

ENHANCING COMMUNICATION FOR DEMOCRATIC INNOVATIONS: AN ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK FOR CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES

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Communication is fundamental to democracy, although this importance varies according to the different models of democracy. In deliberative and participatory democracy models, citizen participation and engagement and the discursive dimension exponentially increase the role of information and communication. Democratic innovations, emerging from these deliberative and participatory traditions, correspond to the type of initiative in which communication plays an essential role. However, communication processes in democratic innovations are still understudied. The scarce research in the field reveals difficulties in reaching the citizens and increasing public awareness. This study analyses communication in three different institution-led democratic innovations, namely the Conference on the Future of Europe, the Bologna Citizens' Assembly, and the Spanish Citizens' Climate Assembly. The case studies provide examples of local, national, and transnational initiatives at the European level. The qualitative approach to the three case studies was based on 30 interviews with participants and organisers of the initiatives, complemented by the consultation of documents. The findings are integrated into an analytical framework to approach the communication of democratic innovations, resulting from the triangulation of the results.

KEYWORDS communication; democratic innovations; citizens' assemblies; public awareness; analytical framework

Introduction

Communication plays a fundamental role in democratic processes, due to the need for information and justification of decisions by governments and administrations, as well as the need for information substantiating citizens' choices (Carpentier and Wimmer 2024; Dewey [1927] 1991; Habermas 1992), but its relevance varies according to the different types of democracy. In liberal democracy, it is a basic element of information and accountability, while in participatory and deliberative or discursive democracy it has more profound implications (Carpentier and Wimmer 2024; van Dijk 2000; Strömbäck 2005). In these types of democracy, the required discursive dynamics of discussion, dialogue and exchange of reasons are essential to decision-making processes, with politics acquiring

more pedagogical and discursive contours, attentive to the public interest and demanding in terms of citizenship (Dryzek 1994).

Emerging from participatory and deliberative models, democratic innovations are designed to increase and deepen citizen participation in political decision-making and include different practices such as mini-publics, participatory budgeting, and e-democracy as real-world applications of the concept (Smith 2005).

This study focuses on the special case of citizens' assemblies (Reuchamps et al., 2023; Smith, 2024) as a type of mini-public (Ryan and Smith 2014; Smith and Setälä 2018). These are institutions that promote a space where a diverse group of randomly selected citizens come together to reason and debate on an issue of public interest. Although citizens' assemblies are demanding processes in terms of communication, research has neglected to analyse these processes (Maia 2023), beyond the strict public deliberation (Baiocchi 2003; Niemeyer et al. 2023). This study aims to develop a framework for analysing the communication of these initiatives, drawing on the compilation of previous research and interviews with participants and organisers of three citizens' assemblies in Europe. Interview results were used to assess the main communication gaps identified by participants and organisers.

In Section 2, the article discusses the importance of communication in democratic innovations. Section 3 presents the methodological strategy, followed by the findings from the triangulated data in Section 4. The discussion compares the findings with the literature on communication (section 5), and the conclusions offer key directions for future research recommendations for designing and assessing future citizens' assemblies.

Background – Communication and citizens' assemblies

Communication plays a key role in the political process. All types of democracy necessarily rely on citizens being informed (Peruško, Harro-Loit, and Lauk 2024), but this dimension has different implications in the deliberative model, which demands universality, inclusivity, fairness, reciprocity or mutual respect, in an open discursive process between equal citizens, driven by argumentation (Guttman and Thompson 2004).

In his seminal idea, Habermas suggested the parameters for a normative and theoretical vision of the public sphere, through its conception as a space for debate, the proliferation of ideas and the formation of public opinion, based on fundamental principles associated with critical rationality (Habermas 1992). Starting from this normative ideal, deliberation gained a wide scope, ranging from government decision-making to community conversations or organised public meetings, and can be seen as a critical concept in research into political communication (Gastil and Black 2008). At the macro level, it is understood as deliberative democracy, at the meso level it refers to specific forums for deliberation, and at the micro level it corresponds to spontaneous deliberative conversation (Peruško, Harro-Loit, and Lauk 2024; Polletta and Gardner 2018).

Although deliberation and political communication both focus on collective issues, only deliberation involves reason-giving (Beauvais 2020). Thus, deliberative communication aims to make the process of creating, executing and maintaining power interesting for citizens, involving them in the decision-making process (Čabreja 2022). If deliberation requires a minimum level of trust between the participants and the process (Nord, Ots, and Vozab 2024), this can be achieved through increased transparency, which entails a reallocation of communicative power, and publicity emerges as principal conduit for such redistribution (Wood and Aronczyk 2020). The entire process of mini-publics, including recruitment, rules and decisions, must be legitimised by external communication (Guttman and Thompson 2004).

The principle of publicity, understood as the act of making something public, is the moral foundation of politics. In theory, publicity represents an epistemic gain, due to an increase in alternative opinions, which should improve the quality of political justification (Bohman 2009). Any limitation or restriction on publicity limits and distorts public opinion and thinking about public and social affairs (Dewey [1927] 1991). Publicity also matters because it engages people in power relations, forcing the powerful to interact politically with those affected by decisions and enabling the oppressed to form new identities (Hayward 2021).

