

Representations of 'the Public' in Media and Policy Discourse

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Three statements to compare...

- Obama, 2009: 'The majority of Americans - from across the political spectrum, and of all backgrounds and beliefs - have come to a consensus that we should pursue this research. [...] That is a conclusion with which I agree. That is why I am signing this Executive Order...' [Obama speech, 2009]
- Bush, 2001: "'The president does not make decisions by polls," said White House spokesman [...]. "This is a decision that was made based on what he believes is in the best interest of the American people and in the best interest of this nation.' [St. Petersburg Times, August 10, 2001].
- Pattison, 2005, 'Key recommendation: 'increased dialogue with the public over the next decade on stem cell research' (Pattison, 2005, 7)

Questions raised...

- What role should ‘the public’ have? Who are ‘the public’? How do you identify ‘public attitudes’ and what does ‘dialogue’ mean? How is ‘public opinion’ represented? When is public opinion considered relevant? What rhetorical value does it have in policy making?
- Our research was designed to explore ‘public discourses’ and ‘discourses about the public’. Our work was based on the premise that such discourses are constructed rather than simply ‘found’ or ‘reflected’, and was designed to explore how such constructions played out in different cultural/political contexts.

Method

A comparative analysis of how debates 'the public' and stem cell research have played out in four countries - the UK, New Zealand, South Korea and the USA. Assessed through:

- (1) A systematic analysis of newspaper coverage in each of our 4 selected countries - examining how the public was characterised and represented (e.g. references to public opinion or use of 'vox pop' quotes from 'the public')
- (2) Reading secondary accounts, participating in conferences/consultation events, examining policy documents and records of political debates and conducting some interviews with scientists and policy makers.
- (3) A review of research into public attitudes toward stem cell research (looking at funding, method, findings and deployment of such research in all four countries)

Overall findings

1. 'The public' most often had a voice in the debate in all four countries *through stakeholders* such as scientists, patient groups and religious organisations – rather than as 'ordinary person'.
2. The public differently represented on the basis of certain *religious* and *national* characteristics
3. 'The public' as an entity, is much more often *talked about*, or 'on behalf of', rather than being represented directly.
4. 'Public Opinion' as a site of representational conflict

‘Public Opinion’ as a site of representational conflict

- Assessing public attitudes (via consultation or surveys) has sometimes become part of the battle, with different polls being commissioned by media outlets or funded by different sides (a practice most prominent in the US and in South Korea, but recently also appearing in the UK over the hybrid embryo debate)
- The validity of survey findings can be challenged (because of the key role of the ‘framing effect’ in this area of research).
- Similarly consultation exercises can be challenged (e.g. on grounds of process and representativeness)
- The visible and direct ‘display’ of so-called ‘public opinion’ can also be susceptible to PR exercises (with ‘ordinary stakeholders such as ‘patients’ or ‘women’ mobilised for PR purposes)
- The *same* public response may also, in one instance, be framed as appropriate, and in another instance be reframed as irrational

Two questions to focus on

1. Constructions of 'the public' in each country (including how 'publics' are differently constructed in relation to ***religious*** and ***national*** characteristics)
2. The public as a **flexible** concept (shifting constructs from different sites and at different times)

Constructions of 'the public' in New Zealand



The basics...

- It was 'experts', politicians, policy-makers and journalists who spoke *for* the public amidst dominant voices of a range of stake-holders.
- 'The public' and 'public opinion' as rhetorical devices are constructed, mobilised, performed by these groups in range of spaces, for specific political purposes.

Public	Opinion	Who?	Where?	When?
Emotional	Abhorrence, revulsion, hysteria	Journalists Politicians	Newspapers Parliament	Legislative change Scandals
Pioneering adventurers	Hopeful scepticism, determination, impatient with legislation	Journalists	Newspapers	Human interest stories occur infrequently
Maori minority	Spiritual values against e-SCR	Journalists Politicians, Policy-makers	Newspapers Parliament Consultations	Legislative change
Disinterested citizens	Science 'important' but distanced from everyday lives	Policy-makers	Interviews	Private/ workspace
Emotional rationalists	Questioning, 'yeah right', contextual	Policy-makers	Interviews	Private/ Workspace
Sophisticated thinkers	Struggle, complexity, middle ground	Policy-makers	Interviews	Private/ workspace

The pioneering adventurer



- Suffering patient and family leave the 'Wasteland' of New Zealand in search of the Holy Grail of experimental stem cell treatments that might offer hope to their condition.
- Encounter dangerous foreign shores, such as China and Australia, accompanied by the media.
- Parent or partner takes on pioneering spirit of settlers, retains 'Kiwi' skepticism about scientific potential.

