



# “IT’S NOT MY JOB TO ENGINEER YOU AN OUTCOME”: INTEGRITY CHALLENGES IN DELIBERATIVE MINI-PUBLICS

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## ABSTRACT

As the use of deliberative mini-publics becomes more widespread (OECD, 2020), they face a number of threats to their integrity. The expansion of these practices has led to the professionalisation and commercialisation of participation (Bherer et al., 2017a), which raises potential tensions between commercial and democratic interests (Hendriks & Carson, 2008). Practitioners—the individuals and organisations who design, facilitate, and deliver deliberative mini-publics—play a central role in the realisation of democratic ideals on the ground (Hendriks et al., 2020), yet relatively little attention has been paid to them (Escobar, 2022). This paper focuses on the experiences of practitioners as they navigate tensions between a commissioning body’s interests and demands, and the integrity of the deliberative process. Drawing on interview data with 22 practitioners, this paper provides a qualitative thematic analysis exploring how practitioners experience and respond to these tensions, as well as the limitations they face.

**Keywords:** *deliberative practice, deliberative mini-publics, integrity, practitioners*

## BIO

Lucy J Parry’s research focuses on deliberative democracy in theory and practice, democratic innovations and animal ethics. She is project manager of the deliberative integrity project and a senior research associate at the Centre for Deliberative Democracy and Global Governance and a research associate with Democratic Society.

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## INTRODUCTION

Interest in, and awareness of, deliberative mini-publics (DMPs) is expanding (OECD, 2020). Deliberative mini-publics combine the random selection of citizens with deliberation that aim towards the production of recommendations, which are usually presented to decision-makers who are often also the authorities who commission the process. Who exactly commissions deliberative mini-publics varies widely, but in many contexts, it is a public authority or governmental body, such as local councils, state or national governments, specific government departments, or legislative bodies. The actual design and delivery of a mini-public is often the responsibility of an external actor or actors, known generally as practitioners.<sup>1</sup> The independence of the practitioner from the commissioning authority is often emphasised as best practice to safeguard the integrity of the process (Curato et al., 2021).

Yet, as the use of deliberative mini-publics increases, they face a number of risks to their integrity that cannot be safeguarded by independent organisation alone. Increased political stakes raise the pressure for DMPs to secure certain outcomes and expectations, increasing the incentive for manipulation by the state or powerful interests (Hendriks & Carson, 2008; Oross & Tap, 2021). Many advocates of DMPs call for them to be tied more closely to decision-making, where authorities are obliged to implement recommendations, but this risks greater incentives to control the outcomes of deliberation (Mann et al 2014, p. 25). There is also concern that with increasing popularity, mini-publics may become a veil for merely ‘activating’ citizens and securing legitimacy for already-made decisions by politicians, rather than genuine engagement and agency (Bherer et al., 2017a; Mann et al., 2014, p. 29).

Existing research suggests that these risks to integrity are exacerbated by the professionalisation and commercialisation of the public participation industry (Bherer et al., 2017a, 2017b; Hendriks & Carson, 2008; Lee, 2014b). Increased interest and use of participatory activities has resulted in a burgeoning field of practice made up of professionals who specialise in the design and delivery of participatory processes, including deliberative mini-publics. For some, the establishment of an ‘industry’ operating in a commercial context is directly in tension with principles of deliberative democracy (Hendriks & Carson, 2008), along with several other risks. First, when faced with the risks outlined above, practitioners may place the interests of their client—usually the commissioning body—above deliberative and democratic interests (Bherer et al., 2017a; Christensen & Grant, 2020). Second, commercialisation may lead to market competition between practitioners, that may, in turn, limit transparency as well as collaboration and foster a ‘trade secrets’ mentality that is detrimental to the field (Christensen & Grant, 2020; Hendriks & Carson, 2008). Third, there is a risk that deliberative mini-publics are becoming an ‘off-the-shelf’ product or commodity that is repackaged and applied indiscriminately without consideration of local contexts (Christensen & Grant, 2020).