In complex societies, most citizens rely on media for information (Couldry and Hepp 2017). Greater access to information appears to be associated with greater participation (Prior 2007), higher levels of support for policy proposals (Muradova, Walker, and Colli 2020), and an impact on voting behaviour (Baekgaard et al. 2014; Hayes and Lawless 2015). Media plays an important role in influencing public opinion, but it has shown itself to be far from the deliberative ideal (Gastil & Black, 2008). Sometimes it plays antagonistic roles to deliberation, such as manipulation (Habermas 1992; Jansová et al. 2024). The internet and social media have accentuated the fragmentation of the public sphere, leading to a higher risk of exposure to exclusively similar views (Stroud, 2008, 2010). This can increase polarisation (Sunstein, 2002, 2007), and disinformation (Jungherr and Schroeder 2021; McKay and Tenove 2021), posing serious threats to the functioning of democracy (Orhan 2022; McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018).

Democratic processes are subject to countless other criticisms and threats. There has been an awareness of democratic backsliding in recent years evident in cynicism, disinterest and reduced voter turnout (Bermeo 2016; Luo and Przeworski 2021; Wolkenstein 2023). However, citizens are participating in new social movements, civil society organisations, networks, and activist groups, getting involved in policy issues, indicating some democratic vitality (Dahlgren 2013; 2009; Della Porta 2013).

Democratic Innovations

It is challenging to define democratic innovations. The term was little used, with only some classificatory attempts (Smith 2005). The current conceptualisation identified democratic innovations as actions designed to increase and deepen citizen participation in political decision-making, based on normative values of inclusion, popular control, and transparency (Smith 2009).

Furthermore, attempts have been made to implement mechanisms for greater control and decision-making by communities, through the application of intermediate steps such as consultation and delegation, and testing of deliberative experiments in various institutions, at different territorial levels, such as referenda, cyberdemocracy, citizens' juries, consensus conferences, citizens' councils, or deliberative polls (Fishkin 2011; Sintomer and Ganuza 2011; OECD 2020). These practices have been shown to have some potential positive contributions to the quality of democracy (Jäske and Setälä 2020; Michels 2011).

However, there are criticisms regarding barriers and social exclusion (Ercan and Dryzek 2015). Deliberative formats are criticised for often silencing the speech of individuals due to class, gender or ethnic differences, affecting underrepresented groups such as women, minorities and socioeconomically disadvantaged populations (Fraser 1992; Young 1996; 2003).

Elstub and Escobar (2019) extended the concept of democratic innovations to institutions and processes developed to deepen and reimagine the role of citizens in the process of governance and debate on a political issue, with greater opportunities for participation,

deliberation and influence. These authors classified democratic innovations into four large families: mini-publics, participatory budgeting, collaborative governance, and referendums and citizens' initiatives, to which they add a fifth group transversal to the others: e-participation (Elstub and Escobar 2019).

Citizens' assemblies correspond to models of democratic innovation that are part of the deliberative wave (OECD 2020). Selected groups of citizens are exposed to ideal conditions for deliberation, with access to privileged information on the topics to be discussed and contact with experts. The processes take place in environments with conditions for deliberation between citizens, to make proposals based on reasoned arguments (Boswell et al., 2023; Curato et al., 2024; Reuchamps et al., 2023). For these groups of citizens to be effective and accepted, it is essential to have a random selection process, ensuring the representation of all segments of a population (Gąsiorowska, 2023).

In this context, communication emerges as a prerequisite for the successful organisation of a participatory process, from recruiting participants to ensuring the transparency of the process and guaranteeing the benefits of wider learning (OECD 2022). The OECD differentiates two communication fields in democratic innovations: communication with participants and with the broader public. While the first is intended to support the recruitment, maintain engagement and ensure a smooth experience, the second is intended to increase interest and awareness about the participatory process and the issues addressed, ensuring transparency and building trust (OECD 2022).

Methodology

This study's key research question is to understand how different areas of communication should be assessed in communicating citizens' assemblies, following a qualitative approach to study three case studies, using semi-structured interviews and the consultation of documents published by or about the studied initiatives.

Case Studies

Focusing on the European level, the case selection aimed for different scales of governance, namely regional, national and European level initiatives. Additionally, selection included a time criterion, seeking initiatives taking place between 2020 and 2023 to enable a comparative global sociopolitical context.

Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE). The CoFoE is an innovative democratic initiative promoted by the European Union, which took place between April 2021 and May 2022. It was jointly co-chaired by the Presidents of the three EU institutions, supported by an Executive Board and a small Common Secretariat.