'After Auckland doctors ran out of options to treat his son, Graham Dalton searched the world for alternatives...Top sailor, Graham Dalton has taken his 22-year-old son to Melbourne for a rarely-used cancer treatment in a last ditch bid to save his life'
(Daltons take cancer fight overseas, Sunday Star Times, 8th May 2005).

- Rhetoric of time running out for patients, urgency of need for proactive legislation.

Maori: a spiritual minority



'The deep-seated views held within our whanau about the relationship between the living and the dead cut to the very heart of our spiritual and cultural world view'
(Tariana Turiana, Maori Party, Hansard, 14th November 2006).

- In parliamentary debates, policy documents, newspaper articles ‘the public’ still Pakeha – but ‘special’ attention to and respect for Maori ‘spiritual and cultural concerns’.

‘A key issue for Maori is how the use of embryonic stem cells in research might disrupt whakapapa. Another consideration is the question of when wairua, or spirit, can be said to enter the embryo’ (Ice Storm, Sunday Star Times, 18th February 2007).
- Spiritual values/‘special attention’ raised critical concerns.
- ‘The spiritual beliefs of tangata whenua around death and dying cannot be smoothed over, rushed through or minimised, for the purpose of expeditious lawmaking’ (Tariana Turiana, Maori Party, Hansard, 14th Nov. 2006).



The Human Tissue 'bill scratches a political itch – a desire to be seen to be publicly upholding someone's cultural values...does it override the rights of everyone else, even if some Maori decide that they do not like any interference with the course of nature, however red in tooth and claw nature may be?' (Stephen Franks, ACT, Hansard, 14th November 2006).

- But how seriously values taken? Validity if contradict those of other publics?

- Maori values dealt with in special sections of bills, acts and debates.

‘...this implies that Maori are in some way not in fact part of society’ (Judith Collins, National – Clevedon, Hansard, 6th October 2004).

- Discursive segregation symbolically separates Maori values from rest of nation and relegates spirituality/religion to Maori-only concern.
- Maori concerns a universal issue, increasing national diversity and ‘as a nation, we need to have that debate’ (Tariana Turiana, Maori Party, Hansard, 14th November 2006).

Constructions of 'the public' in South Korea

Dominant representation

- Public as a patriotic being: *kukmin* or people of a nation
- Anonymous but interested public: *netizen* (= net + citizen)

Focusing on changes over time

The basics...

- A strong tradition of scientific nationalism
- Dr Hwang, the ‘celebrity scientist’/national treasure’
- Fuelled by the government’s hunger for popularity + ‘digital populism’
- Celebration, egg scandal and fraud

S. Korean Case Study

Rhetorical use of public: during celebration

Hwang speaks 'for' & 'to' the public

"I shall try to accomplish excellent achievement that *kukmin* expect by next autumn..." (*Segye Times*, 26 May 2005).

- **Patients' voices:** full of hope and expectation, extremely emotional statement quoted (taken from Hwang's online fan community), 'impatient' and 'bound to behave irrationally'
- **Interested 'general' publics**

S. Korean Case Study

Rhetorical use of public: during scandal & fraud

- Egg scandal:
 - **Egg donor candidates** quoted repetitively “(donating my eggs is) quite normal because it is for the country” (*Segye Times, Hankook Ilbo, Kookmin Ilbo*, 22 Nov 05)
 - **Loyal supporters**
- Exposure of fraud:
 - Devastated **patients** (and families)
 - Heavily **emotionally charged publics**: panic, shock, confusion, shame/humiliation, and a sense of betrayal and denial
 - **Semi-experts netizens** distinguished from rest of ‘lay’ netizens

S. Korean Case Study: Rhetorical nature of *kukmin*

- Implying one voice above religion, political spectrum, gender, age, disability, etc.
- Ready-made opinion: claims about general ‘public opinion’ were asserted by referring to *kukmin* with no reference to any evidence base (self-affirming mechanism?)

S. Korean Case Study: Scientifically un/aware public

- Key change over time in representation of scientifically un/aware public
- During breakthrough: lay knowledge was good enough "*... the level of scientific language/understanding [among the general public] is comparable to those of scientists*" (Munhwa Ilbo, 20 December 2005)
- During scandal: lay knowledge regarded as irrelevant/irrational in the scandal
- S. Korean case demonstrates the malleability of public opinion in media/policy discourse by showing a dramatic shift in the legitimacy of public opinion and its source



