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*Séamus Ó Tuama: Key Players or Cameos: Science and
Technology Policy and Customers, Stakeholders and Citizensⁱⁱ*

**Key Players or Cameos: Science and Technology Policy and Customers,
Stakeholders and Citizens** ^{iv}

Table of Content

Abstract	3
New Right and Democratic Necessities	4
Citizens as Customers	6
Citizens as Stakeholders	7
The Importance of Unencumbered Citizens	8
The Technological Citizen	9
Risk and Resolutions	10
Returning to Responsibility	13
References	16
<hr/>	
Editorial Note	18

Abstract

Recent decades have seen an increase in publicly contested science related controversies and issues. Increasingly ordinary citizens are called upon to make difficult private and public decisions about science. They have to decide about the food they eat – Is beef safe? Should they eat genetically modified foods – whether they should vaccinate their children, live near electricity pylons or telephone masts and so on. These are both individual and public questions. There is a need to balance the public good against risks and uncertainty. Sometimes personal decisions impact on the wider public and vice-versa.

As science presents ever more complex questions we struggling to find ways of

answering them. At one level citizens are becoming more informed and active, but on the other they are being defining as stakeholders and customers. A customer is a consumer not an active participant. A stakeholder has a vested interest; traditionally some hold more interests (votes) than others.

This is a dichotomy. On one side responsible citizens address urgent concerns in an evolving democratic framework. On the other experts and elites decide policy in a top-down model for a more passive community. This is an old dilemma in a new context, it is about who should steer the ship through very uncertain waters.

New Right and Democratic Necessities

The concept of the citizen and citizenship can be traced back at least to classical Greece. However in recent centuries it has become associated almost inextricably with the traditions of liberalism and civic republicanism. The relationship between citizenship, democracy and the modern liberal-democratic state became so close as to be almost indistinguishable. Both citizenship and democracy arrived as virtually uncontested goods into the contemporary era (Fierlbeck, 1998). Democracy is promoted as the model of good governance globally, often in an uncritical and unreflective way. In Canovan's words it is 'crowned with a halo of sacred authority' (Canovan, 1999).

The emergence of neo-liberalism in the West from the 1970s began to question the stability of that triangular symbiosis. The word democracy remained as a sacred icon, but the understanding of its functioning became enmeshed in the great neo-liberal project in no less a way than the state and citizenship. In this paper I want to focus primarily on the handling of the idea of citizenship, both as a starting point for a broader analysis and in a clear recognition that to go further is too ambitious for this occasion.

Ostensibly neo-liberalism is tied to the notion of the citizen in a formal sense. Indeed much of the rhetoric and political articulation of neo-liberals is prefaced on the idea of citizen qua the classical liberal citizen. The notion of citizenship had extended considerably in the West since the writings of the early liberals. Much of this heritage has not been taken up by the neo-liberals, in fact the views

of people like John Stuart Mill in the 19th Century and T.H. Marshall in the last century have been rolled back by neo-liberal thinking.

It is now over 20 years since Jürgen Habermas developed his position concerning the *colonization of the lifeworld*. The discussion begun by Habermas has considerable importance for the discussion in this paper.

Habermas deriving from Weber's representation of bureaucracy as being purposive-rational, moves his analysis forward to recognize a systems-theory perspective, in that the orientation is geared more towards 'solving system problems'. We can see here the seeds of the problem of *colonization of the lifeworld*; for now the orientation is geared towards rationally addressing systemic problems around economic production and public administration. This is the fuel that drives the neo-liberal agenda, giving rise to such ideas as New Public Management (NPM). NPM acts as a mask, behind which the neo-liberal orientation is almost invisible. Here we search after efficiency, cost effectiveness, delivery of service, greater organization flexibility, mission statements, customer charters, quality, and absorption of a private sector managerial culture, philosophy and structure. These indicators promise public goods like: value for money—reduces the call on tax revenue; greater efficiency—saves money and delivers the service more quickly; transparency of service—democratization and equity of delivery; respect for customers—the sort of respect and service one might expect in a good store. This list could continue.

In all to use the jargon it is a 'win-win situation'. In these terms it is assumed everyone gains. Those entitled to the services get them in time, they are delivered within budget, the frontline deliverers feel positive about their roles, and governments can cut taxes and still deliver better services. The value of the NPM mask is that many of these assertions are verifiably true. The problem of colonization of the lifeworld is also verifiably true. The fresh paint and bright signs on the shop front may hide that in the short term, but the overall gamble of the project is one which ultimately undermines what Ulrich Beck describes as the European way of life. In this way we may be addressing systemic problems and dealing with them with rational efficiency, but the cost on the lifeworld side

may be greater than anticipated.