The first pillar of the Conference, the Multilingual Digital Platform, consisted of an accessible online platform that allowed all citizens to discuss ideas, comment or submit proposals in the 24 official languages, through simultaneous automatic translation (Conference on the Future of Europe 2022b). At the European Citizens' Panels, 800 citizens representing the sociological and geographical diversity of the EU were randomly selected, using five criteria – nationality, urban/rural, socio-economic background, gender, and age – and organised into four different panels of 200 citizens each. The selection process involved 27 national polling organisations using a telephone random sampling method, coordinated by an external service provider (Conference on the Future of Europe 2022a). The National Citizens' Panels

were organised according to the same principles of good deliberation, and six countries organised a Panel: Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Lithuania and the Netherlands.

The citizens’ recommendations that emerged from these Panels were presented by citizens’ representatives, who joined members of the European Parliament, the national parliaments, the European Council and European Commission, in a Conference Plenary. 49 proposals and 326 measures resulted from the final Plenary discussion (Conference on the Future of Europe 2022a).

Spanish Citizens’ Climate Assembly (SCCA). The Citizens’ Climate Assembly was an exercise of deliberative democracy to issue recommendations and/or public policy proposals to the Government, the Parliament and society in general.

The initiative followed the Declaration on the Climate Emergency, approved by the Spanish Council of Ministers on January 21, 2020, which included among its commitments the intention to strengthen participation mechanisms and establish a Citizens’ Climate Assembly around a starting question: “A safer and fairer Spain in the face of climate change. How do we do it?”

A group of 100 citizens was formed, representing the diversity of Spanish society. The selection was made by an independent organisation through a random process based on criteria such as age, gender, geographical origin, town size (urban-rural), income level and nationality. Sociodemographic information was then collected using an online form and by telephone.

The governance of the Citizens’ Climate Assembly had a four-group structure: an Independent Coordination Panel, an Independent Technical Team, the Ministry of Ecological

TABLE 1
Communication channels identified in the three case studies and the literature

Literature	CoFoE	SCCA	BCA
Communication with participants			
Phone	Recruitment phone calls	Letter and phone	Recruitment phone calls
Email	Email Post mail: documents; e-mail messages	Email Recruitment documents	Email Presentations documents
Social media	WhatsApp	WhatsApp	WhatsApp
Online platform	Zoom platform	Zoom platform	Zoom platform
Participation tools	Multilingual Digital Platform [Decidim]	Decidim / Survey	Mentimeter
Technological support	Simultaneous translation; Zoom meetings	Zoom meetings	Zoom meetings
Communication with the broad public			
Website	CoFoE	Assembly website	Partecipa (Municipality of Bologna); Chiara.eco
Social media	YouTube	Facebook, X, YouTube	YouTube; FIU’s Instagram, Facebook and YouTube
Video	YouTube: 37 videos	YouTube: 89 videos	FIU YouTube: 17 videos
PR (press releases, press conferences, media contacts)	Briefings with journalists; media contacts	Elected spokespersons after the last session	

Transition and Demographic Challenge, and an Independent Expert Group (Asamblea Ciudadana para el Clima 2022).

The Assembly happened between November 2021 and May 2022. It was carried out in five stages: preparation, learning and knowledge, deliberation and reflection, recommendations and follow-up. The first five sessions were online, and the last session was in person in Madrid. All instruments were made available so that people with few digital skills could follow the sessions correctly (training and computers were supplied). Zoom and Decidim platforms were used, among other digital tools. The vote took place in person and online. This led to 172 recommendations, guided by 8 principles and organised into 58 objectives.

Bologna Citizens' Assembly. The Bologna Citizens' Assembly is a democratic instrument that seeks to contribute to the presentation of proposals and implementation of municipal policies. One of the most innovative and distinctive features is that the Assembly is officially recognized in the Municipal Statute as part of the decision-making process, and the operative modes have been approved through the *Regulation on citizens' right to participate and be informed*. This endows it with deliberative power, as the Municipal Council must consider the proposals put forward by the assembly, which can be convened at most once a year, on a particularly relevant topic, within the jurisdiction of the Bologna Municipality.

The first Citizens' Assembly was convened in 2023, addressing the topic of climate change, took place between May and November and consisted of nine half-day meetings.

This first edition was made up of 100 people, including 80 municipality residents over the age of 16 years, selected randomly by strata (following criteria such as age, neighbourhoods and gender), and 20 "city users", who regularly frequent the city. To select participants, 1,000 letters were sent out in advance to achieve 100 positive responses. Citizens were also contacted by telephone, and an information meeting was held afterwards.

The Assembly resulted in six final recommendations, which were approved by the Bologna City councillors during the City Council meeting on Monday 26 February 2024.

Data Collection

The research included 30 in-depth interviews and the consultation of 61 documents. Interviews were conducted with participants and organisers of the three case studies. All interviewees provided informed consent and their data were anonymised, following the strict ethical guidelines approved by the researchers' organisation's ethical commission.

Interviews took place between September 2023 and January 2024 using snowball sampling. This sampling method in qualitative research allows for the identification of individuals who share the same network of contacts and experiences, as was the case with the participants in the studied cases. From the first contacts made, others followed with other participants (Parker, Scott, and Geddes 2019).

