

22 Digital Humanities and Political Innovation: The SOWIT Model

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Abstract

In this chapter we show how a new type of political knowledge can be harnessed from everyday communication flows between citizens to support community and policy development processes. The emergence of this new knowledge will be enabled by an e-supported deliberation process (SOWIT) that aims to improve political communication and deliberation between citizens, civil society organisations, local councils and councillors. To explain the SOWIT project and its innovative approach to political engagement we first outline its motivation with respect to political reform in Ireland. We then discuss the model's framework and features in functional terms. The core innovations are rooted in SOWIT's foundation in the fields of Q-methodology, discursive representation and meta-consensus theory. Finally, we explain how the model departs from the epistemic norms of current political paradigms particularly with respect to public opinion and random selection as a basis for representativeness in deliberative fora. SOWIT is currently being developed as a pilot in collaboration with Fingal County Council in Dublin.

Keywords: political innovation, e-supported deliberation, SOWIT, public opinion.

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1. Introduction

Political innovation using technology is not commonly regarded as within the domain of Digital Humanities. Online political discussion fora, mini-publics and deliberative polls have a strong social science basis with design and output framed in positivist terms as indicated by the Discourse Quality Index (Lord & Tamvaki, forthcoming; Steenbergen, Bächtiger, Spöndli, & Steiner, 2003), survey data and representativeness indicators. However, where political innovation is rooted in the democratic norms of inclusion and difference it becomes at its root concerned with extending an understanding of the discursive world. Interpretation versus scientific positivism prevails and the political innovation enterprise becomes fused with philosophical, creative and discursive trajectories.

This goal of discursive understanding (see Dryzek, 2010) is particularly important at a time when citizen deliberation¹, reasoning and judgement are becoming recognised as key to governance in a complex networked society (Barnes, Newman, & Sullivan, 2007; Dryzek, 1987). At the global level, citizen deliberations are increasing integrated to climate management and biodiversity policy. At the national level there is a growing interest in citizen assemblies as a way of debating national referendum issues (British Columbia Citizen Assembly on Electoral Reform, 2004; G1000 Belgian Citizens' Summit, 2011; Ireland's We The Citizens (WTC) pilot, 2011). Municipalities and cities are also experimenting with deliberations and direct democracy through participatory budgeting (Porto Alegre, Brazil; Freiburg, Germany)², law making (Municipal Health Councils, Brazil; Iceland's Crowd Sourced Constitution) and citizen initiatives (Finland's Citizen Initiative). At the same time, the rise in social media use has led to the rapid emergence of a broad range of online participatory and deliberation experiments such as Fishkin's

1. Deliberation is a commonly understand a process in which citizens discuss an issue and provide reasons both for an against an issue with the aim of achieving a mutually acceptable outcome. Processes of deliberation are commonly oriented to Habermas's (1975) ideal speech situation which requires that all participants have equal opportunity to contribute to the discussion, are free from domination, and are motivated by the pursuit of truth in all claims made. The aim is to provide the ideal conditions so that the force of the better argument prevails.

2. In 2008 the city of Freiburg combined online deliberation with the use of a budget simulator, enabling citizens to better assess the impacts of their choices.

(2009) online deliberative polls, the Womenspeak parliamentary consultation on domestic violence in the UK (Smith, 2009), and Community Campaign Creator (Coleman & Blumler, 2009).

Yet, despite the promise that deliberation holds for enabling a more participatory and informed political system, deliberative methods to date rely mainly on Habermasian theories of communicative rationality and discourse ethics. Accordingly, ideal deliberation between individuals should emphasise reasoning, impartiality and focus on the common good. Difference democrats such as Young (2000), and others (Pennington, 2003; Tully, 2002) however, have argued that these standards can result in exclusion of the most marginalised. In Young's (2000) words they "extend already constituted institutions and practices to people not currently benefitting from them enough [...] thereby expecting them to conform to hegemonic norms" (p. 12).

In this chapter we offer a new approach to deliberation that moves from the procedural focus of communicative rationality to a substantive focus on the discursive structure of public opinion. We show how individual subjectivity and judgement can be harnessed to unlock the social structure in public opinion in a way that provides more inclusive information for, and new approaches to, the development of sustainable policy. We root our participatory and deliberative approach in a method for observing individual subjectivity (Q-method), developed by physicist and psychologist William Stephenson in 1953 (Stephenson, 1953). However to date it has not been scaled to enable its use in political processes. The SOWIT model (Social Web for Inclusive and Transparent democracy) is thus entirely novel.

