

Linking mini-publics to the deliberative system: A research agenda

The systemic turn in deliberative democratic theory has shifted the focus away from seeking to design separate, internally deliberative ‘mini-publics’ and towards a new appreciation of their external, systemic quality. Yet, so far, such accounts have not gone beyond recognizing a potential for mini-publics to contribute to deliberative systems. In this paper, we argue that a systemic conceptualization of mini-publics must recognize their fundamentally ambivalent character: Since mini-publics have the potential both to foster and to undermine systemic deliberation, it is insufficient to celebrate their positive potential alone, and vital to develop frameworks that allow for a critical evaluation of mini-publics’ systemic role. To this end, we propose a framework based on the systemic qualities of deliberation-making, legitimacy-seeking, and capacity-building, and conclude that key to mini-publics’ quality, when judged against these criteria, is not just their own features, but the degree of ‘co-development’ of all system components.

Introduction

For a long time, mini-publics have been hailed as ‘among the most promising actual constructive efforts’ that promote deliberative democracy (Fung 2003: 339). Numerous studies have illustrated how forums including citizens’ juries, consensus conferences and twenty-first century town hall meetings can develop civic virtues (Grönlund et al. 2010), promote social learning (Kanra 2012), transform participants’ preferences (Niemeyer 2011; French and Laver 2009; Luskin et al. 2002), develop shared identities (Hartz-Karp et al. 2010) and generate epistemically superior outcomes (Secko et al. 2009). Some describe them as ‘the most advanced method to institutionalise deliberative democracy’ (Elstub 2014: 166; Elstub and McLaverty 2014: 14) and integral to the renewal of representative democracy (Ferejohn 2008). The surge of experimental studies with small-scale deliberation has been so dominant that, for some time, one could get the impression that mini-publics *were* deliberative democracy (Parkinson 2006: 5; Chambers 2009: 330-1).

By now, there is more widespread agreement that mini-publics make up only one component part of deliberative democracy (Mansbridge et al. 2012), or are even useful mainly for research purposes (Dryzek 2010: 9). Following the initial phase of enthusiasm for mini-publics, deliberative democrats have increasingly acknowledged their limitations. Mini-publics only work for small numbers (Parkinson 2006: 4-5; Gutmann and Thompson 1996: 131) and clearly delineated issues (Dryzek 2010: 28). They are not representative in the electoral sense (Goodin 2008: 11; Lafont 2015: 10), their being ‘designed’ gives them an undemocratic feel (Chambers 2009: 330), and they are not immune from partisan politics, manipulation and strategic abuse (Bevir and Ansari 2012). Thus, the legitimacy of mini-publics has been questioned, especially when these unelected bodies are given a privileged position to shape public policy (Lafont 2015; Olsen and Trenz 2014; Parkinson 2006).

What reconciles the celebratory and critical stances towards mini-publics is the recent turn towards the notion of ‘deliberative systems’ (Parkinson and Mansbridge 2012; Mansbridge et al. 2010), which links the assessment of these forums as discrete episodes of democratic deliberation to a broader examination of their purpose, legitimacy and impact within a wider context of democratic processes and institutions at the level of the system as a whole. This new perspective obviates any short-sighted celebrations of mini-publics as instantiations of deliberative democracy; yet, it still neither renders irrelevant the concerns about mini-publics’ legitimacy nor explains how their positive features translate to system-level outcomes. Therefore, now that the general case for a systemic appraisal of mini-publics has been made, there is a need for a clearer conceptualisation of mini-publics’ links with the wider systems of which they are a part: how they influence the extent to which these systems can plausibly be characterised as ‘deliberative’, and thus how their role in deliberative systems ought to be normatively conceived.

In this article, we propose a critical approach that can examine the ways in which mini-publics contribute to the deliberative capacity of the broader polity. Arguing that mini-publics have the potential both to enhance and to undermine deliberative capacity at the systemic level, we propose deliberation-making, legitimacy-seeking, and capacity-building as evaluative criteria to assess their democratic credentials in relation to the wider system. We also suggest that one determinant of their positive role is the degree of ‘co-development’ towards deliberative democratic legitimacy between different system components.

The article is structured in four parts. First, we briefly map current debates on the democratic credentials of mini-publics. We take part in this debate by arguing for neither an optimistic nor a critical view of mini-publics but one that underscores their *ambivalent* character. Second, we put forward a characterisation of what makes a ‘good mini-public’ when evaluated in systemic terms by establishing the relationship between a mini-public’s

‘internal quality’ (the extent to which the micro-deliberative forum is inclusive and deliberative) and ‘external quality’ (the extent to which it contributes to the system’s deliberative capacity). Third, we offer concrete examples to illustrate our systemic analysis. In this section, we present a critical rereading of oft-cited case studies of mini-publics. We argue that when assessed in systemic terms, mini-publics that are often celebrated to be of ‘good’ quality may fall short in promoting systemic deliberation. Finally, the article concludes by revisiting some of the theoretical and empirical literature’s critiques against mini-publics, particularly their insignificant and undemocratic character in relation to mass democracy (Lafont 2015; Pateman 2012). We offer the notion of ‘co-development’ as one possibility to ensure mini-publics’ fruitful role in the deliberative system.