The interviews were based on a semi-structured interview guide, where the interviewers explored what happened to try to explain situations and get concrete facts, and potential interviewees (identified via snowball referencing) were selected by the fulfilment of criteria that make it possible to answer the questions (Rubin and Rubin 2005), with the freedom to change and introduce new questions (Moreira 1994). This allowed the interviewees to bring up topics, criticisms and lessons that were not previously foreseen. The interview script included a specific topic on communication: "What was the dissemination and communication strategy?", and two questions related to the team and organisation process: "Who is at the table? And who had what role in the process?", and "What was needed to set up the events and how was this achieved?". Other questions prompted answers related

TABLE 2.
Four communication categories emerging from the literature and empirical data analysis

Communication category	Public audiences	Activities	Literature references	Empirical data
Decision-making communication	Participants	Technical information; Moderation and facilitation; Opportunity to speak; Time to speak; Opportunity to listen; Understanding of the process	Black et al. 2009; Bohman 2009; Escobar 2011; Fung 2006; Kelshaw and Gastil 2007, 2008; Polletta and Gardner 2018	CoFoE; SCCA; BCA (participants and organisers)
Internal functional communication	Participants	Recruitment; Agenda; Travels; Logistical conditions; Gifts and/or <i>per diems</i>	OECD 2022	CoFoE; SCCA; BCA (participants)
Public awareness communication	Broader public	Recruitment; Information on the process; Agenda; Results; Recommendations	Hayward 2021; OECD 2019, 2020, 2021; Smith 2024; Ward 2008; Wood and Aronczyk 2020	CoFoE; SCCA; BCA (participants and organisers)
Follow-up communication	Participants; Broader public	Follow-up; Development and application of citizen recommendations; political and policy decision-making	Devaney et al. 2020	CoFoE participants and organisers; SCCA and BCA

to communication issues, namely questions related to trust, transparency, listening and digital technologies.

All the interviews were translated into English and data were analysed through a comparative thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006; Clarke and Braun 2017), aiming to identify and interpret characteristics of the data to recognise patterns regarding the perspectives and practices of the participants interviewed, who expressed their opinions on the main topics regarding communication.

Thematic coding was hand-coded by the researchers involved and themes were interactively discussed and agreed upon, based on the topics identified in the interview discourses (see Table 3 ‘Identified themes and categories’ in supplementary materials). The analysis sought to understand the forms and channels of communication in the three case studies, identifying similarities and differences. From the comparative analysis, the main communication themes that emerged from the thematic analysis were identified. Lastly, the triangulation of results provided the grounds to propose a framework with specific categories of analysis.

Results

The three initiatives emerged in the midst of the so-called “permacrisis”, which began with the financial crisis in Europe and Brexit, and followed with the Covid-19 pandemic

TABLE 3
Identified themes, examples and corresponding categories

Identified themes	Examples	Categories identified
Recruitment messages	"It was over the phone. I don't even remember it very well." (N05)	Internal functional communication
Recruitment process	"After receiving the letters at home, they organised an informative meeting [...] then we had a deadline to confirm our participation." (I6)	
Recruitment credibility	"I was contacted by a person who was recruiting this here in Portugal (...) and I was a bit reluctant at first" (N08)	
Media used with participants	"We asked to the members if they preferred email or WhatsApp, and they chose WhatsApp" (I10)	Decision-making communication
Strategies used with participants	"During the last three meetings, a communication group has been formed by the members" (I10)	
Perceptions of communication	"With the participants the communications went rather smoothly" (N09)	
Process methodology	"We tried to empower a bit the communication at the beginning, when we sent the 1.000 letters to the selected citizens" (I09)	
Experts and information	"Therefore, we had experts on various things (...) It was a part that I think is really important." (N05)	
Speaking and listening	"Despite my young age, I always felt listened, and that I gave an important contribution. " (I06)	
Assemblies' general methodology	"They didn't explain to us enough what it was, that a debate in the plenary means you have 2 minutes to say your idea" (N07)	
Assemblies' time	"You were reluctant to participate so as not to take up other people's time. You felt the time on you." (K06)	
Difficulties in the process	"The biggest issue was putting together one hundred people who did not know each other" (I08)	
Perceptions on methodology	"Personally, I am not totally convinced by the methodology" (I01)	
Impact/effects	"Those who participated are now more aware about the problems related to the pollution and they have a better knowledge on how to deal with them" (I02)	Public awareness communication
Objectives of dissemination	"The citizens assembly must be given the widest dissemination, so that all the inhabitants are informed and can follow the developments" (I05)	
Strategy for media	"On our side at all levels we communicated with journalists at the occasion of each session of the Panels" (N09)	
Strategy for public communication	"They asked us a lot to share it on our social media" (N08)	
Media and journalists'	"The European media was quite interested. Probably wasn't enough but I'm really not a media specialist " (N11)	
Difficulties in public communication	"That was one of the big problems. How did... How could you communicate to citizens? " (N02)	
Results of dissemination	"a media outlet distorted some of them and that almost ruined all the work done" (K05)	
Success of dissemination	"No. In Belgium not. In Belgium there was no attention from the... not enough attention from the media." (N07)	

(Continues)

TABLE 3
Continued.

