or lowering the bar?

Standardisation of community engagement practices is occurring across all of the dimensions in our discussion. It would be erroneous to assert that legislative requirements in local government acts are uniform; rather, they exhibit some characteristics of being both 'place-based' and 'path-dependent'. First, for example, community engagement as an element of strategic planning is less a requirement in Queensland than it is in NSW and WA, for

instance. Moreover, in South Australia and Tasmania the respective state-based local government associations take a more proactive role in providing and facilitating community engagement as part of both the activities of local governments and the sector as a whole (see Tan and Artist 2013). Yet, *at precisely the same time*, the way that council-generated 'community strategic plans' comprise an element of several jurisdictions' overall planning frameworks is decidedly similar in NSW, Victoria and Western Australia (again, see Tan and Artist 2013). Second, the growth and what we will denote as the 'institutional hardening' of professional associations around community engagement suggests—in line with the literature on professionalisation generally (see Noordegraaf 2007)—that these organisations are moving to position themselves to exercise market closure around membership. Third, the training offered by these groups, while not proscribing innovation within these practices, cannot fail to offer standardised approaches to engagement. Fourth, commercialisation of community engagement products and services by practitioners is moving the industry toward 'off-the-shelf' engagement processes, such as the trademarked methods discussed above, a point made by Hendriks and Carson (2008, 307) in their discussion of deliberative practices.

The argument in favour of standardisation is that it ensures a degree of 'best practice' which encourages accountability and accessibility, as well as providing common language and values which enhance legitimacy (Lewanski and Ravazzi 2017; Mazeaud and Nonjon 2017). However, arguments against standardisation include that processes will become less responsive and even limiting, given the various contexts where it occurs (Hendriks and Carson 2008; Lee 2014) and that more 'place-based' forms of engagement are delegitimised, risking elitism and exclusion (Lee 2014, 2015; Bherer et al. 2017b). Using Haus and Sweeting's (2006, 267) definition of democracy, the 'process of collective self-determination' risks becoming inflexible and ultimately unresponsive to the needs of the

community; as we have already noted, in their discussion of deliberative practices, Hendriks and Carson (2008, 307) suggested an irony that standardisation and elitism entail.

5.3 Capacity: Governance, community and democracy

The third area of concern for local government centres on the issue of capacity. Within the international literature concerned with the devolution of state power to sub-national (and in particular local) government it is commonplace to point to the desirability of both financial and (in particular) governance, or 'administrative', capacity if these governments are to play their roles (for an overview covering a range of polities, see Shah 2006). However, it is a mistake to think of governance capacity as merely an issue for local governments in polities labelled as 'developing'—on the contrary. For example, a core focus of the work undertaken by the (then) Australian Centre for Excellence in Local Government (ACELG) was for much-needed capacity-building, centred particularly on workforce issues *alongside* community engagement, as twin elements in regional, remote and very remote local governments in Australia (see, for example, Bolitho 2013; Pillora and McKinlay 2011). Moreover, it is commonplace to point out the dual roles that local government employees play in terms of capacity, in both enhancing their own organisations and supporting communities in non-metropolitan (and particularly rural and remote) areas by, for example, being involved in local civic associations, sending their children to local schools and contributing to aggregate demand more generally (see, for example, Dollery et al. 2008). As such, on the grounds of both local government capacity and community capacity in rural and remote areas, there are reasons to be cautious in endorsing an approach to community engagement and its practitioners that is not grounded in local government organisations and their communities. Additionally, one of the most profound defences of local government *per se* is that it provides for the government of not just a local area, but governing with what we will describe as the *wisdom of place* as discussed by J. S. Mill (1865) Harold Laski (1967, 411–412) and Michael

Lyons (2007), for example, and which forms the moral and economic foundation for the principle of subsidiarity (see Shah 2006, 5). On these grounds—that is, on the grounds of both government *and* community capacity—it makes little sense to endorse a 'fly-in, fly-out' model for community engagement practitioners, wherever those local governments may be.

An additional, capacity-related argument against the commercialisation of community engagement can be identified. Returning to the heuristic of local government depicted in Figure 1 based upon Haus and Sweeting (2006), we noted that participatory democracy forms elements of only one quadrant of the four-part model of local democracy. As such, it might not particularly matter if the other elements of the model (i.e., 'representative', 'user-pays' and 'network') remain more, rather than less, 'in play' in the local democracy 'mix' and in defensible forms. However, in situations where this is not the case—where (for instance) participation in representative procedures is low (as it is where it is not compulsory in Australian local government jurisdictions in Tasmania, South Australia and WA), or alternatively where 'participatory governance' assumes a heightened moral value (as suggested by Aulich 2009) to the extent that other democratic practices are eroded—the issues associated with a move to the market provision for community engagement assume increased importance.

Community engagement can be the means of collective self-determination to assist in local governance and local democracy. However, the 'community engagement industry' will, in all likelihood, continue to propagate. These developments warrant continued and careful scrutiny.

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