In this paper, I focus on the experience of practitioners relating to these risks. I do this through a qualitative thematic analysis of interviews conducted with 22 practitioners across several regions of the world. My findings suggest that, in cases where practitioners face pressure from commissioners, they demonstrate remarkable resistance and willingness to uphold the integrity of a process. Nonetheless, practitioners are aware of the limitations of their agency and the extent to which they are constrained by broader political systems in which mini-publics are situated.

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<sup>1</sup> This is not always the case, as in Ireland where the design and delivery is generally the responsibility of the bureaucracy.

I find that there is concern and awareness of the risks of commercialisation, with a focus on the entry of large, commercial consulting firms rather than amongst existing independent practitioners. This is tied to the fact that currently, practitioners rely on their extensive experience of mini-publics to respond to and plan for dealing with these tensions and pressures.

The paper proceeds as follows. In the first section, I define who practitioners are and the different roles they fulfil in deliberative mini-publics. I also outline the tensions they face and their potential role in upholding integrity based on research to date. In the second section, I provide a brief overview of the data and methods used in the analysis. The third section presents the analysis, which first explores the range of experiences interviewees relayed of client relationships, followed by the ways in which they navigate these tensions. I also offer reflections on the broader context in which practitioners operate, and how this limits or expands their agency. Finally, I discuss the implications of these findings and the interaction of political and commercial pressures that practitioners face, as well as the implications for upholding the integrity of deliberative mini-publics.

## Who are practitioners?

For the purposes of this paper, I define ‘practitioners’ as actors whose main domain of work is in the design and delivery of deliberative mini-publics and who rely on this work—in whole or in part—for their income. Practitioners are on the frontline when it comes to integrity issues as they are often the first point of contact for the commissioning authority and a buffer between the authority and participants in the process. They are thus in a potentially powerful position when it comes to defending or upholding the integrity of a process in the face of pressure from a commissioner (Bherer et al., 2017a, p. 8). At the same time, they are also engaged in a commercial relationship with the commissioning body as a client, facing possible loss of income and future work if they do not meet certain demands, which place practitioners in a potentially awkward position (Lee, 2017). Furthermore, practitioners occupy different roles during a process and have different levels of agency. Facilitators and recruitment specialists are often subcontracted by another practitioner organisation, whilst practitioners also vary in terms of their experience and reputation that can be leveraged to resist pressure.

Despite their pivotal position, practitioners have been somewhat overlooked in the deliberative democracy literature (Escobar, 2022). An emerging body of work has focused on the role of public participation professionals (PPPs) and considered the tensions they face, including the implications of the professionalisation and commercialisation of public participation and deliberation work (Bherer et al., 2017a; Christensen & Grant, 2020; Lee, 2014a). Laurence Bherer, Mario Gauthier, and Louis Simard (2017b) suggest that the open and somewhat unpredictable nature of a deliberative process can cause nervousness amongst commissioning authorities (see also Christensen & Grant, 2020), leading to attempts to control information flow or outcomes. Practitioners are then faced with competing pressures from the client, along with the pressure to maintain the integrity of the process. Bherer and colleagues (2017b) frame this experience as in tension with the norm of impartiality in participatory practice, which becomes difficult to maintain when faced with stark choices between the client’s demands and the deliberation’s integrity.

Caroline Lee (2014a) understands this tension as a clash of logics within practitioners themselves. On the one hand, practitioners embody a participatory and emancipatory rhetoric focused on expanding democratic practices. On the



other hand, they generally work within the confines of existing systems and organisations, where participation must be managed and manageable (Lee, 2014a, p. 493). This ultimately comes down to a tension between normative and instrumental logics for doing participatory and deliberative processes. However, this clash of logics is not unique to PPPs but is also reflected in scholarly and policy debates over the role and function of deliberative mini-publics in the broader democratic system (Parry, 2021).

The aim of the current paper is to explore, in detail, how practitioners navigate this tension on the ground, how they respond, and the limitations they experience. Whilst previous work has focused on the broader field of public participation, I focus specifically on deliberative mini-publics, given the increase in interest and attention on this form of deliberation. This enables me to explore, in depth, specific issues relevant to DMPs that may not arise in other forms of participation, such as the generally commissioned nature of DMPs by public authorities (especially in Europe and Australia) that may impact integrity.<sup>2</sup> This paper therefore focuses on experiences of commissioned processes, where the design and delivery of the deliberative mini-public is ‘outsourced’ (Christensen & Grant, 2020; Wan, 2018) to professional practitioners. Previous research has introduced frameworks and typologies for understanding the roles of PPPs (e.g., Chilvers, 2013; Bherer et al., 2017b). Here I focus on the rich *experiences* and *practices* of practitioners (Hendriks et al., 2020; Escobar, 2022) to enhance our understanding of how the commercialised context of deliberative practices affects their integrity.