Citizens as Customers

I perceive a growing confusion between the term customer and the term citizen. We cannot conflate the meaning of citizen and customer, to do so would undermine much of what has been achieved in western civil society over the centuries towards the evolution of citizenship. In shorthand a customer is a person who buys goods or services. On the other hand a citizen is a member of a political community, the membership of which carries both rights and responsibilities. They are not mutually inclusive. A customer has rights, provided s/he has the wherewithal to purchase the service. Without the ability to pay the customer effectively has no rights at all. The responsibilities of a customer do not extend much beyond basic civility and the requirement to fulfill his/her side of a contract.

In attempting to disentangle the two concepts it is useful to make some initial points. In a general sense customers are treated as though they are citizens, although of course they may not in fact be citizens at all. A good example of this might be customers of an airport duty free shop. In so far as a citizen is a customer it is only when s/he is engaged in a transaction. Customers have rights and indeed at times responsibilities, much like a citizen. A customer is obliged to pay for the service. In some circumstances the customer may have to fulfill certain obligations in order to complete the transaction. A customer might have to provide evidence that s/he is entitled to complete the transaction, for instance purchasing prescription medicines. The key point is that a citizen is always a citizen within the political community and a customer is only a customer when they are engaged in a transaction. A citizen has a fuller set of rights and obligations, but they may apply only to a given geographical space. On the other hand a customer's rights and obligations are restricted to the transaction being undertaken, but in theory at least money or tradable commodity is all you need to be a member of the club. Both clubs have rules and benefits of membership, but they are not synonymous. The realm of customer is essentially located within two of the three pillars of citizenship identified in T.H. Marshall's famous essay

Class, citizenship, and social development. Herein lies the problem in addressing the sorts of issues outlined above. What is required is an informed active citizenry not passive customers.

Citizens as Stakeholders

The idea of stakeholders emerges from the same philosophical position. Here the model suggested is drawn from the world of private corporations. Votes here are allocated primarily to particular kinds of investors called shareholders or stockholders or stakeholders. There is a weighted voting system where investors are allocated votes in proportion to the number of shares they own in the corporation. It is not unusual for a single investor to control a corporation on the basis of a substantial holding, often less than half the shares. It makes no difference how many other investors are in the corporation it is shares or stakes that count. This has led to discontent among first time investors in privatized state companies-like the telecoms sector-and sports fans who see their clubs floated on the stock exchange. Unhappiness emerges when the new company takes a direction not to the wishes of the majority of the shareholders, but instead to the wishes of the majority shareholders. In some cases the small shareholders find themselves maneuvered into selling their shares to the new owner at levels less than they hoped for or indeed for less than the original purchase price. There is nothing new in this, it is essentially playing the game according to the rules agreed. The only newness is in the realization on the part of the new participants that the rules are so arranged. Neither is it new in terms of the emergence of democracy. Plato had his problems with democracy, the Utilitarians had misgivings and even John Stuart Mill was prepared to conceive of a notion of weighted voting. The idea of stakeholder revisits these debates, even if it is presented in a very different light.

Stakeholder participation in political decision-making is presented as inclusionary. Politicians are fond of making the grand gesture of extending the consultation process on major public issues like technological concerns or planning to all stakeholders. The implicit message is that everyone with a concern will be consulted. The reality is that like in private corporations some of

the stakeholders hold more shares, that is their vested interests are given a greater centrality to the decision-making process, because perhaps of their expertise or their economic dependency on the outcome. Like the annual shareholders meeting everyone has a voice, but not everyone has the same vote.

The idea of stakeholding decouples the relationship between citizenship and the common good. It has the impact too of separating rights and responsibilities within the ambit of citizenship and making both optional functions. Let us use a hypothetical example a public consultation around the MMR or three-in-one vaccination of small children. Parents of small children would be seen as stakeholders in the debate, in this sense they are one among a group of citizens with a right to participate in the discussion. This means that other citizens are *de facto* excluded, whether or not they are concerned with the issue. It also means that the stakeholders, the included group, also shoulder responsibility for the issue within the context of the discussion. This raises a whole series of problems around the working of democracy and the role of the citizen.