We begin by outlining the motivation for SOWIT with respect to political reform in Ireland. We then discuss the model's core features in functional terms. Finally, we explain how it departs from the epistemic norms of current political paradigms. During our discussion we refer to particular elements of the full SOWIT model (see Liston, Harris, & O'Toole, 2011a) that are relevant to the discussion at hand. The innovation we propose highlights the transformative potential of the growing field of digital humanities in Ireland.

1.1. Political engagement, reform and deliberation in Ireland

Recent concern with the state of Irish democracy has given rise to bursts of political innovations that touch on the core of democratic values such as free speech, power and voice. Such innovations in Ireland have ranged from the Open Data movement, to citizen deliberations by civil society groups (The Wheel, Claiming our Future, The Second Republic), the WTC assembly¹, as well as online political initiatives (Political Reform Score Card²; Fix Our Area³). The lobbying techniques of Irish civil society organisations have also evolved to include media campaigns and social media communication strategies in response to the impact of the economic crisis on Ireland's social partnership and corporatist structures (Carney, Dundon, Ní Leime, & Loftus, 2011).

At the macro-level political reform has also become firmly established within national level political discourse. The 2011 general election saw reform addressed in the manifestos of all political parties. The Constitutional Convention is the first opportunity for Irish citizens to deliberate at the national level on constitutional reform and the Local Government Action Plan (Dept. of Environment, Community and Local Government, 2012) promises new structures for enabling greater citizen participation, such as participatory budgeting. As the innovation of social partnership which emerged in the 1990s is replaced by fluid social dialogue processes, a transformation is occurring in the dynamics of participation and decision-making in Ireland.

However, despite this agitation towards reform and citizen engagement, there are challenges for political reform that inhere in the character of the Irish public sphere. Across the spectrum of democratic theory, the public sphere generally describes a plurality of free spaces for the expression of diverse opinions, contributing to a plurality of voices and perspectives on an issue,

1. The WTC pilot assembly was an opportunity for a random selection of Irish citizens to deliberate on suggestions that emerged from regional events around Ireland on the future of their country. The deliberation took place on June 25th and June 26th 2011 in the Royal Hospital Kilmmainham, Dublin, Ireland. It was made up of 100 citizens selected randomly from a cross-section of Irish citizens, aged between 18-87. For further information see <http://www.wethecitizens.ie>.

2. <http://www.reformcard.com>

3. <http://www.fixourarea.com>

thereby informing and forging public opinion (Dewey, 1927). Arendt (1967) in particular notes that opinion exchange in the public sphere is essential for the discovery of political truth. However, a recent study by Gaynor (2011) suggests that the social partnership scheme in Ireland significantly narrowed the public sphere in the 1990s in particular. She also points to the lack of significant social action on the bailouts of the Irish banks as a symptom of the lack of alternative discourses, voices and interests (Gaynor, 2011, p. 513). This conclusion resonates with Habermas's (1975) concern with the decline of the institutions of public opinion when state and society penetrate each other (O'Brien, 2009). Similarly, O'Carroll (2002) finds that the Irish public sphere is 'stymied', preventing communities from articulating their interests, developing skills and political agency.

We address this concern with the Irish public sphere by outlining a normative design for a hybrid communication and deliberation model that is directly linked to Council decision processes. The model, entitled SOWIT enables citizens, civil society organisations and political representatives to engage directly in discussion, deliberation and policy development on an ongoing basis. Specifically, it responds directly to recent calls for the explicit recognition of "the situated, partial, and constitutive character of knowledge production, the recognition that knowledge is constructed, taken, not simply given as a natural representation of pre-existing fact" (Drucker, 2011, para. 3, emphasis in original).

We present this model and explain its approach to the generation of a new type of political knowledge through the concepts of discursive representation and dynamic visualisation of meta-consensus based deliberation (Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2006, 2008).

2. The SOWIT model

SOWIT is a new model of citizen engagement that aims to respond to the challenges associated with harnessing public opinion for sustainable policy while harnessing the potential of the technology for asynchronous and visualised

communication¹. A core feature of SOWIT is that it is integrated in a supportive capacity to policy decision processes at local authority level. In this way, SOWIT aims to support the impact of the public sphere by having a direct feedback link with local government.