Identified themes	Examples	Categories identified
Objectives of follow-up	"We were promised feedback at the end of this year to keep us up to date" (N06)	Follow-up communication
Perceptions on follow-up	"The last meeting we had, which was the 2nd of December, 2 years ago, was kind of a disaster." (N10)	
Difficulties on follow-up	"Sometimes I find the document, and I say oh yes this is it and afterwards I didn't find it again because it's so difficult to find." (N07)	
Impact of follow-up	"Some people have to say yes, we are forgotten, and that's a bit bad for the image of Europe" (N06)	

and the war in Ukraine. The pandemic was the event that had the greatest impact, forcing the dates and functioning of the assemblies to be changed, while the outbreak of war in Ukraine had a noticeable effect on the CoFoE in particular. However, they also benefited from a trend towards the "deliberative wave", which was beginning in Europe with the Irish Citizens' Assembly or the French Citizens' Convention on Climate.

Commonalities and Differences in Communication

The three initiatives have relatively identical communication strategies, despite their diverse geography and scale. The main difference in terms of scale was mentioned at the CoFoE because of the different types of media landscape in each country, which made it hard to come up with a common strategy. In all cases, there was an anchor website for the initiative, where information could be assessed. These channels provided background information about the organisers, methodologies, documents, materials, the stages of the process and news. However, while the CoFoE and the SCCA had their own websites, Bologna used the Municipality's Partecipa and the Chiara.eco websites.

At the same time, the initiatives used social media to increase the visibility of the events and encourage participants. In Bologna, information was shared on the Comune di Bologna's social media (Facebook, X, YouTube, Instagram, Telegram). The YouTube and Facebook channels of the Fondazione Innovazione Urbana (FIU) were also used to stream the plenary sessions, and stories were published on Instagram. In Spain, the Assembly's Facebook, X and YouTube pages were available. The CoFoE used the YouTube and X platforms to broadcast videos about the event and to disseminate and share information. The social media pages of the European Commission and the European Parliament were used to disseminate information on the conference (see Table 1). Concerning contact with the general public, the Bologna Citizens' Assembly used the campaign material of Mission 1000 Climate-neutral and Smart Cities.

Communication with Participants

Email was the most widely used means of exchanging information and sharing documents. In Bologna, a WhatsApp group was created, enabling internal communication with the participants in a horizontal way, and almost all internal communication was managed mainly through digital tools. In all three cases, digital chat platforms were used for meetings

and assembly sessions. In the CoFoE, the second sessions of the European Citizens' Panels were held online (Conference on the Future of Europe 2022a). In Spain, the Zoom platform was used, with the required support to ensure correct registration and follow-up throughout the assembly sessions.

In Bologna, the assembly sessions used Mentimeter software, allowing real-time interaction with participants. In the SCCA for the final vote on the recommendations, participants were able to use the Survey Monkey platform, in addition to the presential vote.

Communication with the Wider Public

Digital platforms were used to extend the process to other segments of the population, aside from those selected for the assemblies. The Multilingual Digital Platform, at CoFoE, used Decidim software (Barandiaran et al. 2024), allowing citizens to participate through comments, ideas and proposals (Conference on the Future of Europe 2022b). This platform has a high potential for promoting citizen participation but may not have reached its potential due to difficulties in communicating with the wider public. The platform received 5 million unique visitors and had more than 50.000 active visitors. 17.000 ideas were debated and almost 22.000 comments were made (Conference on the Future of Europe 2022a). Given the population of 450 million in the EU, its potential has gone untapped.

Analysis Framework – Triangulation of Results

The triangulation of results allows to identify four categories, which result from an attempt to articulate the communicative dimension of decision-making with temporal moments and spaces that transcend the assembly. The legitimization of mini-publics requires a transparency component that can be achieved through publicity (Raphael and Karpowitz 2013). This begins with public awareness and recruitment of future participants in the pre-assembly stage and continues through to the post-assembly stage, where it is important to publicise the assembly's results and proposals and maintain contact with the participants (OECD, 2022).

The four proposed categories are: "decision-making communication", "internal functional communication", "public awareness communication", and "follow-up communication".

First, "decision making communication", as revealed by participants' comments, showed a keen sense of criticism regarding the way assemblies worked. These comments included considerations about the opportunity to speak, the balance of speaking time, and the opportunity to listen and understand the process. CoFoE participants complained and demanded changes to the plenary's operating rules because they did not agree with the model and the speaking time. A demand that culminated in an adaptation of the rules and the creation of thematic working groups, to ensure that the plenary operating rules were better suited to the participants: "[citizens] managed to rebel a bit and say no, we also want to do our way!" (n01). The problem of time was also mentioned in the Spanish Assembly: "some complained about the time issue, you felt like you had a stopwatch next to you" (k06).