Optimistic, critical and ambivalent views on mini-publics

It has been six years since Simone Chambers (2009) first raised the question: ‘Has deliberative democracy abandoned mass democracy?’ Chambers challenges the literature’s tendency to focus on designing discrete small-scale deliberative assemblies at the expense of taking on larger questions about how deliberation can be strengthened in the context of an unstructured public sphere (Chambers 2009: 332-333). Carole Pateman (2012: 8) affirms this observation. Deliberative democrats, she argues, have focused on ‘new deliberative bodies’ and have shown ‘little interest’ in promoting participation in the broader public sphere. There has been more attention towards an ‘epistemic reading’ of deliberative democracy which ascribes a central place to authentic deliberation in small, neatly designed forums (see Grönlund et al 2014) rather than pursuing a macro-deliberative strategy which broadens the scope of inclusiveness of deliberation in mass democracy (see also Lafont 2015; Olsen and Trenz 2011). This trend is disadvantageous even in the study of mini-publics. As Chambers puts it, ‘unless we have a good grasp of how the broader democratic context can be shaped to complement, or at least not undermine deliberative experiments, then many of the democratic advantages of mini-publics will be lost’ (Chambers 2009: 331).

There are two currents that address Chambers’ challenge of understanding how micro-deliberative forums are linked to macro-political processes. One represents what can be called an *optimistic* view, which supports the scaling up of mini-publics’ outcomes to the broader public sphere. Mini-publics need to be better connected to centres of power so their recommendations bear weight on political decisions. This is based on the premise that mini-publics represent an ‘enlightened’ as opposed to ‘raw’ public opinion that has undergone the process of rigorous deliberation, hence deserving of serious political consideration (Fishkin 2003). Goodin and Dryzek (2006) have provided a snapshot of successful mini-publics that were able to secure ‘macro-political uptake,’ such as the British Columbia Citizens’ Assembly which led to a referendum on electoral reform. More recently, Pogrebinschi (2013) has illustrated how specific institutional design features of ‘large-scale mini-publics’ such as Brazil’s National Public Policy Conferences (participants range from 10,000 to 500,000) can lead to political effectiveness, manifest in the legislature’s responsiveness to these forums’ input.

Another view, however, takes a *critical* position against such accounts. Lafont (2015), in particular, questions the basis of micro-deliberative forums’ legitimacy. She takes issue with mini-publics directly determining public policies, for these ‘diminish rather than increase the legitimacy of the deliberative system as a whole’ (Lafont 2015: 41). If, following Pettit (1997: 184), legitimacy in deliberative democracy rests on outcomes all citizens ‘can own and identify with,’ then outcomes of mini-publics are far from approximating this ideal. Micro-deliberative forums have ‘bounded validity’ as deliberations occur under controlled conditions of a scientific experiment (Olsen and Trenz 2014: 118) – in contrast to the complex and non-ideal deliberative context of the broader public sphere, where citizens remain vulnerable to sound bites and demagoguery (Lafont 2015: 58). Even though mini-publics may produce an epistemically superior outcome, these results will have little currency in a polity where the citizenry is disempowered to make well-considered judgments. Following Chambers’ argument, Lafont urges deliberative democrats to pursue a macro-deliberative strategy as mass participation in quality deliberation is central to democratic legitimacy.

While the debate around an optimistic versus a critical perspective on mini-publics has so far largely taken place within the context of ‘micro’ versus ‘macro’ approaches, a systemic interpretation of deliberative democracy can provide further nuance to this debate. Conceptually, this approach foregrounds the relationships of micro-deliberative forums to other spaces and mechanisms of discursive contestation. Deliberative democracy is envisaged as an overarching system made up of different component parts that overall plays host to a range of contesting discourses within and across both ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ sites in an inclusive, deliberative and consequential manner. No single site—be it mini-publics or parliamentary debates—is expected to uphold all deliberative virtues at once. Therefore, mini-publics are not perceived as a privileged deliberative forum which can trump the legitimacy of discourses formed in the less structured public sphere. To this extent, we argue, a systemic view of deliberation does not endorse the ‘shortcut’ Lafont has identified, for it does not

automatically confer a privileged role to mini-publics in shaping public policy (Lafont 2015: 3). Instead, a systemic appreciation of mini-publics is neither optimistic nor critical but *ambivalent*. Mini-publics, depending on how meaningfully connected they are to other components of the deliberative system, can serve to promote or hinder deliberative democratisation at the wider systemic level.

What makes a ‘good’ mini-public in the deliberative system?

What, then, makes a ‘good’ mini-public in systemic terms? We posit that such assessment rests on the relationship between a mini-public’s internal and external deliberative quality. By ‘internal quality,’ we refer to how mini-publics fare in assessments of ‘deliberativeness.’ These, for example, are deliberative forums that pass the test of representativeness, those that register high levels of inter-subjective consistency (Niemeyer 2011) or Discourse Quality (Steiner et al. 2004), and lead to outcomes that realise deliberative goals such as meta-consensus and enhanced civic virtues. The literature on mini-publics has focused on these standards and measures in the past two decades, so we will not provide an exhaustive discussion here (see Grönlund et al. 2014). At this point, it suffices to state that from a deliberative systems perspective, it is not enough that mini-publics register high internal quality. For mini-publics to claim relevance and legitimacy in the deliberative system, they must be consequential in a deliberation-enhancing sense. We refer to this as ‘external quality.’

A mini-public has external deliberative quality if it fulfils three ‘functional imperatives’¹ in the deliberative system: *deliberation-making*, *seeking legitimacy*, and *capacity-building*. These functional imperatives are conceptualised based on the view that deliberative democracy at the level of systems is first and foremost about democratic legitimacy (Niemeyer 2014: 182; Parkinson 2006: 4). While mini-publics (like any contributing parts to a deliberative system) can fulfil a range of different functions (see e.g. Fung 2003), not all of these align—or are even compatible—with the specific goal of democratic legitimacy. From a deliberative perspective, democratic legitimacy consists in political outcomes ‘receiv[ing] reflective assent through participation in authentic deliberation by all those subject to the decision in question’ (Dryzek 2010: 23). Though this ultimate normative ideal might never be completely achieved, it does serve as the standard towards which system components must contribute in order to enhance deliberative democracy. Thus far, the literature that has taken a measured view of mini-publics has described mini-publics to have a *potential* to play a role in relation to legitimacy (as in the focus of Niemeyer 2014) but clear evaluative criteria must be identified to assess the extent to which this potential is realised. In this light, we argue, that the external deliberative quality of mini-publics must be seen as comprised of the deliberative virtues of (further) deliberation-making, (further) fostering legitimacy, and building (further) capacity.

