

Provisional title:

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**What would the ideal consensus conference look like,
and why should we strive towards one?**

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The consensus conference is an inherently positive, idealistic, and value-laden participatory mechanism that envisages ordinary citizens engaging with experts (scientists and other knowledge producers) on issues of compelling social significance. It invites ordinary citizens to bring their life experience and values to the serious consideration of a technology that may have far-reaching consequences. The local mechanic, dentist, homemaker, teacher, retiree, or tree surgeon are tapped - but not the tree-hugger - because these folks should not have any hidden agendas nor know anything substantive about the topic under consideration. Paradoxically, they stand a chance of being selected if they possess the right kind of ignorance and yet are also judged to be open-minded, willing, able to tackle the topic, and available – the loss of 6 or 7 days income is no hardship for these citizens. Perhaps this all sounds too good to be true. For proponents of deliberative democracy models, the consensus conference may be more about citizens bringing about the kind of society they want than a yea or nay to a specific technology. [I realize that part of your paper is a discussion of what the consensus conference is and why it developed and should be used, but I am struck immediately here by the lack of why I should be interested in consensus conferences...What is the potential benefit of using consensus conference...what is the hoped for goal, product; is there one? Not that you should complete your paper here in this intro paragraph, but maybe a brief sentence or two. Or perhaps from another angle...why there is a void left by other processes/models that consensus conferences may fill and overcome]

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To put these ideas in context I will discuss why and how the consensus conference model developed, what the ideal might look like based on an evaluation framework, how selected consensus conferences stack up against the ideal, and finally, how important and/or likely it is that such participatory mechanisms will be adopted on a wide scale.

The consensus conference is one of several methods that arose in the 1980s to try to inject more participation by average citizens into the technology decisions [this term is a bit broad for me....by technology decisions do you refer to any decisions that involve any technology or just policy decisions regarding the development and use of technology?] that ultimately affect them. Many writers have situated the public's disaffection with science to have

occurred following incidents such as Love Canal, nuclear power plant meltdowns both at home and abroad, toxic oil spills, and the BSE crisis. Such loss of public confidence is reputed to have been the impetus for the birth of the so-called 'public understanding of science' [\[\(PUS\), establish acronym here if use subsequently\]](#) movement. [\[more here on PUS\]](#)

...So it was that governments in Europe and the United States looked for ways to re-engage their populations with the aim of continuing the economic trajectory that that science and technology had afforded up until then. [\[Would continuation of the economic trajectory be at risk if the governments did not re-engage their populations? Why?\]](#). Those countries with a formalized technology assessment agency were well positioned to work on this issue. [\[Why? What did these technology assessment agencies hope to achieve, how?\]](#) Ironically, the United States Office of Technology Assessment (OTA), which was the agency upon which a number of such entities were modeled, closed down in 1995 - the year that the Danish Parliament established the Danish Board of Technology as an independent body (Van Eijndhoven, 1997). Thus it was the Danish model of participatory engagement; i.e. lay people providing a counterweight to experts in a public arena of discourse, which became the format that has been emulated by countries worldwide. [\[What is the link between the Danish Board of Technology and participatory engagement that ensures that this and not other models came to the forefront in Denmark? I see that the second paragraph after this one answers this question, so maybe incorporate these two paragraphs into one or rework\]](#).

It was not just happy accident that the consensus conference model evolved in Denmark, however. Danish culture, particularly in education, was influenced by a beloved historical figure, N.F.S. Grundtvig (1783-1872), a social and educational reformer. His folk school (*folkelig køjskole*) was conceived as a place where the native Danish language would be used to teach the ordinary citizens instead of the classical Latin and Greek of the exclusive universities. He had a strong belief in the abilities and wisdom of the ordinary people above the educated and elite. The term *folkelighed* that came to inform this institution is a multidimensional one. It can refer "to enlightened, responsible and tolerant participation in the exercise of power," "the quality of being of the people," or just plain "peopleness" (Borish, 1991). The tradition of people having a say in matters that affect them thus builds upon a sensibility that is well [\[long?\]](#) integrated into Danish institutions.

[\[see note above about incorporating into earlier paragraph discussing technology offices\].](#)

The consensus conference is only one of a number of methods that the Danish Board of Technology uses to promote ongoing discussion about technology, to evaluate technology, and to advise the Danish Parliament (the Folketing) and other governmental bodies in matters pertaining to technology (Danish Board of Technology, 2005). The DBT has a direct connection with the decision-making bodies in Denmark of which the countries that adopt its model can only dream. The decision to make use of the consensus conference method typically follows an annual procedure of identifying issues to be assessed, characterizing the main aspects of these issues ("the problem") and deciding who are the main "customers" or "target groups" of the assessment. In other words, the consensus conference method is chosen if and when it is deemed suitable for dealing with a specific issue that is up for assessment (Klüver, et.al., 2000).