The Importance of Unencumbered Citizens

The earlier discussion on the impacts of science and technology set a context for the discussion of the importance of guarding the concept of citizen. The advent of customer and stakeholder into the discourse at best create a confusion, which I believe is an indicator of Habermas' contention regarding the colonization of the lifeworld. The social democratic state was engaged in the project of factual equality, which extends beyond the tightly defined equality of liberalism and later neo-liberalism. John Stuart Mill realized this in the 19th Century and until the late 20th Century the project continued in this trajectory, not without many objections and problems of course. In Britain the arrival of Margaret Thatcher advanced the liberal project once more and effectively gave renewed vibrancy to the rational choice free-market at the expense of the lifeworld. Thatcher after all pronounced the non-existence of society. The neo-liberals still fervently believe in the classical liberal notion of the citizen as a rational actor in the market, but not as an agent of democratic engagement. This discussion has long roots in what might be described as the developmental and protective camps of liberalism. The

neo-liberals have total faith in the market and the citizen's primary duty is to defend against the encroachment of government.

The chief evil of government is its capacity to interfere with the market or to engage in the social process of factual equality. This implies the primacy of the system at the expense of the lifeworld in Habermas' terms. This might be rational if the market could in fact steer all aspect of life, if risk or contingency were not issues, and if continued economic growth and resource exploitation could continue unchecked. This sort of free-market utopia does not exist. We inhabit a more complex and might I venture a more interesting and demanding world. If we hold democracy as the best road to good government in this context, then we need to address the fundamental unit of the citizen—without citizens there can be no democracy.

The Technological Citizen

Frankenfeld (1992) in his seminal proposition on *Technological Citizenship* addresses four areas of citizen engagement, which run against the neo-liberal orientation towards constructing citizens as customers and/or stakeholders. The four basic rights enjoyed by the technological citizen for Frankenfeld are rights to knowledge or information; participation; guarantees of informed consent; limitation on the total amount of endangerment. These four could be realized through an adaptation of structural arrangements within the liberal state, but they could not be advanced under the influence of a neo-liberal push away from viewing citizens as producers of government rather than consumers of it and or having differential interests in the common good. We live in an unprecedented era of positive and negative potentials, which heightens the importance of this discussion, and underlines Frankenfeld's model of:

... a set of binding, equal rights and obligations that are intended to reconcile technology's unlimited potentials for human benefit and ennoblement with its unlimited potentials for human injury, tyrannization, and degradation (Frankenfeld, 1992: 462)

The complexities we are dealing with immediately impose an unreachable scope

for any national or regional constitution. In this sense perhaps the citizen's role takes primacy over those of elected assemblies and parliaments. I wish to take this discussion forward from a few perspectives. Firstly by looking at technology and responses to it, but then to return using the frame of responsibility to re-examine the citizen-parliamentary relationship.

Risk and Resolutions

Many of the hazards and risks are global in potential. Information technology is reconstructing not just boundaries, but time-space equations. Many of the biotechnological advances, for instance cloning, are supra-species in that they carry a potential to not just go beyond political boundaries, but to go beyond humans as the dominant planetary species. Can the nation state continue to operate at a local level, relegating the supra-national problems to supra-national constitutional frameworks, might be the next question. Membership of international agencies of governance and monitoring can begin to deal with some of these issues. But whether it can guarantee the rights and obligations outlined by Frankenfeld for ordinary citizens in an international community is very doubtful.

This leads us to the quality of decision-making and to Bohman's concepts of hypercomplexity and hyperrationality. Hypercomplexity refers to the web of interconnected problems emerging through for instance ecological risk, global economics, food and water supplies, population pressures, global crime, etc. Hyperrationality is a direct response to these sets of problems, suggesting that strong political rationality is more effective and efficient than deliberation. Bohman's thesis refutes the contention that complex decisions are best made in tightly bound political processes, but this position is far from universal. His counter thrust is that an open deliberative process should cover not just political institutions, but bureaucratic ones also.