1. *Deliberation-making* is a term first used by Niemeyer (2014: 179), who provides the most complete conceptualisation of mini-publics in the deliberative system so far. ‘Deliberation-making’ means mini-publics distilling and synthesising relevant discourses to be transmitted to wider publics, as opposed to engaging in direct decision-making. In this sense, mini-publics play a particular role as ‘brokers of knowledge’ as participants in this forum were given time and resources to work out complex issues to which non-participants have no access. As such, they can, for example, promote a nuanced position on polarising issues or prompt mass publics to reconsider unpopular proposals which mini-publics considered to be just. However, such synthesised information will only constitute deliberation-making if it enriches, rather than puts an end to, public deliberation. At best, mini-publics can contribute to the formation of a meta-consensus or public understanding on the range of legitimate positions (Niemeyer and Dryzek 2007). At worst, they shut down debate by claiming epistemic authority instead of engaging mass publics. The public and often celebrated status accorded to mini-publics must therefore achieve a careful balance for them to prompt further deliberation and reflection among non-participants rather than claiming the final word on the issue discussed. If mini-publics are perceived as authoritative in their ability to claim epistemic superiority, they potentially distort the inclusiveness of public debate and render it less rather than more democratic. Equally, however, if their status is insufficiently prominent, mini-publics’ recommendations might be undermined by partisan campaigners manipulating public debate.

This point shows that mini-publics’ deliberation-making cannot be assumed, but must be critically assessed on a case-by-case basis; and the assessment is not just dependent on the mini-public itself, but on the wider context within which it takes place. To fulfil the systemic imperative of deliberation-making, mini-publics certainly ought to be designed to have sufficient status to enable deliberation

¹ We borrow the term ‘functional imperatives’ from Parsons’ (1971) account of the social system which is composed of various components that fulfil particular functions to ensure the system’s survival.

among affected publics and avoid being undermined by interested lobbying whilst sending a message of opening up debate as opposed to having the final say; yet ultimately its effects in this regard depend as much on citizens' reactions and responses to it as on its own features. Citizens' reactions and responses, in turn, rest on their given deliberative capabilities (cf. Niemeyer 2014: 184).

2. The second systemic imperative, arising out of these considerations around the first, is mini-publics' obligation of *seeking legitimacy*. In systemic terms, the epistemic quality of mini-publics' outcomes is only as good as the process that feeds it back to 'public authorisation and accountability' (Olsen and Trenz 2014: 118). Following Manin (1987), legitimacy is not predetermined but constituted only by *convincing* the public that their conclusions are valid and their recommendations are worth pursuing. This is particularly relevant considering outcomes of mini-publics have 'bounded validity,' and it is only withstanding the scrutiny and contestation of non-participants that can grant these outcomes the status of generalisable validity.

Again, the relevant quality marker (i.e., legitimacy) does not result from mini-publics' internal features alone, nor from their formal links with authoritative bodies; but it depends on the nature of its relationships with those toward whom its legitimation is imperative: the wider, non-participant citizenry. Irrespective of their internal quality, mini-publics have an 'external' *obligation to persuade*—a duty to justify, clarify, respond and change recommendations or collective decisions if need be. This safeguards mini-publics from dangers of 'participatory elitism' by extending these forums' internal democracy to their engagements with the public sphere (Chambers 2009: 344). This may seem an overly exacting demand on mini-public participants, but it is only by broadening the scope of deliberative legitimation to non-participants that mini-publics can forge a meaningful connection to the deliberative system. 'Legitimacy matters,' as Dryzek and Tucker argues, 'because it means that the forum is broadly accepted as having a proper place in the political process' (Dryzek and Tucker 2008: 865)—when without such acceptance, mini-publics' supposed role in enhancing democratic legitimacy bears at least a risk of degenerating into a harmful as opposed to beneficial influence on the deliberative system.

3. Finally, resulting from the previous two points, we suggest that a 'good' mini-public in systemic terms must contribute to *building the capacity* of a polity to host inclusive and authentic deliberation. Niemeyer argues mini-publics can play a role not only in 'improving the civic skills of *participants*' (Niemeyer 2014: 194, emphasis added), but also help foster truth-seeking behaviour and deliberative abilities of *non-participating* citizens by acting as 'exemplars' of deliberation (Niemeyer 2014: 179, 191, 194). Yet he also admits what we are stressing here: A positive systemic role of mini-publics does not rest on mini-publics' own functions and qualities alone, but it is dependent on citizens fulfilling a certain role, too.

Lafont's critique is pertinent here. How can a public sphere appreciate or contest mini-publics' outcomes if the public does not have the capacity to engage in deliberation? It seems that mini-publics' role in enhancing deliberative capacity, as envisaged by Niemeyer, is in fact contingent on an already existing level of such capacity. Lafont proposes macro-political strategies instituting structural changes that alter the terms of discourse such as enhancing media diversity or undercutting the role of money in politics. This is a welcome propositions from a deliberative systems perspective. But as polities wait for such structural changes to occur, it is also valuable to see mini-publics as agents that can contribute to the deliberative capacity-building of the broader system. A deliberative system which has institutionalised mini-publics in policy formation, can, for example, socialise citizens to civic virtues that are deliberative in orientation, hence, perform an educative and capacity-building function. Mini-publics can also prompt further citizen engagement by reaching out to broader publics and setting deliberative rather than confrontational terms of public discourse. These are small but not insignificant contributions mini-publics can make in building capacities of the broader system.