Given the pervasiveness of the model [\[insert # of cc's held since year dot\]](#) it is not surprising that every aspect of the consensus conference model has been examined, poked, prodded, de-constructed and experimented with by proponents who are eager to institute participatory forms of technology assessment in their own countries. From GMOs [\[write-out term for first reference\]](#) and plant biotechnology, to gene technology in the food chain, to issues around telecommunications and Internet access, many consensus conferences have now been held [\[perhaps a citation here identifying these confrences specifically\]](#). A fair question to be asked is: have they been effective? The answer has to be, "it depends," for there are no standardized criteria by which to judge whether the objectives of a particular engagement exercise have been met. Indeed, in some cases even the organizers themselves had not adequately addressed the issue of objectives (Rowe, et.al., 2005). As for evaluation or assessment after the fact, there too have there been difficulties. [\[this sentence sounds a bit awkward to me\]](#)

Some organizers find that their funding does not stretch to an independent evaluation, or simply get so caught up in the mechanics of the event that the evaluation is overlooked or tacked on midway through (McKay, 1999).

[\[This section gets confusing due to formatting of text and tables...I would combine the two tables into one. I generally caption the top with something akin to "Table 1. Acceptance and process criteria for consensus conferences as developed by Rowe & Frewer \(2000\)."\]](#)

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Rowe & Frewer (2000)

Acceptance criteria

Representativeness

The public participants should comprise a broadly representative sample of the population of the affected public.

Independence

The participation process should be conducted in an independent, unbiased way.

Early Involvement

The public should be involved as early as possible in the process as soon as value judgments become salient.

Influence

The output of the procedure should have a genuine impact on policy.

Transparency

The process should be transparent so that the public can see what is going on and how decisions are being made

Resource Accessibility

Public participants should have access to the appropriate resources to enable them to successfully fulfill their brief.

Several attempts have been made to formulate schema or frameworks in order to establish the criteria upon which a consensus conference may be evaluated (Guston, 1998; Rowe, 2000; Rowe, et.al., 2004 & 2005). If we examine one of these frameworks, insights into how some researchers envision the ideal participatory mechanism might be revealed. It is also necessary to consider some accounts as to why this has proven problematic. Rowe and Frewer (2000) provide criteria in a systematic effort to address

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the evaluation issue (Table 1). The authors divide the criteria into *acceptance criteria*, which establish benchmarks to measure the construction and implementation of the participation exercise, and *process criteria*, which relate to the potential

public acceptance of the exercise (p.11 [why is this page reference here – maintain citation style](#)).

Both kinds of criteria are considered necessary because of the complex and multi-dimensional nature of the consensus conference. These criteria were distilled from a number of suggested criteria found in the literature. The checklist developed by the authors is meant to be used by evaluators [to allow for more 'fine grained' analysis of each criterion is presented in the Appendix. \(which appendix?\)](#)

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Three consensus conferences held in the U.K., the U.S., and Australia [cite the appropriate appendices here as you provide details on these conferences there. Alternatively perhaps you may want to drop the appendices if you detail them enough in your text or perhaps bring those tables into the text if you end up discussing them substantially that the appendices become redundant](#)) present a number of difficulties with respect to the application of these criteria. The respective evaluators used a variety of instruments (questionnaires, interviews, recordings and transcripts, background documents given to participants and so on) but there is no

Process criteria

Task Definition

The nature and scope of the participation task should be clearly defined.

Structured Decision-making

The participation exercise should use/provide appropriate mechanisms for structuring and displaying the decision-making process.

Cost Effectiveness

The procedure should in some sense be cost effective.

parity to be found among them in terms of whether the evaluation was integral to the planning for the event, whether the organizers allowed the evaluators access to Steering Committee planning meetings, the amount of interaction allowed between the facilitator and the experts and a host of other variables. Trying to apply criteria after the fact is not a workable proposition, which underlines the value in Rowe

and Frewer's work (citation year). An alternative is to extract and review only a few criteria that can be applied across the board and may yield some insight into future directions for the organization of a consensus conference. [If this is what you intend to do next, state that]. First, a short summary of each consensus conference follows.