My findings illustrate a range of experiences with commissioning authorities, ranging from constructive collaboration to overt attempts at controlling both process and outcomes. Whilst responses also vary, common themes emerge in how practitioners respond to these challenges, which include clear and upfront communication and relying on experience to navigate them. The findings also highlight the limitations that practitioners perceive in their role and the structural constraints they perceive in integrating deliberative mini-publics into broader political systems, a topic that is beginning to garner attention in the field (Boswell et al., 2022).

These findings surface the on-the-ground experience of practitioners and contribute to our understanding of how practitioners perceive and enact their roles. They demonstrate how practitioners work to uphold integrity beyond rhetoric and performativity (Lee, 2014a) whilst operating in a context where their agency remains limited. Finally, the findings also alert us to current and future threats to integrity, especially when organisations with little to no experience of deliberation enter the field.

## APPROACH

This paper draws on 22 semi-structured interviews with practitioners, as defined above, from Europe, Australia, North America, and South America. This group of interviewees was drawn from a larger pool of participants for a broader research project, which also included academics, policymakers, and public servants. This paper excludes academics who are employed by academic institutions, although the interviewees included a handful of academics whose work is primarily within practitioner organisations. It also excludes public servants who, although working on

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, not all deliberative mini-publics are commissioned, and not all are commissioned by public authorities.

deliberative mini-publics within the bureaucracy, experience a different kind of relationship and tensions as they sit within the commissioning authority. These two groups are excluded for the purposes of this paper because the focus is on the actors who are directly engaged in a so-called commercial relationship with commissioning bodies—they are being paid to provide a service (Bherer et al., 2017a, p. 5).

For the most part, interviewees’ work focused on deliberative mini-publics specifically, although many had experience in other types of deliberative and participatory processes. They included people working in both non-profit organisations and commercial businesses, as well as freelancers working independently. Our interviewees spanned multiple and sometimes overlapping roles, including orchestrating deliberative mini-publics (design, planning, and evaluation), practicing (facilitating, working with stakeholders, and recruiting participants), coordinating (developing best practice guidelines and networking) and, to a lesser extent, studying (conducting and disseminating research) (Chilvers, 2013). Whilst studying deliberative mini-publics is frequently the domain of academics, it is also carried out by practitioner organisations (Bherer et al., 2017a, p. 5). Another important role is advocacy, where practitioners promote the use and expansion of deliberative mini-publics.

I and a broader research team conducted the interviews. We initially recruited participants through our existing networks and then used a snowball technique to gather additional participants. We asked participants about their goals and motivations for working in this area, and the kind of obstacles they faced in their work. Additional questions prompted interviewees to reflect on any experiences where they felt a process had lacked integrity, and what measures they took to mitigate these challenges. Data was recorded, transcribed, and anonymised before being entered into NVivo for qualitative thematic analysis. From an initial round of qualitative coding, I identified the four main themes discussed below: experiences, responses, context, and limitations.

## ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

### Experiences

Participants reported a range of experiences of working with commissioning bodies, the vast majority of which were governmental. Positive experiences were the result of good working relationships with commissioners, particularly public servants. This meant achieving trust and honesty between practitioners and commissioners which enabled a productive relationship. One practitioner recalled, in particular, how important it was to work with ‘very brave public servants who were very trusting in sharing with us their fears.’ This meant that practitioners were aware at the outset of the sensitive nature and potential power and politics at play regarding the issue at hand, which they were mindful of in designing the process. Another participant mentioned their experience working with a government where the process was able to achieve the right balance of structure and direction with flexibility and openness. Several participants described achieving this balance as a matter of ongoing negotiation and open communication with commissioners throughout a process.