Thus, all three of these imperatives reaffirm that mini-publics have potential to enhance deliberative systems, but simultaneously stress that they can also be counterproductive by narrowing down discourses, providing authorities with new avenues for manipulation, and alienating rather than including the already marginalised voices. Therefore, the three functions we propose as an anchor to assess a mini-public's 'external quality' in deliberative systems rely on an assessment that goes beyond considering the institutional features of the mini-publics themselves, to appraise more critically the extent to which these key functions are actually realised through the highly complex and contingent interplay between the mini-public itself and the context in which it takes place.

A comparative application of the framework

To illustrate how our criteria work in practice, we present four examples of mini-publics. The first two exhibit considerable level of internal quality yet producing weak and counter-productive systemic effects. The first example—the Australian Citizens’ Parliament—has a reasonable level of internal quality but did not achieve much consequentiality. The second example is the British Columbia Citizens’ Assembly. It shows how a mini-public widely celebrated for both its internal and its supposed external quality has still had some problematic systemic effects when judged against our conceptual criteria. The last two examples are mini-publics with low internal quality that nonetheless produced systemic effects, both productive (in the case of the ‘Conférence du Citoyens’ in France) and counterproductive (in the case of the ‘Electronic Town Meeting’ in Italy). The examples thus lend credence to the conceptual argument that in deliberative systems, mini-publics are of a fundamentally ambivalent character. Their systemic assessment can significantly differ from their level of ‘internal quality’. Moreover, the discussion below aims to serve as a starting point towards better understanding of what factors might be key to mini-publics’ systemic success.

High internal quality yet weak systemic impact: The Australian Citizens’ Parliament

The Australian Citizens’ Parliament (ACP) is one of the most documented deliberative mini-publics in recent years (see Carson et al. 2013). The ACP was convened by the newDemocracy Foundation and a group of academics specialising in deliberative democracy. Held in February 2009, the ACP was attended by 150 participants selected through stratified random sampling based on sex, age, educational background and federal electorate. Participants were asked to discuss the broad question ‘How can Australia’s political system be strengthened to serve us better?’ The event used the format of a Twenty First Century Town Hall Meeting, where citizens listened to plenary sessions by political experts and discussed proposals responding to the charge in break out groups over three days. In the final day, the participants developed a list of recommendations in six reform areas, including changing the electoral system to optional preferential voting and promotion of civic participation.

Scholarly work on the ACP has been consistent in describing this event as ‘inclusive’ insofar as the profile of citizen parliamentarians mirrored the demographic composition of Australian society. Inclusiveness is also manifest discursively (see Felicetti et al, forthcoming). The process was designed to allow participants to freely put their proposals on the table with very little restrictions. This design feature prioritised inclusiveness of diverse voices, but, as various researchers have noted, this came at the expense of focusing the deliberation on key proposals (see Curato et al. 2013). At some point, there were over eighty proposals on the table, leaving the deliberations in breakout groups in need of coherence and depth. While more could have been done to enhance the quality of contestation among competing discourses, overall, the ACP can be described as having good or moderate internal quality. Participants were empowered to set their own agenda which indicates the forum’s unbiased character (Hartz-Karp and Carson 2009: 16). The final report was ‘written in their [participants’] own words,’ and was subsequently turned over to the Prime Minister’s representative at the ACP’s closing ceremony.

Despite its profile as a widely successful mini-public, when judged against the three systemic criteria, the ACP appears somewhat less successful. First, it sparked little further deliberation outside the scope of the event. Aside from inviting some politicians and a representative of the Prime Minister, the ACP had no direct or formal links to the empowered space. Transmission strategy of securing media coverage did not materialise as the ACP coincided with the devastating Black Saturday bushfires, which meant less air time and traction for the citizens’ parliament (Rinke et al 2013: 260). Second, left with no other strategies to reach out to the broader public sphere, the legitimacy of the ACP’s proposals was not subject to the scrutiny of actors outside the mini-public. Finally, the ACP does score highly on deliberative capacity-building of its participants, having generated political confidence among participants who consider themselves as disinterested in politics to the point that some described the event as ‘life changing’ (Dryzek 2009: 5; Hartz-Karp and Carson 2009: 26). This indicates a possible systemic impact of the ACP as a deliberative exemplar, with indirect legitimacy-enhancing and capacity-building effects—yet only on participants themselves, not to the system overall (see Knobloch and Gastil 2013)

High internal quality yet a potentially counterproductive systemic impact: The British Columbia Citizens’ Assembly

The British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform (BCCA) marked a significant development in democratic innovation. Although multitudes of deliberative mini-publics had already taken place, BCCA was unprecedented in that it enjoyed full support of the Legislative Assembly (Smith 2012: 91; Warren and Pearse 2008: 9) and had a guaranteed policy impact—a supposedly positive systemic feature. The Assembly was organised in 2004 to review British Columbia's electoral system, and if necessary to propose a referendum question with an alternative to the existing simple plurality system.