Secondly, the participants did not report many problems in the "functional internal communication". As one of the organisers stated: "With the participants, the communications went rather smoothly" (n09), and the participants agreed that "internal communication between us and the organisers went on nicely" (i06). However, the sensitive stage of

recruitment prompted some criticism. This is because it is sometimes difficult for an ordinary citizen to access the process and the initial phone contact was not always clear about what was required, and there was a lack of trust between the parties, which led to suspicion: “I was a bit reluctant at first. I didn’t know what it was. I thought it was a scam” (n08).

Third, “public awareness communication” refers to information aimed at the general public. In Bologna, the participants expressed regret regarding the deficiencies in external communication. The Spanish Assembly adopted a strategy of confidentiality, which entailed the maintenance of anonymity during the deliberative process and assemblies. This ensured the secrecy of votes, with participants’ identities remaining undisclosed until the recommendations were formally presented. The dissemination of information via social media or mainstream media channels was restricted during the assembly. It was only in the final session that the decision was taken to permit members of the assembly to make statements to the media, and 12 representatives were elected for this purpose (Asamblea Ciudadana para el Clima 2022). This option divided the participants’ opinions. On one hand “it was a good idea to maintain anonymity until the end, which made us feel safe” (k05), on the other hand “this did not translate into a relevant impact at the level of influencing public policies” (k08). Conversely, at CoFoE there was recurrent contact with the media and journalists, with briefings after Panels and Plenary sessions. Participants were also encouraged to disseminate information regarding the Conference via their social media platforms.

However, there is an opinion that the CoFoE failed to capture the media interest. Among participants and organisers it was attributed to the final phase of the Covid-19 pandemic and the start of the military conflict in Ukraine, which competed for media attention: “There were lots of things going on in Europe and in the world that maybe were of more importance for the media” (n11). There was equally a reflection on media’s logic and news values: “the Conference, with the exception of the beginning and the end, in the middle there were no dramatic moments, only conversations” (n03).

These made the three initiatives less visible and were a source of frustration and dissatisfaction for the participants: “I just want to highlight what is explained in the Statute about the Bologna Citizens’ Assembly, stating that to the citizens’ assembly must be given the widest dissemination, so that all the inhabitants are informed and can follow the developments. (...) in Bologna, I noticed that nobody knew about the assembly” (i05).

Finally, although little mentioned in the research, “follow-up communication” appears to respond to unfulfilled information needs after the event. Previous research warns of this need: “[m]ore needs to be done to communicate to the members of a citizens’ assembly regarding the uptake and implementation of their recommendations” (Devaney et al. 2020). Follow-up communications enable informing the public about the decisions taken in the assembly and their implications for the lives of ordinary citizens, but it also fulfils the mission of responding to a request from the participants. This need was particularly evident in the CoFoE case. Among the organisers, there seems to be an awareness of the importance of this stage, evidenced in different documents (Council of the European Union 2023; European Parliament 2024; Arpio et al. 2023), but it is among the participants that there is a demand for follow-up communication: “we were promised feedback at the end of this year to keep us up to date. So, we are trying to get some communication (...) but some people have to say ‘yes, we were forgotten’, and that’s a bit bad” (n06).

The four categories are the basis for the proposed analytical framework presented in Table 2. Additional examples of the participants’ considerations, leading to the four categories are available in Table 4 (supplementary material), which encompasses a diversity of assessments.

TABLE 4
Participants' assessment of the communication

	CoFoE - Conference on the Future of Europe	Bologna Citizen's Assembly	Spanish Citizens' Climate Assembly
Internal functional communication	n09: "With the participants the communications went rather smoothly. I mean, we prepared the document, etc, but the direct communication with the citizens, for example, in the panel was carried out by the external service provider (...) They had to inform 800 citizens." n08: "I was a bit reluctant at first, I didn't know what it was, I thought it was more like a scam. (...) Because it's not very normal to call a guy to go to the European Parliament, is it?" n07: "I think the process and the methodology were very good. (...), but the communication about the process was not good and not efficient."	i01: "I am not totally convinced by the methodology [sending a letter to all participants as first invitation], because there are some people who are living elsewhere compared to their residence, some others who do not check regularly their mailbox, and we had some delays due to the letter." i05: "The communication set up towards the participants has been quite traditional. When I received the invitation from the municipality, there was a link." i02: "The communication has been very effective. (...) For sure, those who participated are now more aware of the problems related to pollution and they have a better knowledge of how to deal with them."	k08: "due to legal issues (protection of personal data) it was not possible to use the Spanish demographic census and from there select the participants. Advertisements had to be placed on Facebook and other media to encourage people to participate." k05: "I saw an advertisement asking if I was interested in the environment and I responded." k06: "The methodology was well planned, but some complained about the time issue, you felt like you had a stopwatch next to you. The discussion part was cut off somehow."
Decision-making communication	n05: "The first time, this first weekend, was more than just us expressing, it was for us to listen, we had the confrontation... We had this contact with the experts. This is a very important phase."	i06: "working in smaller groups made communication more effective. Despite my young age, I always felt listened, and that I gave an important contribution."	k03: "Little by little people began to feel prepared and with the tools to participate, deliberate, etc., but it was a gradual process."
Public awareness communication	n01: "It's a process that remained relatively confidential. (...) there's a long reflection to have about how we communicate nowadays (...) Because if we don't communicate enough, it's not inclusive enough."	i05: "I just want to highlight what is explained in the Statute, about the Bologna Citizens' Assembly, stating that to the citizens assembly must be given the widest dissemination, so that all the inhabitants are informed and can follow the developments. (...) I noticed that nobody knew about the assembly."	k07: "At the end of the Assembly the issue of confidentiality was opened, and 12 spokespersons were elected to communicate and explain the recommendations. But it was too late."