U.K. National Consensus Conference on Plant Biotechnology (1994)

The Plant Biotech Consensus Conference of 1994 was the first Danish-style conference to be attempted in the U.K. Organized by the Science Museum and funded by the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC) it was composed of a 16-member lay panel, and a 21-member expert group. The conference followed the Danish format [you have multiple references to "Danish-style", "Danish model", etc., but I am not sure I am clear what the specifics of this model are. Perhaps a more explicit description or extraction of principles in a table/figure might help before you break into these three case studies] with some local changes that ultimately led to charges of bias by members of NGOs. Instead of one or two speakers presenting information at the preparatory weekends, the Plant Biotech organizers brought in 7 experts in the first weekend and 12 at the second weekend. The first day of the conference (ordinarily the first occasion for presentations from experts) the lay panel heard from 21 experts (Klüver, 2005). As a first attempt at a deliberative participatory technology assessment, the topic of plant biotechnology was chosen for its less controversial nature, compared to cloning and other hot button issues at the time (Purdue, 1999). Ironically, both pro- and anti-biotechnology groups claimed that the lay panel's report supported their respective positions.

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U.S. Citizen's Panel on Telecommunications and the Future of Democracy (1997)

The first U.S. consensus conference took place in 1997, three years after initial planning for it had begun by major instigator [\[proponent?\]](#) Richard Sclove. Participating organizations included the non-profit Loka Institute, the Education for Public Inquiry and International Citizenship (EPIIC) program at Tufts University, and various other academic and governmental organizations. [\[It might be nice to provide some incidental background info or links for further exploration by the reader on these programs in a footnote\]](#) A directorate composed of four members from the principal sponsoring organizations established the 12-member Steering Committee which then put together the lay panel of 15 [\[what?\]](#) by random phone calling and supplementary targeted recruitment to be broadly representative of wider Boston's population. [\[This is a long sentence\]](#) The telecommunications theme was chosen by the directorate members with a view to upcoming decisions concerning Internet access and other aspects of telecommunications reform. The format generally followed the Danish example. The above notwithstanding, the consensus report was judged to be too broad and “not timely to congressional needs” to have had an impact on policy and/or legislation (Guston, 1998).

First Australian Consensus Conference on Gene Technology in the Food Chain (1999)

Australia joined a number of other nations by holding its first consensus conference in 1999. It was an initiative of the Australian Consumers Association (ACA) which, interestingly, put out a bid for sponsorship of the conference to a wide range of organizations that included the nation's premier scientific research organization, the CSIRO. [\[What does CSIRO stand for? Did CSIRO actually place a bid?\]](#) The Australian Museum won the sponsorship and jointly with the ACA established the Steering Committee. The topic was chosen by the ACA and the conference was timed to coincide with an upcoming decision by the Commonwealth government on gene technology and food regulation. The local format differed from the Danish model in that every stakeholder group that joined was able to place a representative on the Steering Committee, making it quite large at 17-members. The 14-member lay panel was recruited by a market research company hired for that purpose and a sub-committee of the Steering Committee provided a list of expert speakers to the panel who had the ultimate choice of experts. A professional evaluator was brought in late in the process which had a bearing on the comprehensiveness of the assessment. The consensus report produced by the lay panel showed a

basic caution towards gene technology but not an outright rejection (McKay, 1999). A number of issues of concern were identified by the evaluators with respect to the conference process, in particular the methodology by which the experts and lay panel were chosen.

[It might be helpful to the reader in following you to provide an introduction to which criteria you will discuss further and use in your analysis and why you chose them].

The criterion of representativeness

From the summaries above, it will be seen that *representativeness* is a crucial criterion – both for the citizen panel and Steering Committee as well as in the composition and selection of the experts. Using the criterion of representativeness in Rowe and Frewer's [\[publication date\]](#) framework, the following questions are posed:

- i) were all persons with a legitimate interest in the issue (and therefore the outcome of the participation exercise) clearly identified?
- ii) were participants appropriately selected from among the group of stakeholders?
- iii) was the right balance achieved between participants acting as representatives (delegates) and participants acting in an individual capacity?
- iv) was enough effort made to get the right participants?
- v) whatever the intentions, was the group of participants actually representative (and stayed that way during the course of the exercise)?