The SOWIT model comprises three spheres:

- A collaboration sphere which enables asynchronous open cross-group and local authority communications;
- A deliberation sphere which provides a space for discourse ‘speakers’, Councillors and Council officials;
- A decision sphere which is the democratic institution, in this case the County council.

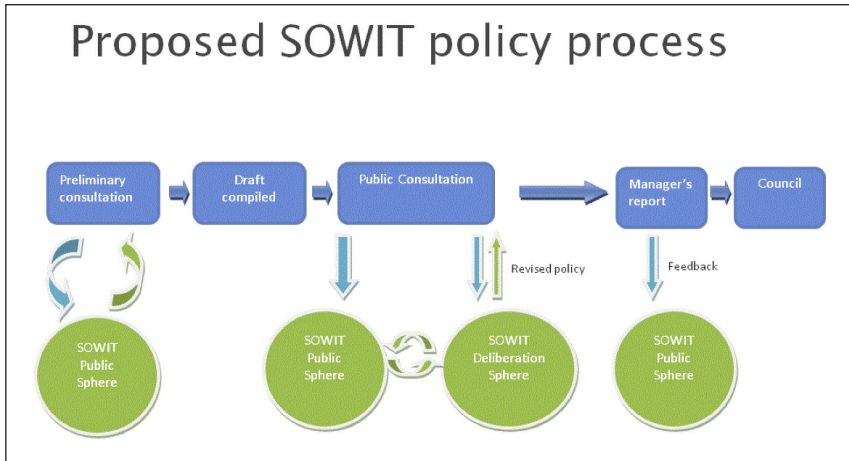
The models design is rooted in the work of [Young \(2000\)](#) on social inclusion and [Dryzek and Niemeyer \(2006, 2008\)](#) on discursive representation.

2.1. The collaboration sphere

The collaboration-sphere is a permanent and open online federated social network for citizens, civil society organisations, councillors and local government officials. Citizens can connect with one another and with elected members on political issues, learn about other citizen views, obtain information, and contribute to the identification of social discourses that can be represented in deliberations. The output of citizen issues and sentiment is publicly available data. SOWIT communications are allocated time at Council meetings for discussion. Feedback from the council meetings is posted to the collaboration sphere. Consistent with the dispersed nature of the general public sphere, the online collaboration space integrated citizen’s information from other sources as well as OpenData sets ([Figure 1](#)).

1. For full details of the model and explanation of these theoretical frameworks see [Liston, Harris and O’Toole \(2011a\)](#).

Figure 1. Proposed integration of SOWIT to support local authority policy development processes



Attending to the hermeneutical challenges that inhere in a Dewian collaboration sphere of open communication (Dewey, 1927) SOWIT deploys an innovative active listening tool that aims to support citizens to actively create shared meaning. REFLECT software, developed by Kriplean, Toomim, Morgan, Borning, and Ko (2011), assists with the interpretative problem of understanding and converting information. It enables participants in a conversation to summarise and re-state expressions in a stream of discussion, thereby enabling clarification, supporting common understanding and identifying barriers to communication¹. As such the basis of SOWIT's approach to political communication and knowledge is "centered in the experiential, subjective conditions of interpretation" (Drucker, 2011, para. 13).

The collaboration sphere also acts as an evolving learning space, where citizens have access to the most relevant policy and broad contextual information for formulating and informing their opinions. Such information is presented

1. It does so by providing a space for bulleted summaries beside comments in a web forum. Any reader can add a bullet point summarising what the commenter said. These restatements are publicly viewable and the original commenter can clarify whether the summary is accurate. As such individuals in the community are facilitated to listen actively to other members. For further information see <http://homes.cs.washington.edu/~travis/reflect/>.

in a visualised manner, to which citizens can propose additional relevant information sources.

2.2. The deliberation sphere

The deliberation sphere is activated during the policy development process. In this forum citizens engage with diverse social discourses in a deliberation process with other citizens, civil society organisations, councillors and officials. We define social discourses in [Dryzek and Niemeyer's \(2008\)](#) terms as “a set of categories and concepts embodying specific assumptions, judgments, contentions, dispositions, and capabilities” (p. 481).