Negative experiences outweighed the positive, however. Negative experiences of working with commissioners fell into two main categories: (1) attempts to control the process in some way and (2) lack of honesty about the politics surrounding a project. Regarding the former, several participants recalled attempts by authorities to control different

aspects of a process. One particular pressure point identified by multiple participants was the provision of information and selection of experts that present to participants. For many participants this was experienced merely as ‘heated discussions’ but not insurmountable, whilst for a small minority of others, as overt manipulation:

...basically, the government said to me, ‘You have to organise for these five people to appear before the jury.’ I said, ‘No, I’m not.’ Because that is not—I’m going to—I’m organising the people the jury said they want to hear from and they said, ‘No, you have to organise for these five.’

Some DMPs are not designed and delivered by a practitioner organisation, but by the government or bureaucracy also commissioning the process. In these cases, there is also a risk that the information provided is ‘clearly biased’ (see also Farrell, 2022).

Another example of attempted control reported was directed at the final outputs or decision of a process. Two cases were cited where the elected officials commissioning the process expressed a desire for a specific outcome and in one case, exerted significant pressure on practitioners to achieve it. In both cases, the practitioners’ responses struck the same note: ‘it’s not my job to engineer you an outcome’ This type of experience had a profound effect on some participants, with one describing it as ‘horrendous’ and how it made them doubt whether they should continue working in deliberative practice.

One participant recalled how a commissioning body threatened not to pay the external suppliers and contractors working on the process unless the practitioner complied with their demands on the content of the final report. The practitioner refused and in this case was able to rely on backup from an external funder and respond that:

We’re gonna cover it if you don’t pay them, we’ll cover it... Because guess what? We’re not putting that page in. The only report we generate is the report that those...people stand behind.

For practitioner organisations who do not have an additional or external source of funding, instead relying solely on commissioned processes, the pressure to comply may be greater.

The examples above are exacerbated when commissioning bodies are not honest with practitioners about the politics of an issue or process. Several participants suggested that politicians are often afraid of receiving public backlash, which leads to lack of clear and open communication with both the public and practitioners designing and running a process. This leads to problems further down the line. A few interviewees suggested that one particularly tricky aspect for practitioners is getting access to senior decision makers, who may not want to deal with an issue head-on or are not fully invested in the deliberative process. But without direct access and interaction, communication takes place down the ranks and is sometimes unclear, such as when a junior person taking on the role does not have decision-making authority.

Despite these negative experiences, most practitioners we interviewed had never pulled out of a project due to these pressures – ‘we’ve never had an unresolvable problem.’ Some reported struggling with the decision of whether to stick with a project under pressurised circumstances and trying to weigh up the consequences of pulling out versus staying in:



Sometimes it’s important to go ahead with a project in conditions that are unfavourable. In some ways it’s easier to opt out and say your ethics are above this, than it is to engage in the messy political reality.

A small minority of participants had either threatened to pull out of a project, actually pulled out, or noticed issues prior to signing a contract and withdrawn. In the one case where practitioners described pulling out of a contract, it was actually not one of the pressures cited above, but the commissioning authority’s insistence on using a particular method that did not suit the needs of the community in which they wanted to use it. In that case, the practitioners felt that ‘we had to hold the line, there was nothing that we could do to crawl back those integrity-based measures that were being broken.’

Based on the responses above, it appears that the practitioners we interviewed were willing to stand up to commissioning authorities in the small number of examples where it was necessary. In the following section I explore exactly how practitioners navigate these pressures and what factors enable and constrain them in upholding the integrity of a deliberative process.

## Responses

Our participants relied on a range of tactics to support them in upholding the integrity of a process. Firstly, nearly all interviewees recounted a range of factors that were relevant for them in evaluating whether to take on a project in the first place. These included looking for the potential impacts a process will have and how clearly those impacts were articulated by commissioning bodies. Other impact factors were the time and resources available, as well as the issue, scope and rationale. Despite taking these factors into account, most participants also mentioned that restricted time and resources were the biggest integrity pressures they encountered. These different factors were framed by some as trade-offs that were always present in some way, such as the trade-off between time and number of participants within the constraints of a given budget as increasing both these things costs money. Whilst these factors were considered, most participants recognised that there are always limitations that they work within, and it is about how those factors are negotiated with commissioners. Several interviewees described how they had entered into projects under conditions that weren’t ideal, but that they had been able to reach compromises with commissioners over some aspects of a process such as the time available.