In terms of the governance of science and technology we have not developed a way of dealing with global problems in a sufficiently complex or enforceable way. One could cite the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro as the beginnings of this,

but the frailty of the process was highlighted by George W. Bush's antipathy towards Kyoto and other international agreements that his administration viewed as being against US interests. The counter might be to suggest that delegations and experts could sufficiently deal with the issues, keeping an eye on public opinion and the needs of the planet. Sclove points to the fundamental misconception inherent in such an approach. He puts forward a compelling argument why technological development needs to be addressed through posing 'appropriate questions'. He contends that 'technology is implicated in perpetuating antidemocratic power relations and in eroding social contexts for developing and expressing citizenship (Sclove, 1995: 7). He says many of the ill effects and unforeseen consequences of technology have arisen precisely because we have been unable or did not realize that we should have been asking questions aimed directly at the social aspects of technology. Like Dryzek, and others, he suggests that clearer democratic involvement with the decision-making process might have delivered us greater collective good, although it must be acknowledged that unintended outcomes also arise. Sclove himself offers a sophisticated set of answers to this deficit, including drawing on existing models.

Winner's analysis of a self-maintaining scientific community fits well with the current discussion on the relationship between citizen, customer and stakeholder. His 'reverse adaptation' concept proposes that 'the end' is not decided in any democratically shaped context, so much as providing a reason for 'the means', which is the perpetuation of a technological system through 'the resources, freedom, and social power to continue its work' (Winner, 1977: 259). Here the citizen has no real input, the customer consumes the fruits of a system shaped to a great extent by a key stakeholder.

Beck asserts that 'progress replaces voting' (Beck, 1992: 184). He suggests that there is a role reversal between 'the political' and the 'non-political', while constitutions remain in place 'the political system is being threatened with *disempowerment* (Beck, 1992: 187). He puts forward the spectre of a 'ghostlike' polity that can no longer make the important decisions on the direction, scope, risk or endangerment of the science and technological advances that are shaping society. These decisions are being made in a non-political realm according to

techno-economic imperatives. This is not just an indictment of the political; it is placing in question the entire constitutional arrangement of the welfare or nation state as being less than adapted to deal with problems of the day. Giddens describes this dilemma as a 'high modernity' contradiction of Weber's 'steel-hard cage'. In this case he suggests a counter-Enlightenment insight that the world is highly contingent and open precisely '*because of*, not in spite of, the knowledge we have accumulated' (Giddens, 1995: 58).

Control over this knowledge is, as Zimmerman points out, close to the centre of the problem (Zimmerman, 1995). His discussion of the democratic deficit inherent in this new paradigm identifies a serious problem at the outset, due to the very nature of the 'large-scale complex systems' that control science and technology. Echoing both Bohman and Beck he claims that these systems generate their own steering functions and make decisions about risk, that once might have been the remit of politics and constitutional states: '... [these] complex systems, pose dilemmas for how we govern and are governed by some of the most significant and powerful institutions of our time' (Zimmerman, 1995: 86). His position is that a lack of democratic structures to deal with this hypercomplexity is generating a position where the technological systems are emerging as *de facto* political systems. He makes points in relation to science and technology that could have easily been ascribed to say Locke or Rousseau against a pre-liberal society. He addressed the issue of tyranny: a tyranny emerging from the impotence of the citizen in the face of the emptied political world or the ghostlike facade of a political system now devoid of political potency, as described by Beck and Giddens. The self-steering technological complex deals with issues reaching as deep as imaginable within society and the entity of the individual. That citizens encounter outcomes 'without even their tacit consent is undeniably an act of tyranny' (Zimmerman, 1995: 92).

The complexity and sheer impact on the human species of biotechnological science has shifted the boundaries of nature and our understanding of ourselves in the deepest and most fundamental ways. Biotechnology forces the concept of the individual out of focus. Complex technology is both global and socially shaping. Citizens have little direct input, governments are reluctant or often

unable to make policy, but it would be naïve to construct Zimmerman's or Winner's scientific communities as homogenous or hegemonous. Even at the level of evaluating risk for say a GMO food, it is not always clear that the various relevant branches of even closely related scientific fields consult. Everyone works at his or her own research, following what are often altruistic goals, but in a policy fog.

Beck is not optimistic that self-determination and democracy can win out against 'the imperialism of technology, science and industry' (Beck, 1998: 30). Here he is echoing similar views to Winner and Dahl. Rifkin believes that advances in biotechnology could fundamentally alter society. He says '[m]eritocracy could give way to genetocracy, with individuals, ethnic groups, and races increasingly categorized and stereotyped by genotype (Rifkin, 1998: 3). The entire thrust of the *Biotech Century* is that even this transformation may just be a naive introduction to a potentially more sobering unfolding of biotechnological potentialities. This is one which could, at least, see an advanced eugenics by an elite or elites, producing "'works of art', continually editing their DNA codes for therapeutic and cosmetic ends' (Rifkin, 1998: 129).