The BCCA convened over a total time frame of eleven months. It consisted of 160 nearly randomly selected citizens, and was broadly representative of British Columbians in terms of gender, region, age, ethnicity, level of education, and employment (Warren and Pearse 2008: 10). The BCCA had three phases: learning, public hearing and deliberation. It recommended a version of the Single Transferable Vote system for the referendum on electoral reform. Although the referendum failed to reach the required 60% threshold of approving votes by the total electorate, it is widely regarded as a great success (Lang 2007: 37). The fact that more than 57% of voters supported the changes proposed by the BCCA has been interpreted as an 'impressive' and 'exceptionally high' positive vote, indicating that the wider population put trust in the judgement of the BCCA (Dryzek 2010: 169-70).

The BCCA scores high on internal deliberative quality in that participants were selected through random draw except for the self-selection implied by having to accept the invitation to take part, and two Aboriginal members were added after the random selection procedure (Warren and Pearse 2008: 10) and were broadly representative of the wider population. With six weekends for the deliberation phase, ample time was given for critical exchange of views. Participants were split up into smaller groups to enable high quality deliberation while exposing participants to a range of different views (Smith 2012: 100). The final decisions of the BCCA were made through a democratic vote.

The obvious systemic consequentiality of the BCCA consists in the provincial government's commitment to the BCCA setting the official referendum question. The BCCA is a rare example of a mini-public that guaranteed political uptake (if only in the form of a referendum) rather than having merely advisory status (Goodin 2008: 20). In addition, the BCCA was consequential for the wider society due to its impact on other citizens. Observers of the BCCA and the resulting referendum attributed the eventual failure of the referendum to low publicity and education about the BCCA and the referendum, while showing that those who did know about the BCCA were more likely to vote in favour of the Assembly's proposal for electoral reform (Lang 2007: 50; Smith 2012: 102).

Whether this impact resulted in further deliberative engagement, legitimacy, and capacity is a different question. To start with, despite its supposed consequentiality and hence systemic benefit, a mini-public resulting in a referendum vote can constrain deliberation in that it allows less room for participants to weigh nuanced positions (see Felicetti et al. forthcoming). In the case of the BCCA, the options were predefined. This narrowed down and *decided* the debate instead of sparking further deliberation, giving the BCCA a questionable degree of epistemic authority. Even to participants themselves, the framing of the charge arguably foreclosed from the outset one of their preferred options (Smith 2009: 89). The design of the BCCA's selection process may have skewed its outcome (James 2008; Smith 2009: 82) and the facilitation of the deliberation resulted in an indifferent dismissal of a 'substantive point' made by the citizens in relation precisely to citizen empowerment (Lang 2007: 57). Such shortcomings could have been corrected by processes of persuasion as demanded by the legitimacy function of mini-publics. However, the high profile of the BCCA as a result of being tied to a national referendum not only failed to incorporate such critical responses from non-participants, but may in fact have undermined these by being presented, leading as it did to a referendum, as the decisive and final citizens' voice. As such, even if the particularly thorough procedures of the BCCA enabled participants to gain new deliberative skills, as in the case of the ACP, the message communicated to non-participants warrants a closer look. Where the BCCA did spark interest and influenced the wider citizenry's stance towards the referendum question, it did so in line with the idea of a 'trust-based' function of mini-publics (see MacKenzie and Warren 2014), which can be seen as opposed to the critical response from non-participants that we have highlighted as crucial for a positive systemic impact.

These two examples illustrate that celebrated mini-publics with high internal quality can produce systemic impacts that fail to achieve, or even undermine, deliberation-making, legitimacy seeking, and capacity-building. Recognising this ambivalent character from the systemic perspective is important to avoid overly generic or uncritical evaluations of mini-publics in complex real-world settings. Yet what does this mean in terms of normative implications? Should otherwise very positive democratic innovations be ousted out of precaution? Or even generally less deliberative procedures prioritised over innovations such as mini-publics? This discussion

relates to one of the central points of discussion within the systems literature so far: the question of whether the 'sharing of labour' advocated by defendants of the systemic interpretation means that only minimally deliberative system components can be 'excused' for their non-deliberative features, and thus effectively legitimated. Our discussion shows that such a judgement cannot be made generically, but requires case-by-case evaluations. Since conventional assessments of mini-publics' own internal deliberative quality is not a predictor of its systemic qualities, such evaluations must be orientated towards systemic norms that go beyond any more isolated celebrations even of otherwise undoubtedly useful events. Rather than 'excusing' poor system components, the evaluative standard itself has undergone a shift in emphasis, but can—and ought to—retain therein its normative rigour. Our systemically-oriented normative criteria present a possible starting point for this. They do not lower, but, if anything, raise the evaluative bar.

Yet, given the potential mismatch between mini-publics' internal and systemic quality, this new perspective still demands a reassessment of seemingly poor-performing mini-publics. In what follows, we take up this task along two examples: a French 'Conférence du Citoyens' on genetically modified organisms, which has weak internal deliberation yet contributes effectively to deliberative democratisation at the systems level and an Italian 'Electronic Town Meeting' on health policy whose poor internal quality had very similar reasons to the French case, but has backfired from a systemic perspective. Comparing these two cases presents a starting point for a deeper analysis of the circumstances in which the complex interplay between mini-publics' internal and external characteristics results to different types of system-level effects, as an alternative to a blanket 'excusing' of insufficiently internally deliberative bodies or events.

Poor internal quality yet productive systemic impact: The Conférence de Citoyens in France

The deliberation on genetically modified organisms (GMOs) provides an example of a mini-public that had poor internal quality but had consequential impact on the deliberative system. In June 1998, a *Conférence de Citoyens* or Citizens' Conference (CC) was convened to resolve a gridlock on the issue of GMOs (Joly et al. 1999: 14). The format followed the Danish model of Consensus Conference and the mini-public took place over three weekends. Fourteen participants selected by an opinion polling institute took part in a series of lectures on nutrition, genetics and food production (among others), followed by a three-day consensus conference that culminated in a report.