In the UK Plant Biotechnology consensus conference, the Steering Committee lacked an environmentalist; the project staff in the U.S. consensus conference applied a 'mix and match' approach that attempted to anticipate how different people would interact together, based on address, occupation, age, educational attainment, and the response to a short essay question. Project staff and steering committee members acknowledge that this effort likely yielded a group of participants biased toward civic-mindedness (Guston, 1998, note 14 – [maintain a citation style](#)). The Australian consensus conference recruited participants according to the Danish model – newspaper advertisements – but in the view of the evaluators, the composition of the panel had a bias toward regional, rather than urban representation. In addition, the absence of a pre-conference interview to assess attitudes and values resulted in a number of individuals who displayed "firm religious beliefs" leading to reservations by the Steering Committee as to how open the panel would be to scientific information or even to change (McKay, 1999, 6.2).

Representativeness has been scrutinized in the literature on consensus conferences. Davies, Blackstock, and Rauschmeyer (2005) have written an exquisitely nuanced and well-

argued paper that, among other things, identifies three aspects surrounding the choice of participants for they call “minipublics” (consensus conferences). [\[this sentence appears to missing a word or two\]](#) These are 1) the recruitment problem, 2) the composition problem, and 3) the mandate problem. Using the typology presented in their article, it is suggested that random selection best characterizes the kind of recruitment method typically used in consensus conferences. By this they mean that participants are chosen using quotas stratified by social and demographic categories such as gender, age, social class, and locality. “The rationale for these categories is that they are assumed to relate to significant differences in perspectives on an issue, deriving from the different life experiences and interests likely to be associated with these categories.” Such an assumption, they contend, is problematic because it assumes a relationship between the individual’s location in the social structure and their value position – an assumption which, even if it holds *on average*, may well easily be false for a particular individual (Davies, et.al., p. 603) [italics in original]. [\[I like that you provide these contrasts\]](#)

The composition problem requires even more judgment as organizers make decisions about proportionality (which may lead to the absence of minorities or their marginalization within the group), selectivity (meaning only a purposively chosen selection of categories are represented), and/or universality (all categories are represented). Considering the desire to keep the numbers on a lay panel to around 14 persons, the result is usually something of a compromise between selectivity and universality.

The mandate problem (which can blur into task definition, below) is also significant in that the charge given by the organizers to the lay panel has to be transparent and unambiguous, to which some negative experiences by participants in the case studies will testify. Forming a workable panel is always a bit of a gamble in the sense that the “choice of a decisionmaking perspective can be suggested (but not determined) by the organizers, and the actual process of group deliberation is intended to engender the ‘we’ rather than ‘me’ frame of reference – both by challenging arguments that that are substantiated by reference only to ‘me’, and by presenting other arguments that call for a recognition of a ‘we’, or at least a ‘you’, in the thinking of each participant” (p. 607).

Additional insight into the concept of representation has been elucidated by Mark B. Brown [\(publication date or citation\)](#). He makes the point that citizen panels are far less participatory than their historical counterparts “from ancient Athens to New England town meetings” because

the initiative comes from the organizers, rather than the citizens themselves. Random selection does not provide an equal *opportunity* for everyone to participate in addressing a given...issue. It provides merely an equal *probability* of being chosen to participate (2006, forthcoming) [italics in original] [citation format]. On the point of participants being able to represent different social perspectives, he makes the point that the immediate aim of representing perspective is **deliberation** rather than **decisionmaking**; thus, the inclusiveness of deliberation can be judged according to gradations of richer and less rich deliberation, rather than the less forgiving criterion of fair or unfair representation of interests (p. 16) [my emphasis]. [Interesting alternative].

The ideal consensus conference, then, would pay attention to the methodology used to attract enough interested persons who could be successively filtered through variety of other means - a short essay or questionnaire - and then stratified according to the usual variables – age, occupation, etc. [better summation and transition needed]

The criterion of task definition

A second criterion that has uneven application in the group of three consensus conferences is Rowe and Frewer's (publication date) *task definition*. Questions they ask with reference to this criterion are:

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- i) Was the context to this exercise clearly identified?
- ii) Was the scope of the exercise clear and appropriate?
- iii) Were these clear and appropriate?
- iv) Was the rationale for choosing this particular type of exercise clear and appropriate?