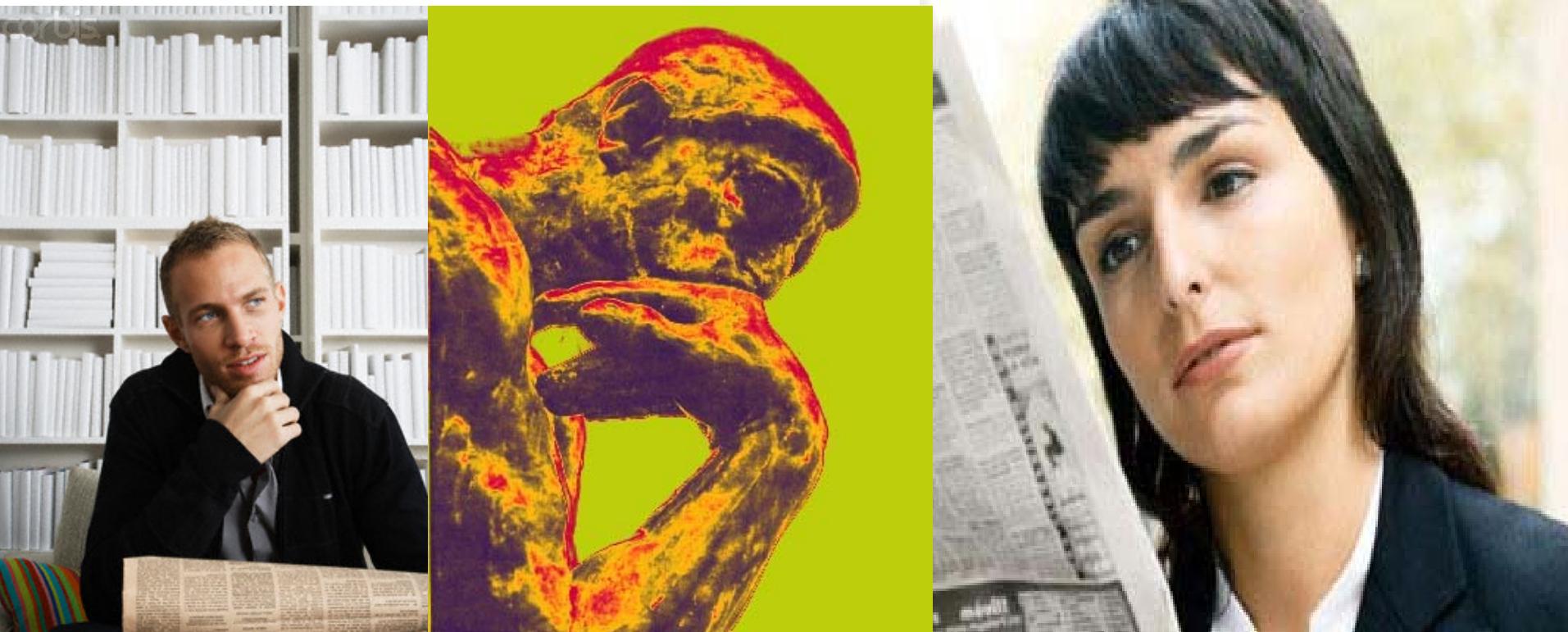
Concluding questions for reflection

- When you refer to ‘public opinion’ what evidence base is used, and how?
- What publics are being represented?
- When is public opinion ‘credited’ or ‘discredited’?
- How should the public be represented?

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Sophisticated Thinkers



How public opinion is assessed through research? Key differences in the funding, methods and aims of research about 'the public'

The systematic analysis of research into public opinion about stem cell research highlighted the following patterns:

- In the USA, research on public perceptions of stem cells has been dominated by opinion polls - generally initiated by stakeholder groups (e.g. political parties, religious organisations or patient groups) or media companies (e.g. ABC News). The main focus has been on what percentage of the voting public support embryonic stem cell research and how this correlates with factors such as religious or political affiliation.
- In contrast, studies in the UK have been more qualitative, with data gathered through interviews and focus groups, and primarily sponsored by bodies such as the ESRC. Questions have included investigating the attitudes of potential donors, studying the role of ambivalence in relation to SCR, testing out the impact of information-giving or engagement events and exploring attitudes toward issues around governance and regulation.
- Research coming out of New Zealand took a qualitative/quantitative approach, utilising surveys, focus groups and interviews to triangulate results and has echoed the UK approach.
- Korean research largely involves public opinion polls (often internet based), initiated by stakeholders or by media outlets. The focus was on public support or opposition to embryo stem cell research in general, and support for, or opposition to Hwang in particular

Different ways of framing the public Categorising the public – voters, tax payers or citizens and lay publics?

The categories used in the research in each country are also reflected in the form of the debate (in policy documents and in the media)

- The US debate repeatedly frames people as '**voters**' and as '**tax payers**' (Terms which reflect the distinct way in which stem cell research, and its funding, has become a political issue in the US).
- By contrast, in the UK, the public are more likely to be framed as some version of the lay public / ordinary citizen (with its emphasis on expert/non-expert divisions, rather than the public as having a voice through their status as voters and tax payers)