Deliberative theorists have largely assessed this event as one with poor internal quality. The CC was critiqued for its lack of transparency in selecting participants and questionable selection of experts who ran the supposedly 'balanced' lectures on the subject (the panel of experts was composed of researchers directly involved with the production of GMOs) (Mirenowicz 2001: 40). The forum's main organiser, the *Office Parlementaire d'Evaluation des Choix Scientifiques et Technologiques* (OPECST), had questionable motives. According to Joly et al. (1999), OPECST—a government body in charge of communicating information from scientists to the Parliament—set up the forum in a way that privileged the Parliament's position on the issue. The CC was used as an instrument to manage a controversial debate in the government's favour by systematically excluding the voices of GMOs' most vociferous critics in the deliberative process (Joly et al. 1999: 14; Dryzek and Tucker 2008: 870). The actual space for discourse in CC was limited. The steering committee 'skewed' the debate 'in a pro-GM direction' (Dryzek and Tucker 2008: 869). There were few opportunities for participants to express major reservations on the GM policy. The debate focused on how the policy can be adjusted while the option of rejecting the policy was not on the table. As a consequence, the report that came out of the consensus conference supports the government's position, although participants were less convinced about the prospects of biotechnology and demanded stricter regulation to mitigate ecological and health risks.

Although the CC had poor internal quality, it made more impact in the public sphere compared to the previous cases with better internal quality. The event attracted considerable attention on television, radio and a special five-page dossier in the weekly newspaper *Télérama* (Joly et al. 1999: 16), even though the event coincided with the World Cup which France hosted and won (see Dryzek and Tucker 2008: 870). As part of this wider public debate and the dubious motives behind its organisation notwithstanding, the CC contributed to 'deliberation-making' by opening up a critical discussion about the French government's co-optation of citizen assemblies (see Joly et al. 12003; 1999). This is an important public debate as a societal basis for the proactive, critical role the wider citizenry must play for mini-publics to retain legitimacy and a fruitful systemic impact. This also shows that the CC's legitimacy was subject to public scrutiny, even if it did not formally respond to them. Interest groups critical of GM were quick to call out the government's manipulation of the CC and the lack of anti-GM perspectives in the expert panel. Scepticism on the role entrusted to ordinary citizens in shaping France's GM policy figured in the press coverage, indicating some level of critical engagement of the

public sphere on the mini-public. Thus, there was *some* deliberative capacity-building—a development that is not unimportant in a context of a political system known for managerialism where the ‘government knows best’ attitude prevails (Dryzek and Tucker 2008: 870). Precisely because of its poor internal quality, and the critical response this sparked by those already discontent with such norms, the CC may have played a role in starting the awareness and wider public debate that can, over time, produce a shift towards a more deliberative culture.

Poor internal quality and a resulting counterproductive systemic impact: The Electronic Town Meeting in Italy

Of course, systemic impact cannot be guaranteed. An example of a mini-public lacking in both internal quality and systemic deliberative impact is the so-called ‘Electronic Town Meeting’ on health policy in Tuscany, Italy, in 2007. The town meeting was so exclusive, non-deliberative, and abused by the authorities that it led Freschi and Mete (2009: 2) to conclude that this case may have fostered post-democratic tendencies more than advancing any deliberative democratisation.

An ‘Electronic Town Meeting’ (ETM) electronically connects several mini-publics of 10-12 participants through networked computers to achieve an overall number of a few hundred to a few thousand participants (Freschi and Mete 2009: 8). Lasting for one day, the ETM in Tuscany on healthcare policy on 17 November 2007 included some 200 participants selected by random sampling (Freschi and Mete 2009: 9). It was convened and run by the regional administration of Tuscany to invite input from ordinary citizens into the ongoing debate on a new regional health plan.

The ETM lacked internal deliberative quality. From the outset, the mini-public was suspicious from a democratic point of view. It revolved around a ‘non-issue’ that was ‘largely irrelevant to citizens’, when there was in fact fierce demand for grassroots participation on a different aspect of the healthcare debate (Freschi and Mete 2009: 19-20). Even within the specific topic chosen for the deliberation, the discussion guide bracketed out issues that were most controversial and relevant within the public debate (Freschi and Mete 2009: 34). Participant selection was designed to exclude and disempower active opposition (Freschi and Mete 2009: 20, 35). Moreover, the group of participants was skewed in that it included ‘few participants of a political orientation opposite to that of the institutional promoters’ (Freschi and Mete 2009: 23). Despite being modelled on the concept of the ‘Deliberative Poll’ (Freschi and Mete 2009: 21), there was little opportunity to deliberate during the ETM. Emphasis was placed on expert questions and a ‘televote,’ leaving only little time for a largely unfocused discussion of the experts’ arguments (Freschi and Mete 2009: 32). Also, the topics of discussion were based on ‘an entirely inadequate information campaign’ (Freschi and Mete 2009: 21). Facilitators took an active role in influencing the event to the point of creating ‘a disciplinarian atmosphere’ and inducing participants to ‘comply docilely’ with their instructions (Freschi and Mete 2009: 33). Discursive participation was asymmetric, and it seems that overly critical questions were actively discouraged (Freschi and Mete 2009: 33).