n06: "What was left out the most was this communication (...) Those who were already convinced of the usefulness of everything we do at European level it's perfect, but all those who didn't know, we didn't try to bring them to this European culture and that's a bit of a shame. This was the opportunity (...) but we haven't informed enough."

i08: "To me, the only missing element has been the external communication. I would bet more on information towards the rest of the citizens, making them aware that a citizens' assembly on these topics was being implemented."

k01: "the commitment to confidentiality was positive. People received no outside influences. It was necessary to make people feel safe, but it limited media access to the Assembly process. Without access to the participants, the narrative had no hook for the media, which nowadays requires a very dynamic approach."

Follow-up communication

n10: "The last meeting we had, which was the 2nd of December, 2 years ago, was kind of a disaster. (...) I think what would have been nice if we had concrete... I don't know... a paper where it says concretely: we did this and this in the making, but we never received any of this."

n06: "As far as we are concerned, we do not have this follow-up (...). It's not as if we've been forgotten, but almost. (...) This undermines the credibility of citizen participation."

i02: "There is this group of young guys, paid by the municipality, who continue to inform us about what is happening. For example, this monitoring group, is regularly followed by these guys, who inform us on the phone, ask us to participate"

k03: "the post-assembly was not planned. There was no budget. There is a lot to improve in that aspect. We did not know how to accompany that level of commitment of the people beyond the holding of the Assembly"

Discussion

Drawing on the identification of four categories for analysing communication, the comparative analysis of three citizens' assemblies indicates that the expansion, reach and legitimacy of democratic innovations in the political system depend to some extent on their visibility and public recognition (Raphael and Karpowitz 2013). Specifically, difficulties regarding communication with the broader public mentioned in previous studies (Devillers et al. 2021; Maia 2023; Smith 2024) were echoed in the interviewees' answers and comments. Furthermore, deliberative communication and the principle of publicity can enable the expansion of participation opportunities for individuals and stakeholder groups in policymaking and broaden the visibility and outreach of democratic innovation initiatives, promoting transparency, accountability, integrity and participation (OECD 2019; 2020; 2021; Wood and Aronczyk 2020), and having the capacity to empower citizens (Hayward 2021). Also, who do not participate in the mini-publics should be aware of the existence of these initiatives, having the opportunity to thoroughly examine the resulting recommendations and deliberations (Devillers et al. 2021).

Nevertheless, "public awareness" is the component of communication that generates the most widespread criticism. Eighteen years after Ward's warnings of disconnection between the assemblies and the public (Ward 2008), communication problems remain. Across the three case studies, there was a perception that citizens in general were not aware these assemblies were taking place. In Spain, a survey on the impact of the SCCA on the public concluded: "the level of public awareness about the SCCA is low, with only 12% of the population reporting awareness of the SCCA, while 71% denied any knowledge of it, and 17% indicated it sounded vaguely familiar" (Fernández-Martínez and Bates 2023, 8). In the Bologna assembly and CoFoE, citizens and organisers regretted the weakness of external communication.

Part of this communication problem may lie within the media ecosystem. Without media attention, citizens cannot be reached (Smith 2024). In many countries, media outlets and journalists pay little attention to deliberative processes (OECD 2020). Even in the CoFoE, an innovative and international scale event, the organisation experienced difficulties in engaging the media. This can be explained in light of the various structural factors that influence the mainstream media, such as media logic, concentrated ownership and commercialisation (Harcup and O'Neill 2017; 2001; Pomatto 2019). Assemblies have news value at the beginning and at the end with the presentation of results, but in between they mainly consist of conversations between citizens, less appealing to the media. Overall, dialogue with the media through press releases, interviews or letters to the editor has proven ineffective. But part of the problem may also lie with the public. A lack of interest in politics and, at the same time, news avoidance behaviour (Ksiazek, Malthouse, and Webster 2010; Wolfsfeld, Yarchi, and Samuel-Azran 2016).

"Internal communication" is less exposed to public visibility, as it is limited to an internal dimension and exclusive to an audience of participants. In general, this communication process was found to be adequate and efficient. Only, the recruitment stage was particularly susceptible to criticism, highlighting the importance of communicating the methodologies used, to mitigate any negative perceptions and ensure consistency in the process (Devaney et al. 2020).