In the U.S. example, Guston (citation) states that the directorate (the four individuals from the principal sponsoring organizations) chose the telecommunication topic from among several other topics because of their perception that the "media appetite" for it was the greatest. He understood from the organizers that this consensus conference was intended more in the mode of a "proof of concept" exercise than as a deliberative exercise aimed at directly informing and influencing policymakers in government. [Interesting distinction] In addition, while the organizers might have been moved to select this topic because of its perceived relevance and timeliness with regard to an actual legislative agenda, in actual fact the lay panel declined to take up the legislative issues although they had received a briefing on them. Feedback from

participants, especially those in government, revealed that the timeliness of the topic was miscalculated as the Congress had “dealt with such issues in the Telecommunication Act of 1997 passed just three months prior [to the consensus conference] and the pending regulatory decisions would be much more detailed in their specification of already-expressed legislative goals (p.15). Rather starkly, Guston stated that “this panel was the creation of an ad hoc collection of private groups with minimal public sponsorship at the national level” (p.16).

In the U.K. example, five years after the U.K. consensus conference on plant biotechnology Purdue noted that the pre-conference material sent out by the Science Museum suggested that the purpose of the conference was to ‘test out’ a form of governance developed in Denmark. The choice of the topic, he suggests, was restricted to plant biotechnology on the grounds that genetic manipulation of humans and animals were likely to be too contentious an issue for the lay British public. Purdue stated that environmentalists suspected that the Science Museum was hoping that plants could provide a non-contentious starting point for public acceptance of biotechnology. The aim of the conference according to remarks by several of the major players was to educate the public about biotechnology. For example, in his opening remarks Earl Howe explained the importance of the biotech industry and therefore the public understanding (and support) of it. Purdue takes this as evidence that “the conference was framed in terms of the deficit of public understanding needed to be made good if science and technology were to maintain ...momentum” (p.86) [\[citation style\]](#).

In Australia, the framing of the topic of gene technology and the food chain was noticeably more open-ended and inclusionary than either the U.S. or U.K. examples. The objectives published in the report by the conference evaluators were:

- i) To facilitate broad public debate from a plurality of perspectives including commercial interests, health and safety, consumer rights to information, environmental sustainability, trade imperatives, ethical concerns, research, regulation and so on.
- ii) To empower members of the Australian public (the Lay Panel) to gain an informed understanding of and provide input to this sensitive and important major technological issue, within the context of their own values and priorities.
- iii) To gain insight for all stakeholders into the Australian public’s plurality of views on gene technology.

- iv) To bridge the gap and create greater mutual understanding between experts and Lay Panel (which may or may not lead to greater agreement) (McKay, 1999).

At least on paper the task definition was not framed in terms of a deficit in citizen knowledge or understanding but rather as an acknowledgement of the “plurality of perspectives” that exist among stakeholders, by which is meant both experts and the general public. Indeed, as Dietrich and Schibeci note [\[publication date\]](#), the Australian consensus conference provided the lay panel with the “...autonomy to draw discussions with [the] experts beyond the normal narrow technical boundaries typical in technology planning formulation” (2003 [authors?](#)). The Australian example is noteworthy because the objectives were supplied upfront by conference organizers. This is frequently not the case; in an evaluation of the 2003 *GM Nation?* event (not strictly a consensus conference), evaluators XYZ wrote: [\[quote\]](#).

The criterion of influence

The criterion of influence (impact) is somewhat narrowly defined in Rowe and Frewer’s [\[publication date\]](#) framework. Questions relating to the influence of the consensus conference are:

- i) Were better specific decisions made as a result of the exercise?
- ii) Did the exercise have a positive impact on corporate policy-making procedures?
- iii) Did the exercise have a positive impact on the general corporate approach to handling the issues?
- iv) Did the exercise bring a significant amount of constructive media attention on to the issues?

References in the accompanying questions to “corporate policy-making” can be widened to mean government policy-making as well. Normally, this would be the one criterion that a prospective adopter of the consensus conference model would scrutinize most closely, for if it cannot be shown that a participatory exercise has had a definable, measurable effect, why hold one? One of the main complaints about participation methods is that they often have been perceived as ineffectual, simply being used to legitimate decisions or to give an appearance of consultation without there being any intent of acting on recommendations. This results in public skepticism and distrust concerning the motives of sponsors (Rowe & Frewer, 2000, p. 15).[\[citation style\]](#)

Our three sample consensus conferences do not fare well on this criterion. The independent EUROPTA Report relates that [the British case showed that the conference had](#)

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substantive sections (e.g. introduction, development of an ideal consensus conference model, three working models of consensus conferences, etc.).

The hardcopy I have included some Appendices. I was a bit confused by their numbering and also felt that they may have been cited in the text more significantly.

I look forward to your final draft! Congratulations on all your hard work, keep it up.

Cheers,

Melanie