In this respect, SOWIT is a radical departure from political discussion fora and current deliberative initiatives because it attends specifically to the discursive struggle that creates and constitutes power relations in society which are the heart of [Young's \(2000\)](#) work on inclusion. This focus on discourse has been pioneered in the innovative concept of discursive representation ([Dryzek, 2010](#); [Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2008](#)). In these works the authors provide a comprehensive account of how a discursive approach can enable a scalable method for inclusive citizen deliberations. Citizens are included to the extent that the discourse to which they subscribe with respect to a policy issue is actively represented in deliberations. We adopt this line of reasoning and root the online model in Concourse Theory ([Stephenson, 1953](#)) and its derived Q-methodology as exemplified by [Niemeyer \(2004, 2011\)](#) and [Dryzek \(2010\)](#). We summarise this method with specific reference to SOWIT.

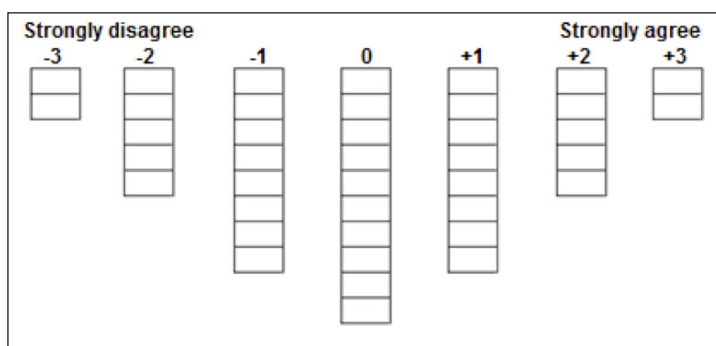
2.3. Unveiling social discourses

Concourse Theory holds that social discourses are expressed in the *concourse of communicability*, which refers to the stream of everyday conversation ([Stephenson, 1953](#)). By analysing streams of opinion in normal conversation it is possible to identify underlying structures in public opinion. These structures or patterns in opinion represent expressions of social discourses. [Stephenson \(1953\)](#) developed Q-method for identifying such discourses, and this method

formed the basis of the empirical deliberative experiments of Dryzek and Niemeyer (2006, 2008). Q-method has recently been revived in the literature on public policy (Ellis, Barry, & Robinson, 2007) and in a wide number of deliberative experiments in the Netherlands, Australia and Canada (Cuppen, Breukers, Hisschemöller, & Bergsma, 2010; Ray, 2011).

Accordingly, the inclusion of all social discourses relevant to an issue at hand is achieved by collating the widest possible range of statements on a particular policy issue (from the web, print media and stakeholder interviews). Social discourse structure is revealed through citizens' subjective ranking of these statements. The assumption is that these opinion statements, drawn from natural speech, represent a comprehensive view of all opinions on the particular issue within the sample population. These statements are then ranked by a purposive sample of key stakeholders and a random sample of citizens. This method, known as the Q-sort, requires citizens to assess the relative importance of each opinion statement by ranking the statement within a quasi-normal distribution grid (see Figure 2). This is enabled using a drag and drop interface. Forcing preference ranking within this structure necessitates the use of citizen judgement.

Figure 2. Sample Q-sort grid
in which a diverse range of statements are ranked



Upon completion of the Q-sort the rankings are correlated and factor analysed to identify underlying commonalities, which are identified as discrete social

discourses. For example, in a deliberative research experiment related to wind farm development, the social discourses emerging from a sorting of a broad sample of statements included Rationalising Globally - Sacrificing Locally, Local Pastoralist – Developer Sceptic, Embrace Wind, and Site Specific Supporter – Energy Pragmatist (Ellis, Barry, & Robinson, 2007).

2.4. New knowledge type

The knowledge that is produced from SOWIT's proposed Q-sort ranking in the collaboration sphere stage is significantly different from current public opinion data which inform public policy and public opinion in Ireland. SOWIT knowledge departs from the objective positivist knowledge extracted from survey methods on which political knowledge is based, to foreground interpretation and public judgement. Our concern with aggregate opinion-based political knowledge (and its data capture methods) is based on a wide literature that emphasises the unstable and manipulable nature of public opinion, particularly relevant in the context of political communication during electoral campaigns. In a recent empirical study, Chong and Druckman (2010) show that when campaign messages are separated in time by days or weeks, individuals give more weight to most recent communications, demonstrating volatility. In contrast, they find that people who deliberate on the information they receive through political campaign communications demonstrate attitude stability and a focus on earlier communications. A further problem with opinion is that inter-subjective understandings of an issue can vary significantly between citizens based on their exposure to the issue and their life-world. Dryzek (2005) states "opinion surveys embody a culture hostile to deliberative democracy" (p. 197).

