

Producing international expertise about technologies of democracy

Public engagement in nanotechnology at OECD

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One can describe the production of political categories (e.g. citizenship, democratic legitimacy, or sovereignty) through the analysis of “technologies of democracy”, that is, more or less stabilized policy instruments that require specialized expertise in order to ensure their production, circulation, and replication. Using the example of public engagement in nanotechnology, this paper explores the construction of expertise about technologies of democracy in an international context, and thereby illustrates the usefulness of the concept of “technologies of democracy” to make sense of the production of governance knowledge and, more generally, of the stabilization of political orders.

At the initiatives of American and European science policy officials, a *Working Party on Nanotechnology* (WPN) was created at OECD in 2007, within the Committee for Science and Technology Policy. One of the major projects of WPN dealt with “public engagement”. It sought to compare the various participatory mechanisms that were being attempted in OECD member countries, and establish a series of “point for consideration” about “public engagement” for national officials to use when planning participatory activities related to nanotechnology. Based on ethnographic materials, this paper describes the production of international expertise about public engagement at OECD WPN. Thereby, it explores the dynamics of production of international expertise about technologies of democracy, and the way national administrative and academic expertise perform this knowledge production process. Technologies of democracy thus appear as instruments that are circulated, solidified and rationalized, this very process rendering certain problematizations of nanotechnology, and the political orders they imply, more stable than others.

I first consider the writing of a questionnaire undertaken as a first step in the public engagement project and meant to be completed by national science policy officials in order to gather information about nanotechnology-related participatory activities. Successive versions of the questionnaire show how an original ladder model of public engagement (evaluating devices according to their “impact” on decision-making) had to be transformed and extended in order to fit with competing expectations in the international arena. I then analyze the construction of “points for consideration”, a series of guidelines that were to be the project’s final product, and show how the constraints of international negotiations solidified the expertise about public engagement in a way that rendered the original ladder model more difficult to articulate. Finally, I illustrate the constraints put on the production of policy expertise at OECD by describing how boundaries between “technology” and “policy” on the one hand, between “descriptions” and “recommendations” on the other are enacted through the internal structure of the international organization and throughout its work process. These boundaries help define the problem of public engagement in nanotechnology as that of the measure of the perception of given nanotechnology research areas and industrial products by stable social groups, and make it more complicated for alternate problematizations of nanotechnology to be heard.