

Regulators and public engagement: the institutional public sphere

In this paper we explore the practices of the regulators in processes of public engagement, participation and deliberation. Influenced by recent writing on the institutional foundations for public engagement, the sociology of the bureau and developments in public sphere theory we first map the different and diverse relationships between regulators and publics beyond the more traditional practices of risk analysis and supervision. How are the new regulators practicing consultation, pre-consultation engagement, establishing relations with a variety of public representative bodies, addressing broad questions of public interest in their regime of self-regulation in relation to firms and more direct engagements with publics through information, education and advice? The paper then focuses on what we see as the attempts by the regulators to become the locus if not the forum for public engagement and deliberation – to set the agenda of public debate and to cope with alternative accounts of regulatory issues in their sectors from other key actors and agencies. In relation to both these questions, of varieties of engagement and the engagement in public debate and discussion, we seek a critical examination of the claims of the regulators to further the interests of consumer-citizens and consider the extent to which the claims of an institutional public sphere stand up.