However, this critique of using survey data as truthful political knowledge does not detract from opinion as the core vehicle through which truth in politics can be found. In contrast to the opposition between truth and opinion raised by Plato, we adopt Arendt's (1967) claim in her essay *Truth and Politics*, that objective truth as a basis for political regimes should be replaced by the ability to make political judgements, which is founded on a plurality of opinion.

Opinion becomes truthful according to [Arendt's \(1967\)](#) reading of Socrates, by means of public debate through which one finds what in one's opinions is true. This approach is directly relevant to [Gadamer's \(2004\)](#) focus on questioning as the path to knowledge. In *Truth and Method* he affirms the "priority of the question over the answer, which is the basis of the concept of knowledge. Knowledge always means considering opposites" ([Gadamer, 2004](#), p. 359). He further states:

"Someone who wants to know something cannot just leave it a matter of mere opinion, which is to say that he cannot hold himself aloof from the opinions that are in question. The speaker (Redende) is put to the question (zur Rede gestellt) until the truth of what is under discussion (wovon der Rede ist) finally emerges" ([Gadamer, 2004](#), p. 361).

Accordingly [Arendt \(1967\)](#) sees the public space not where already formed opinions are defended but a space which enables the "condition of their formation, articulation, and circulation in a broader process of critical thinking and *judging*. It is through this process of opinion formation that facts come to have truth for us in a politically significant sense" (cited in [Zerilli, 2012](#), p. 68).

Yet, such judgement also requires citizens to have access to knowledge to inform opinions, support the questioning process and enable new issues brought out into the open. The flow of free information both before and during the deliberation process supports the challenge of prejudices, prevents the domination of empty opinion, and the suppression of questions with which [Gadamer \(2004\)](#) was concerned. The availability of such information is prioritised in both the collaboration sphere and during deliberations.

Public judgement is thus central to the SOWIT collaboration sphere and specifically to the policy development processes with which SOWIT is concerned. Normatively, this concern resonates with theorists concerned with the functioning of democratic systems. Leading Federalist Alexander Hamilton in 1788 suggested it is not public opinion that we need to guide us, but public

judgment. In his words “[t]he deliberate sense of the community should govern the conduct of those to whom they entrust the management of their affairs” (cited in [Hamilton, Madison, & Jay, 2003](#), p. 436). [Kornprobst \(2011\)](#) states that understanding the emergence of public judgement should be of central concern to modern democracies. [Elster \(1983\)](#) states that “[i]f people are agents in a substantive sense, and not just the passive supports of their preference structures and belief systems, then we need to understand how judgment and autonomy are possible” (cited in [Kornprobst, 2011](#), p. 88). This public judgement focus is at the heart of deliberation which emphasises reason giving and openness to preference transformation when faced with what [Habermas \(1975\)](#) describes as the “forceless force of the better argument” (p. 108).

Although individual judgement has not yet been transformed to public judgement knowledge which will occur during deliberations, the active ranking by citizens of the social concourse of communicability within the online collaboration sphere has enabled the identification and extraction of underlying structure in public opinion.

2.5. SOWIT deliberations

SOWIT deliberative processes are not orientated to pure consensus which, it is argued, leads to exclusion ([Connelly & Richardson, 2004](#); [Young, 2000](#)). To address this challenge all relevant discourses identified are represented within the deliberation sphere. The deliberation process is structured sequentially ([Bächtiger, Niemeyer, Neblo, Steenbergen, & Steiner, 2010](#)) so that various forms of communication are supported at various stages (including storytelling, rhetoric etc). Rational deliberation argued to be exclusive by [Young \(2000\)](#) is accorded only one place in the deliberative sequence. Deliberations also aim towards meta-consensus as developed by [Dryzek and Niemeyer \(2006\)](#). Meta-consensus contrasts with pure consensus which can negatively impact minority groups and discourses. It focuses on disaggregating opinion on normative, epistemic or preference dimensions which enables a wider space for deliberation. For example, strong opposition on normative (value-based) grounds may be acknowledged, but such difference does not necessarily

block further deliberation on the epistemic dimension (knowledge-based opinion/ beliefs about cause and effect). The distinction made between value-based versus fact-based opinion also supports knowledge and information in the deliberation process. Where citizens' opinions can be based on multiple different sources of 'information', presenting fact-based opinions during deliberation enables the public evaluation of such facts for manipulation through propaganda or 'symbolic politics' (Niemeyer, 2004, 2011). Finally, meta-consensus does not require consensus on a single preference outcome thus enhancing discursive inclusion as presented by Young (2000) and the recognition of diverse life-worlds.

