Pros and Cons of Organizing Dialogues with Stakeholders in Responsible Research and Innovation

Social Innovation (Focus Theme)

Research Idea: Academic work by authors with a very early-stage idea or concept for a future project or proposal.

Problem: What specific innovation management problem does the submission focus on?

Increasingly, the people working in innovation projects need to engage in Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI), 'an approach that anticipates and assesses potential implications and societal expectations with regard to research and innovation, with the aim to foster the design of inclusive and sustainable research and innovation' (European Commission). This is not only the case for projects that receive public funding, e.g., in the Horizon 2020 Programme, but also for projects that are funded by the industry, e.g., within the context of companies' Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) or of Creating Shared Value (CSV) ambitions and activities. One of the five key elements in RRI is Societal Engagement, which can be interpreted in several ways. Below, we will focus on Societal Engagement as the organizing of dialogues with key stakeholders in society, e.g., with industry, governmental bodies and civic organizations, in order to take their diverse interests into account.

The organizing of such dialogues and the balancing of interests is, however, not unproblematic. E.g., it can be difficult to get stakeholders to work together, to make stakeholders listen to their disparate positions, it can be difficult to combine diverse interests into a coherent strategy. So some decide to skip such dialogues altogether. This is a problem, both for the organizations directly involved in efforts for Societal Engagement (they will be less successful), and for society at large (when RRI fails).

Current understanding: What is known about this problem, who and how has it been tackled before?

There is a body of knowledge on these topics (organizing dialogues with stakeholders, taking their interests into account), albeit scattered across different fields. There is, e.g., Stakeholder Theory (e.g., Freeman, 1984, 'Strategic Management: A stakeholder approach'—on the level of strategic management, concerning ways to identify relevant stakeholders and to manoeuvre between their interests), in Value Sensitive Design (e.g., Friedman et al., 2013, 'Early engagement and new technologies: Opening up the laboratory'—on the level of project management, concerning ways to understand and combine stakeholders' values during the innovation process), in Open Innovation (e.g., Chesbrough, on combining knowledge and interests of organizations that collaborate during innovation), and in Social Innovation (e.g., European Commission and Mulgan—on putting societal needs centre stage, on both strategic and project levels, and on promoting collaboration between, e.g., public and private organizations).

In much of the knowledge available, however, the benefits and opportunities of organizing such dialogues with stakeholders are focused upon, whereas the costs or challenges receive relatively little attention. We speculate that a better understanding of costs and challenges can help to better organize such dialogues, and to organize Societal Engagement more effectively and efficiently.

Research question: What is the submission's goal?

The goal of this submission is to identify, in a systematic and practical way, the benefits and opportunities, as well as the costs and challenges of organizing dialogues with stakeholders.

Research design: How precisely & in detail was/will the work (be) executed- describe the methodology/approach.

We (the authors) work at TNO, an independent Dutch research and innovation organization, and in the JERRI project, a Horizon 2020 'Coordination and Support Action' coordinated by Fraunhofer Gesellschaft. The project aims to "foster RRI transition in Europe by developing and testing good RRI practices in pilot cases", with Societal Engagement as one of five key dimensions (the others are: open access, gender diversity, ethics, and science education). Our activities include the making of action plans to improve Societal Engagement within TNO. Between January and April we plan to explore and articulate targets for Societal Engagement, in collaboration with stakeholders, within TNO and outside TNO. We are aware of the reflexivity involved: we organize dialogues with stakeholders in making plans for better organizing dialogues with stakeholders.

Our research approach will involve the analysis of documents (e.g., current action plans within TNO), and observation and reflection: observation of stakeholders during our interactions with them (e.g. in discussions and workshops), and reflection on our part of the interactions with them (e.g. in the same discussions and workshops). We will draw from the Science and Technology Studies (STS) tradition to deal with the reflexivity entailed. Moreover, we will organize 'investigator triangulation' for preserving objectivity during our research process. We will do that together with researchers from Fraunhofer, with whom we collaborate in this task of setting goals and making action plans. We will, e.g., review each other's sources and conclusions and provide critical feedback on each other.

We will start our investigation with a desk research into pros and cons, and then further explore (these and other) pros and cons during our work in the JERRI project.

Findings: What are/will be the main outcomes and results?

We aim to deliver an overview of both pros and cons of organizing dialogues with stakeholders, in the context of RRI (or CSR or CSV). This overview will be practical, and will be based on practices (our studies, activities and interventions within TNO, in the JERRI project).

A first (tentative!) overview would start with outlining the different entities that would obtain these benefits or pay these costs, e.g., the focal organization (in this case: TNO), the innovation project at hand, the different stakeholders involved, and society at large, and would then distinguish between different types of benefits and costs, e.g., economic benefits and costs, societal benefits and costs, and technological benefits and costs, on both the short-term and the longer-term.

Contribution: What will the outcomes and results add to current understanding or theory in the IM community?

Our overview of pros and cons of organizing dialogues with stakeholders will help people in the Innovation Management community to better understand the practicalities of organizing such dialogues, which can help to promote (that element of) Responsible Research and Innovation.

Practical implications: Who will practically gain what and in which way from the findings?

Our overview of pros and cons will help people who work in innovation projects to better organize dialogues with stakeholders—which is relatively new and difficult in the industry-funded projects. Our overall aim is to promote Responsible Research and Innovation (also) in industry.