The ETM had very little impact on the wider political debate, and whatever impact it did have was distorting and undemocratic. According to Freschi and Mete (2009), not only were the outcomes not binding (Freschi and Mete 2009: 24), but the entire event also went ‘relatively unreported’ (Freschi and Mete 2009: 31) with only ‘scant publicity’ (Freschi and Mete 2009: 35), and as such attracted little attention by the public. The mini-public produced ‘meagre results’ and ‘did not generate any virtuous circle between micro and macro deliberation’ (Freschi and Mete 2009: 37-8). Indeed, the ETM was criticised precisely for (amongst other things) being *isolated* (Freschi and Mete 2009: 38). For Cellini et al. (2010: 138, see also Freschi and Mete 2009: 41), this illustrates deliberative events being used as ‘distraction.’ Rather than constituting a moment for democratization, the ETM functioned as a ‘soft-power instrument’ for local governments to steer the public debate and establish a controlled form of participation (Freschi and Mete 2009: 41).

Overall, the ETM is an example of a mini-public that is not only of dubious legitimacy internally, but whose impact on the wider deliberative system is counterproductive. This reinforces the point that, much in contrast to implying an ‘anything goes’ policy, the systemic perspective demands clear normative criteria, which can demonstrate that any undemocratic features and consequences of poorly deliberative mini-publics are not always or automatically made up for by positive deliberative effects on the system as a whole. The case of the ETM in Tuscany illustrates that low internal quality of a mini-public coupled with an inattentive mass public that does not take up the issue within its wider political discourse can result in a limiting as opposed to widening of democratic access, and distortion rather than building of deliberative capacity. This cannot be ‘blamed’ on a mass public that ‘happened to be’ apathetic, but, in the case of the Tuscany ETM, it was in fact *by means of the mini-public itself* that governments distorted and shut down critical discourse. As such, this mini-public constituted not only an isolated negative influence on the deliberative system, but also

compromised the general capacity of the system to correct for this very type of distortion. Unlike in the French case, this misuse did not spark public attention and deliberative capacity, but public authorities succeeded in using the mini-public to their own advantage, refining their arsenal of power-consolidating instruments as opposed to first and foremost building capacity *in citizens* to either deliberate better themselves or play the critical role we have highlighted as vital to deliberative systems.

Discussion: ‘Co-development’ as the key systemic quality?

The examples above illustrate the ambivalent character of mini-publics from a deliberative systems perspective. A mini-public may exhibit high internal quality—as in the case of the Australian Citizens’ Parliament and British Columbia Citizens’ Assembly—but, when assessed in systemic terms, can register poor impact or external quality. On the contrary, a consensus conference with poor internal quality can still find relevance in the deliberative system if it is able to enrich on-going deliberations or create spaces for new topics of contestation. Table 1 summarises these observations.

	Australian Citizens’ Parliament	British Columbia Citizen Assembly	Conférence de Citoyens	Electronic Town Meeting
Deliberation-making	poor	counterproductive	Good	counterproductive
Legitimacy seeking	poor	counterproductive	Moderate	poor
Capacity-building	moderate	counterproductive	Good	counterproductive

Table 1: Comparative assessment of the four example mini-publics from the perspective of our three normative criteria

What, then, are the implications of a systemic analysis to our appreciation of mini-publics? First, a systemic analysis underscores that mini-publics do not play a constitutive but rather an auxiliary role in deliberative democratisation. While the empirical turn in deliberative democracy has developed a range of methodologies to capture a mini-public’s internal quality, the literature’s systemic turn prompts an appreciation of a mini-public in relation to the system of which it is a part. This, we suggest, responds to Chambers’ and Pateman’s observations about deliberative democrats’ disproportionate focus on mini-publics without reflecting on how these serve to shape the character of mass democracies. By appreciating the auxiliary role of mini-publics in the deliberative system, we argue against the impression that mini-publics’ *potential* to foster democratisation is sufficient reason for granting them a central place in conceptions of deliberative systems. It is possible, for example, that forums such as expert committees and political parties hold an equally central role in making polities more deliberative if internal deliberations within these ‘traditional’ avenues of conducting politics do uphold the three-fold criteria we propose. We suggest that mini-publics’ impact on the deliberative system, just like other spaces and mechanisms for discourse formation, must be subject to a rigorous normative test in terms of deliberation-making, legitimacy seeking and capacity-building for them to claim the status of mechanisms for deliberative democratisation.

The second implication foregrounds the importance of a mini-public’s *embeddedness in the broader deliberative system*. The classic argument in favour of ‘insulating’ mini-publics is to create a space where conditions are conducive for respectful and inclusive reason-giving. This set-up, undoubtedly, has secured an empirical footing to the claim that deliberative democracy is a credible alternative to doing politics given particular institutional conditions. But now that the literature has progressed to thinking about systemic deliberation, the theoretical literature is challenged to consider how mini-publics can be meaningfully linked to the messy and complex deliberations in the public sphere which occur under non-ideal conditions. Based on the examples presented above, we suggest that ‘connecting’ or ‘linking’ to the system is possible when a mini-public is designed as one of many nodes of discourse-formation that shape public policy. The French CC, for example, was embedded in a highly charged political context. The conditions of its very creation are politically-motivated. Even though its internal quality was questionable, it was in a better position than the ACP to be a deliberation-maker not only because of its contentious and relevant topic with high stakes but also because of the mini-public’s direct link with centres of power, in this case via the OPECST. As Dryzek and Tucker (2008: 865) put it, deliberative democratisation entails not just attending to ‘the design of the forum but also the interaction of that design with broader political system characteristics.’ However, this also means that mini-

publics can equally be designed to manipulate the wider debate—whether maliciously or inadvertently—as the cases of the Italian ETM and the Canadian BCCA, respectively, show.