Practically, deliberations are conducted in a face-to-face setting with a group not likely to exceed 15 participants. The participants include 'discourse speakers' which are a sub-group selected from the Q-sort participants according to their stated 'ideal criteria' indicated in survey responses during the Q-sort process (for further details see Liston, Harris, & O'Toole, 2011a). Those citizens that are the best fit with the pre-stated 'ideal' criteria act as temporary speakers for a discourse relevant to a particular policy issue. Participants also include elected representatives and Council officials. Each participant has a laptop/pad/mobile communication device which they use to input statements of opinion during deliberations. Statements are projected to a common overhead screen. Once a set of statements are gathered these are Q-sorted by participants during 'rest-points' in the deliberation. SOWIT technologies support analysis, visualisation and measurement of deliberative progress based on comparative analysis of Q data at various rest-points during deliberations.

In doing so, SOWIT aims to encourage active reflection and judgement of each participant on statements raised by the diverse discourse speakers. The goal of the process is to reduce the initial distance between participants as measured by analysis of their respective Q-sorts, motivating co-operative behaviour rather than competitive lobbying or bargaining.

This judgemental process enables political knowledge to move from being offered as objective data to citizens, through opinion polls designed by professionals, to

being *capta* based. This means that information that is understood as important by citizens is offered by participants during deliberations and then ranked by colleagues. What is considered knowledge thus becomes infused with a relevant and shared meaning. As Alexander (2002) states “Capta are richer than data as they are recognised to be relevant (which implies that they are in a context)” (p. 64).

In our approach we specifically attend to Drucker’s (2011) call for visualisations to represent subjective understandings of the nature of knowledge. She states that instead of adopting “quantitative approaches that operate on claims of certainty”, humanist methods should infuse graphic representations of knowledge (Drucker, 2011, para. 6). From this foundation a new stream of political knowledge flows. In sum, the output of the deliberation stream can thus be analysed for new knowledge, new patterns and new research questions, which are at the heart of the digital humanities project.

2.6. The local Council/policy development sphere

The proposals of the deliberative process and final discourse submissions are passed to the local Council where the final policy decisions are made. A resonance score is calculated between final policy and the output of the deliberative sphere. This is published to the collaboration sphere where the Council provides feedback to citizens outlining how their input was used. As such SOWIT aims to achieve Dryzek and Niemeyer’s (2008) concept that policy should ‘resonate’ with public opinion defined as “the provisional outcome of the contestation of discourses as transmitted to the state or other public authority” (p. 484).

Resonance as such is based on an acknowledgement of the diversity of notions of the common good, the role of public judgement in accommodating claims on public goods and the critical role of interpretation and reflection in this process. In this regard SOWIT overcomes one of the core challenges faced by deliberative projects, as it is integrated into the policy making process in an ongoing and sustainable manner.

3. Challenges to current models

Our discussion so far has focused on the basis of SOWIT in generating a new type of political knowledge based on normative principles (Gregeresen & Köppe, 1989). We now turn to compare the contribution of SOWIT to the approach of a significant deliberative experiment at national level in Ireland, the WTC pilot Citizens' Assembly. This pioneering event generated significant awareness among the public for the potential of deliberative judgement, demonstrated the value of deliberative mini publics in engaging citizens in debates on political and constitutional reform, and informed the Irish Government's Constitutional Convention. However, a number of criteria distinguish it from the SOWIT approach. Within the scope of this chapter, we discuss two of these criteria: representativeness and knowledge.

3.1. Representativeness: the issue of random sampling

Citizens' assemblies and deliberative polls address the issue of inclusion mainly within the framework of political representation through the random sampling of citizens (WTC pilot Citizens' Assembly Ireland; G1000, Belgium; the Canadian citizens' assemblies). The assumption is made that the observed population is representative of the entire population. However, a number of authors have critiqued the assumptions on which the random sampling method depends for legitimacy. Davies, Blackstock and Rauschmayer (2005) for example argue that the assumption that individuals hold perspectives attributed to them by their structural group characteristics has not been tested and does not necessarily hold. They specifically identify a 'recruitment problem', 'composition problem', and 'mandate problem' with the sampling method and call for a focus on argument representation based on Concourse Theory and Q-methodology. A further issue raised by Dryzek and Niemeyer (2006) is that random sampling does not account for the fact that citizens occupy multiple discourses which are activated in different contexts.