Returning to Responsibility

Strydom proposes that responsibility occupies the space vacated by debates around rights in the early modern period and by justice in the 20th Century (Strydom, 1999). For the purposes of this discussion it offers a means through which we can reconceptualize the contents of citizenship and forward a direction for addressing the problems outlined above. A convenient starting point in relation to responsibility is to locate it in Kant's formulation of obligation.

Kant developed the idea of obligation as one side of the rights-obligation equation. The importance of this dimension of citizenship is not often articulated in general political discourse and is even neglected by some theorists. Kant lays out the foundations of obligation in the *Groundwork*. For him common human understanding of morality is not something the individual can deviate from by simply changing his or her ends or goals. The 'categorical or unconditional

imperative' is that there is a universal moral upon which everyone, regardless of their individual desires, must act. Gregor (1993) explains that for Kant the individual must be aware of his/her autonomy, and it is this capacity for autonomous will that confers human dignity. Being autonomous and under obligation (to act in accordance with the categorical imperative) the individual is giving him/herself laws by which to act as an individual. In the neo-liberal context obligation lacks the moral force envisaged by Kant. When reduced to the level of customer it must mean little more than the obligation to pay for a good and from the point of view of the stakeholder its orientation is towards self-interest.

Jonas raised the importance of responsibility by stating that technology is essentially the exclusive responsibility of humans, but that its capacity is ever increasing in its impact on humanity and progressively all other life forms on the planet (Jonas, 1982). He listed the five imperatives of technology, beginning with its unreckonable consequences, even when it is applied ostensibly for the common good. An example might be the current GMO food debate. On one side are strong cases to feed a growing global population; on the other are possible and unreckonable long-term dangers that might conceivably outweigh the shorter-term gains. A responsible response demands more than the 'inherent ambivalence' of technology. Jonas points out the irresistible tendency of technology to move from development to deployment. This drive forward is largely unsteered by responsible ethics.

He claims that technology being 'too big' for the stage on which it plays throws up new ethical considerations. The capacity for damage can be global and intergenerational. He insists that the ethical frame 'preeminently summoned by this novel fact is: responsibility and that responsibility increases with power' (Jonas, 1982: 893). He is clear in stating that this responsibility must go beyond care only for the rights of fellow humans. It is not just a case of utilitarian exploitation of the planet for the preservation of humanity, but one in which human good must be tempered with all life on the planet. This responsibility falls on humans as the generators of technological risk. He says that if there is a categorical imperative for humans to exist, then technology cannot employ

'suicidal gambings' against what is categorically forbidden.

The understanding of responsibility is considerably deepened with reference to Strydom's' concept of co-responsibility. Co-responsibility pertains to individuals as members of a collectivity, based on communication and cooperation, and emerges only through a global network of communications at formal and informal levels. It is important to distinguish it from the concept of collective responsibility, which presupposes a metaphysical perspective and also offers shelter from individual responsibility. Co-Responsibility places risk previously known or unknown onto a discursive agenda and assumes that all individuals equally share responsibility for both the consequences and the impacts of any collective action.

Responsibility has gained its elevated role through discourse around risk by social movements, the state and business, but is now established at a macro-level above these actors. We can appreciate this with reference to the new set of key words that are shaping political and public discourse. This can be seen in the extent to which concern and debate about, risk, science and technology and their management have become central to the lives of ordinary citizens. Strydom sees it not as a constraining cultural cognitive structure, but one that can enable, by taking on board differing perspectives, visions and practices.

This projects a new reality for citizens, but also introduces new potentialities for discourse including parliamentary discourse. While parliaments suffer erosion of executive power and declining legitimacy, this may be due to an orientation still towards power when one towards responsibility might be more pertinent. Instead of seeking to exercise power in all the realms once monopolized by the nation state, parliaments might more fruitfully become vehicles for articulating issues of responsibility across a broad canvas. This would require an interactive mode rather than representational one. There is evidence to suggest that parliaments are realizing this function, through wider public engagement and the introduction of new forms of public participation.

Here democracy is less geared towards instrumental decision-making, but moves

more towards a corrective trajectory against the colonizing inclinations of the system in Habermas' terms. A responsibility oriented public sphere may have greater capacity for dealing with the complexities of the contemporary era than one swamped by an uncontrollably expanding and deepening agenda. It also shifts power away from institutions, even very powerful ones, as co-responsibility undermines instrumentalism and re-infuses a moral imperative.

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Editorial Note

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