Moreover, a mini-public's productive links with the wider system do not depend on the design of the mini-public alone, and thus cannot be fully controlled. Rather, the systemic deliberative impact of mini-publics is contingent upon its complex and, to some degree, unforeseeable effects on the wider public sphere, where it has the potential to constitute a link in either a virtuous or a vicious circle. Decisive for this is the extent to which any interactions with other system components would themselves be governed by deliberative norms. For instance, the greater the degree of deliberative capacity already present within the wider public sphere, the more likely it is that manipulative uses of mini-publics would be met with a critical response. This, for example, sets apart the French from the Italian case. While both mini-publics had shortcomings in their internal deliberative quality, the French case was able to transform 'non-deliberative mini-publics' to deliberative consequences. The reason for this has less to do with the mini-public per se but with the capacity of the broader public sphere to respond and call out malicious forums that compromise the democratic process. This observation, however, must not be taken to mean that deliberative democrats should condone ill-designed mini-publics. Mini-publics with poor internal quality give democratic innovations a bad name and this may have practical consequences in, for example, its application in policymaking and civil society circles. They also create communicative distortions and undermine deliberative mini-publics' potential for epistemic and expressive outcomes, which run contrary to the normative core of deliberative theory. So while we do not condone poor mini-publics, our analysis opens up the possibility for poor mini-publics to inadvertently play a role in the system, which is ultimately hinged on various spontaneous and institutional factors.

Hence, from this systemic perspective, one important precondition for mini-publics'—or any component parts'—positive role in deliberative systems is a certain degree of '*co-development*' between the different system components. Co-development in this sense can be defined as that degree of prevalence of deliberative norms that provides the basis for mutually productive interactions between different components and functions of deliberative systems. For instance, a legislature of a deliberative character might see itself as benefiting more from incorporating citizen discourses, as the inclusion of more discourses enriches deliberation. However, this enhances overall deliberation only if deliberation in the wider public sphere is fair and inclusive, as inequalities would otherwise only be amplified. Given that deliberative democratisation relies on inclusive critical engagement, even a legislative assembly with strong deliberative values could 'democratise internally' but without a similar level of deliberative capacity in the wider public, it would lack the critical counterpart that is needed to keep the internal debates open to challenge and rich in discursive engagement.

Realistically, in the messy real world context of modern societies, deliberative democratisation depends on a complex interplay between various different socio-political processes, all of which unfold dynamically in response to different sets of influences and structures. At this level, it cannot possibly be artificially crafted as mini-publics are, but, rather, relies on the creation of self-reinforcing dynamics. These can productively occur via what Knops terms a 'dialogue across deliberative exchanges' (Knops 2014: 11), where it is *partially* deliberative nodes of a wider network that have the strongest incentives to interact with each other in a way that perpetuates deliberative norms through this exchange and thus creates self-reinforcing dynamics of deliberative democratisation (Knops 2014: 12). Of course, this is not guaranteed: The right type of dynamic might not evolve. Yet recognising a need for a self-reinforcing co-development of different system components likewise casts doubts on the often-assumed role of deliberative scholars and practitioners as 'planners,' revealing limitations to the extent to which deliberative democratisation can be intentionally promoted. Rather, in line with Knops's account, it must at least partially be the norms underlying the self-organising exchanges that drive deliberative democratisation.

For the use of mini-publics, this means that they can only ever be a partial solution at best; and thus deliberative democracy cannot be advanced through this medium alone. Rather, mini-publics work best if—or, indeed, work only if—they are only one deliberative instrument used among others. Thus, against Lafont (2015), this suggests not that democratisation ought to be advanced in the public sphere *as opposed to* through mini-publics, but, rather, that *both* strategies must work in conjunction. The development of a deliberative system cannot rely on the mechanism behind one particular component part, but its relevance also extends to its own evolution: It must itself evolve in a systemic fashion, combining the positive impacts of different component parts together to bring forth overall impacts that go beyond the sum of the different component parts.

Conclusion

The systemic turn has created space for deliberative democrats to respond to critiques against mini-publics as the undemocratic approach to deliberative democratisation. It provides the rationale within which mini-publics were never meant to instantiate deliberative democracy, but were designed only to fill specific gaps; and hence a rationale that ‘rescues’ mini-publics from such critiques. This step in the evolution of deliberative democratic theory has been useful and important. Yet, rather than providing any definite answers on the question of mini-publics’ role in deliberative democracy, it has created a need for new and even more complex conceptualisations. Since the systemic conception cannot plausibly imply an ‘excuse’ for *any* non-deliberative bodies or processes, the generic message that such bodies—for example mini-publics—*can* still enhance overall deliberative quality now prompts a closer examination of the ways and the circumstances in which they *actually* do.

As a starting point for this, this paper has proposed the criteria of deliberation-making, legitimacy-seeking and capacity-building to guide analyses of specific mini-publics’ systemic impact. On this basis, even a systemic interpretation of deliberative democracy does not allow for a generic case either for or against mini-publics as such. Rather, specific mini-publics must be assessed on a case-by-case basis and given the complex interplay of mini-publics’ internal features and their context-dependent external impacts, such assessment must indeed be based on systemic criteria rather than assuming established evaluations of mini-public quality in a more isolated sense to be an accurate cue. The discussion of our four example cases of mini-publics suggests that otherwise poor mini-publics ought not to be dismissed from deliberative systems. Yet, equally, supposedly high-quality mini-publics may need to be viewed using a more critical lens. Given such a degree of complex contingency, the best measure of deliberative systems is the degree to which its separate components co-develop as a result of their own deliberative interactions; and the best approach to using mini-publics for deliberative democratisation hence one that does not tout them as easy shortcuts, but makes them a flexible instrument to support and respond to a multitude of deliberative influences from a variety of sources.

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