The SOWIT model challenges current approaches to the epistemic notion of representativeness that inheres in the concept of random sampling citizens. It

departs from the assumptions that a select group of random individuals can be regarded as representing the complex patterns of views and judgments of the wider population. Instead, SOWIT investigates the extent to which a deliberating citizen subscribes to the natural social discourses present in society with respect to a particular issue. The fact that the Irish Citizens' Assembly addressed 18 different issues (drawn from themes raised at a number of regional meetings), would require using the SOWIT method: the identification of a statement set that comprehensively captures diversity of opinion in the public sphere on each of these issues, and the engagement of citizens in Q-sorting to uncover discursive structure.

For deliberation SOWIT would also identify participants based on Q-sort characteristics as well as ideal criteria pre-selected by sorting participants. This is a crucial question, as national level deliberative processes to date have not analysed the extent to which selected individuals represent the landscape of discourses that characterise competition and conflict within the given society. In this respect, we endorse [Dryzek's \(2010\)](#) view that the representation of social discourses can provide both more inclusive political process and one which is scalable to the global level.

Yet, random sampling can be a powerful legitimising tool where it is used in the context of the inclusive concourse of communicability, i.e., the stream of everyday conversation in which social discourses inhere. The citizens selected by random sampling are then assumed to offer equal chance to all citizens of being selected to conduct a ranking of the diverse social opinion. The interesting aspect of Q-sorting is that statistically it requires only a small number of Q-sort participants to identify discourses, with increasing numbers of sorts having no significant difference on the underlying structure of opinion. Our point is that giving all citizens an equal chance to rank the diverse range of opinions on a particular issue, (which necessitates only a small number of participants) enriches the ways in which representation occurs in deliberation. These citizens are not automatically required to deliberate but choose among themselves ideal criteria for discourse speakers, for example, the strength with which a participant identifies with a discourse measured as factor loadings (for

discussion see [Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2008](#)). The random sample thus identifies the social discourses and selects the criteria by which discourse speakers emerge. The speakers align with a core discourse relevant to the issue at hand, thus improved deliberation occurs, and a unique knowledge stream for that particular issue emerges from the sorting process.

3.2. Knowledge: whose knowledge and for whom?

The second way in which SOWIT differs from the WTC pilot Citizens' Assembly is in its approach to knowledge. A final report on the initiative's outcomes ([Farrell, 2011](#)) provides the results of a positivist analysis of the deliberative process for which the issues to be deliberated were chosen by the organising and researching team. It is written by academics and the knowledge produced aspires to a level of absolute truth. Specifically, with reference to the 'scientific process' that underlay the WTC pilot Citizens' Assembly it states, "'statistic significance' shows 'real change' in opinion, not change due to chance" ([WTC, 2011](#), p. 42). Yet in producing such knowledge for a diverse Irish public, it inevitably raises the question of the validity of the epistemological basis by which knowledge from the deliberative process was generated.

Furthermore, transcripts and core knowledge from the deliberative processes were not obtained during the event and therefore could not be made publicly available. This has resulted in a reliance on the version of knowledge that was generated by the opinion polls conducted before and after the initiative. This method restricts any inquiry into how, for example, obvious issues of framing and communication style might have influenced the outcome during the course of the citizens' deliberations. Thus, to date, data from these highly significant political events, as in the case with similar experiments (G1000 Belgium; the Canadian citizens' assemblies) are not publicly available.

In contrast, the knowledge base of SOWIT deliberation is derived from the concourse of communicability of every day conversation. Thus the opinions that are deliberated and from which underlying discourses emerge are

generated by citizens themselves. It is these opinions that form the well from which deliberations spring.

Furthermore, the SOWIT approach holds that because of the hermeneutic challenges of identifying political knowledge, deliberative processes and their content must be fully public with a full stream of content made publicly available. This enables not one interpretation of the text from one particular epistemological viewpoint only, but the emergence of many alternative views, through examination by citizens. We argue that if deliberation is a common and public project, so too is its interpretation. Indeed, the output of the SOWIT deliberation sphere will be a radically new type of political knowledge that is publicly open enabling new perspectives and a common dialogue on what perspectives and dialogue processes mean from our collective perspective.