Furthermore, the communicative dimension of the decision-making process should be more pronounced in deliberative practices. These are more demanding due to their discursive aspect, the justification of arguments and the search for consensus. The communication process partly determines the nature of a public meeting, the process of information, dialogue, deliberation and decision-making, including verbal to non-verbal communication on the part of the organisers, but also the access to relevant information, the opportunity and time to speak, and to listen and understand the process (Polletta and

Gardner 2018). This communication can be more unilateral or bilateral (Kelshaw and Gastil 2007; 2008), as well as more informative with mere information sharing or actively involving the citizens in the deliberation (Fung 2006). It is also important to implement dialogic communication (Escobar 2011; Bohman 2009), transparency, and accessible processes, and also enabling a comprehensive range of perspectives (Bohn et al. 2023; Guttman and Thompson 2004).

The informative component and the role of experts were highly valued by the participants in the three case studies. Participating citizens valued participatory methodologies and emphasised that they felt listened to. This is a critical component since one of the key problems identified in the literature is the inefficiency of some deliberative processes which inadvertently exclude some citizens (Fraser 1992; Schmidt 2024). It is crucial to give voice to different perspectives, to build trust and to foster a sense of community among participants. These facilitation efforts may include ensuring a balance between the speaking turns, avoiding inequality, and that the speeches of the facilitators and consultants do not overlap with those of the participants (Black, Leichter, and Gastil 2009). The type of speech and the way it engages with the audience is also important. It is possible to include personal testimonies alongside scientific evidence, namely personal, emotional and creative storytelling (Black, Leichter, and Gastil 2009; Devaney et al. 2020). Speaking time was considered short in CoFoE and SCCA, but deliberative transformation and decision-making take time (Curato et al., 2017; Niemeyer et al., 2023).

Lastly, regarding the communication of the follow-up stage, most studies focus on the moment in which initiatives operate and tend to disconnect from the underlying processes. However, it is essential that citizens' recommendations are presented in the policy process in a way that values and reflects the time and effort that citizens put into discussing and developing them. This should be reflected in a clear communication process that encourages citizens' compliance (Devaney et al. 2020). This follow-up stage received criticism in the three cases, especially among CoFoE, and the organisations behind these initiatives tried to respond to these expectations. The CoFoE website (now archived but accessible for reference) has a section dedicated to conference tracking. The European Council and the European Parliament published reports on the follow-up to the conference (European Parliament 2024; Council of the European Union 2023; Arpio et al. 2023).

These follow-up and monitoring aspects seem to be components requiring improvement. There are great efforts to implement the initiatives through rigorous recruitment processes and efficient participatory methodologies, but the commitments towards participating citizens seem to diminish immediately after the assembly, even though follow-up is something that has already been recommended by participants in previous citizens' assemblies (Climate Assembly UK 2020). Participating citizens made a personal investment by taking part in these initiatives and deserve to continue to be informed about future developments. Some participants feel that they invested their time and effort, and they demand to be regularly informed of developments in the implementation of their recommendations. Non-existing or dismissive communication can impact citizen participation negatively, now and in the future.

Conclusion

This work, based on the analysis of three case studies, sought to fill an identified need for an analytical framework that would make it possible to assess communication processes in citizens' assemblies. Although democratic innovations are demanding processes from a communication point of view, this analysis has been neglected by research and approaches to communication topics have been marginal. This study responded to this gap with an

analytical framework that includes four main areas of analysis: “decision-making communication”, “internal functional communication”, “public awareness communication”, and “follow-up communication”. The proposed framework may be applied in future research and prove useful for the design and monitoring of future assemblies.

The participants’ (citizens’ and organisers’) assessment of communication in the three democratic innovation experiments reveals general patterns of satisfaction, especially with internal communication, which is valued by most of the interviewees. “Decision-making communication” is also highly rated in terms of the methodology used, although with some concerns about the lack of time for discussion. The category of “public awareness communication” is the one that shows the highest levels of failure and dissatisfaction, while “follow-up communication” shows dissatisfaction among certain participants.

In the area of “public awareness communication”, interviewees recognised the enormous difficulty in communicating to the public through mass media, making it important to think about alternative ways of ensuring effective communication. Thus, “follow-up communication” is an important topic and deserves further attention.

It should be noted that this study only recorded participants’ opinions on “public awareness communication”, so it reflects the viewpoint of insiders. To better understand the reasons why many citizens were unaware that the assemblies were taking place, it would be important to expand this study through empirical work among non-participants. Additionally, this research is limited to a particular type of democratic innovation, meaning the proposed framework may have limited application to other models and experiences. Nevertheless, critically addressing the role of communication in other models of democratic innovations may prove important. Furthermore, the study is limited by a sample of three case studies in a European context, thus not enabling insights from other regions of the world. Additional data collection could draw relevant quantitative insights into communication needs, which can also be relevant for other models of democratic innovations, in diverse sociopolitical contexts.

Policymakers who are leading the implementation of citizens’ assemblies and other types of mini-publics in Europe and elsewhere should plan different pathways for communicating and disseminating these initiatives. The key challenge is to engage the broader public in the deliberative process, exploring the feasibility of the assembly’s results in wider contexts and for diverse social groups, while raising awareness of critical global problems, such as climate change.

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