3.3. Reality check

The potential of SOWIT to address citizens' demands for improved engagement in politics is not just theoretical. Any such development must be designed in a way that responds to the constraints and challenges of current political behaviour patterns and expectations. To this end, consultations have been a priority of the development process. To date three consultations have been held. The first meeting was held with civil society organisations in the Fingal County Council area. Their feedback was positive and constructive, resonating with the enthusiasm expressed by citizens in the WTC regional meetings for greater voice in their democracy, particularly at local government level. The participants noted that SOWIT could improve their ability to collaborate with each other and to affect a stronger voice in local government. Yet, they also pointed to a number of potential challenges in the implementation of the SOWIT approach. The challenges cited included the need for an inclusion strategy so that marginalised citizens or those not IT literate were not further disenfranchised politically. Citizens' trust in digital technologies also emerged as an issue, they noted that any technical complexity in the system could facilitate manipulation and therefore the system should be fully open to

independent inspection (see [Liston, Harris, & O'Toole, 2011b](#), for a full report of the consultation and impact on the SOWIT design).

The second consultation was held with elected members of Fingal County Council. Some Councillors felt that SOWIT was relevant at a national level for deliberative processes on policy. Others noted that it provided a unique forum for counter-balancing the communication distortions of the tabloid media, enabling Councillors to have a voice and respond to negative or incorrect claims. On the other hand, a repeated concern was the potential impact on their workloads and the extent of the power imbalance between elected members and the executive. As such, deliberations would only be effective where they explicitly included the local authority management and where deliberations were framed to have more meaningful impact than competitive individual lobbying by citizens, groups and stakeholders ([Liston, Harris, & O'Toole, 2012a](#)). The final consultation was held with the management of Fingal County Council which expressed their support and engagement with SOWIT ([Liston, Harris, & O'Toole, 2012b](#)).

As such, while the SOWIT model provides a normative model rooted in political and philosophical theory, and informed by empirical findings on deliberative experiments, its nature necessitates ongoing evolution and adaptation to changing contexts and political dynamics. The rationale for rooting SOWIT at the local level is to support evolution of the public sphere where it is closest to people (see [Gaynor & O'Brien, 2012](#)) and respond to citizens' calls for greater participation at local government level.

4. Conclusion

SOWIT has the potential to be a significant innovation in political engagement in Ireland. It breaks new ground in taking a distinctly new approach to political knowledge and data generation than is currently practiced in the form of public opinion surveys and positivist analysis of deliberative forums. Its foundation in discursive representation and meta-consensus provides a means for a new

interpretative approach to citizen participation, one in which the knowledge and opinions of each citizen is recognised as relative, contextual and open to transformation. As such SOWIT, while adopting certain modalities of the positivist approach, aims to be decisively interpretative in its focus on the interpretation of information, the social construction of meaning and the inclusion of all social discourses in deliberation. The outcome will be new digitally-born political artefacts and a new means of political engagement and understanding in the public sphere.

However, we acknowledge that a significant amount of further research is needed from inter-disciplinary and practical perspectives. Firstly, Q-method was developed as a research instrument and not a political process. As such, further research and experimentation is required to fully examine the implications of Q-method on many different aspects of political legitimacy, inclusion and the functioning of the representative system. Secondly, an issue of particular research importance is the way in which citizens communicate across cultures and languages, not only practically but also with respect to the different world views that are argued by [Whorf \(1956\)](#) to inhere in different linguistic systems. Thirdly, an important issue raised by citizens involves the need for an ‘active inclusion’ strategy so that all citizens, regardless of their level of IT literacy or education, can participate in and understand the knowledge resulting from the SOWIT method of inclusive deliberations. Evidence of the effectiveness of outreach is clear in the Brazilian web based public budgeting process in Belo Horizonte, state of Rio Grande do Sul. This initiative successfully brought online crowd-sourcing via an outreach program to the favelas of Brazil ([CDoten, 2012](#)). Not least, critical attention must to be given to the institutional constraints and social and cultural factors that affect the diffusion of innovation.

The SOWIT project raises many questions for further research as it is currently in the very early stages of development. By its nature, it will remain an evolving and changing project, calling for new understandings of our changing political and social world that is driven not only by the myriad of perspectives of the giants of social science and digital humanities but by the ‘wisdom of the multitude’ ([Aristotle, 2000](#)) of Irish and global citizens.

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