For others, constraints offered an opportunity to get creative. ‘Constraints aren’t always bad. Constraints ought to impel creative responses’ one interviewee pointed out, whilst another suggested that the need to adapt to constraints and problems as they arise—to ‘design on the fly’—could be a gratifying experience.

Other factors were definite red flags for practitioners that would rule them out of taking on a project in the first place. Lack of transparency was cited here, which manifests in different ways. Wanting practitioners or participants to sign a non-disclosure agreement or appearing unwilling to publish everything from the process were examples that imply that the commissioning body is trying to hide something and might want to excessively control the process. Another red flag was the risk of ‘participation wash,’ where it is clear that a commissioner is not really interested in genuine participation and deliberation. One participant recounted a political candidate who wanted to run a process during

their electoral campaign who seemed motivated by reputational benefit, which gave cause for the practitioner to turn down the project.

Whilst some participants noted these as red flags at the outset, others experienced the same issues further down the line during a process. There are two possible explanations behind this. Firstly, that these issues are not immediately obvious upfront and only become apparent later. Secondly, most interviewees relied on their previous experience to describe their red flags and how they navigated integrity issues. Participants recounted how they learned from negative experiences to both improve their practice and know what—and who—to avoid in the future.

Several participants relayed that they had reflected on negative experiences and learned important lessons from them. Some also highlighted that it was important to ‘acknowledge errors, acknowledge what could be done better—come out and say it.’ At the same time, this participant suggested that it could be more difficult for some practitioners when they rely on commissioned processes alone for their income. However, others pointed out that the ability to secure future work also relies on reputation, and this was cited by some as an additional motivation for upholding the integrity of a process under pressure:

If I had a reputation of just giving authorities what they want from these processes, I’m of no use. Like I, you know, I said that having a reputation for doing that means that people don’t have any confidence in the processes I’d facilitate. So that’s the first thing. As well as being bad for my professional reputation, and also, I’ve got my own values. I couldn’t do it that way. You know, if you want someone to do that kind of job, find someone else. Yes, you always want work, and to get rework, but I think in order for the process to work well, people have to have confidence that it was run well. Otherwise, you just erode confidence in these processes and in authorities in general, and you just tend to be part of the problem.

For some highly experienced practitioners, their reputation and credibility in the field also served as valuable leverage in holding commissioning authorities to higher standards or pushing back in the face of pressure. This meant that from the outset, they could turn down projects that did not meet their own measures of impact or integrity or could negotiate the factors mentioned above, such as time and commitment to responding to recommendations.

An important way in which practitioners use their experience to uphold integrity is by being clear and upfront with commissioning authorities, stakeholders, and participants about the conditions and design of the process. Participants most frequently mentioned ensuring clarity from the outset on the roles and expectations of the actors involved:

It’s like preparing the ground you know, and this includes, not just ideally it is the mayor you know that commissioned, but it also ideally includes the civil servants because it is them who will be responsible for implementing the recommendations or preparing the input from the city hall in terms of educational materials. So they should also understand what the process is about, so that is why every, like, the basic rule would be that every person who would be involved in the Citizens Assembly should attend the info session.

This was important to participants because in order for the process to run smoothly, those involved need to accept their role and certain behaviours. Clarity over roles and expectations also helps lay the ground for clarity over what is acceptable during the process: ‘the best organisations I’ve worked with have always been very clear about the terms on which deliberative engagement will take place.’ Participants formalised this to varying degrees, from contracts and codes of conduct to information sessions for everyone involved. Some participants also emphasised ‘softer’ measures to support clarity up front, such as focusing on capacity building for participation with public servants and building trust and good relationships with commissioners. The latter is particularly helpful for mitigating some of the less tangible challenges, such as the mindset of commissioners towards participation that could lead to anxiety and pressure on practitioners later on.

It is important to recognise here that the conditions that many practitioners laid out did not only involve design features such as time and scope, but also the impact of the work beyond the deliberative event itself: would the government commit to implementing at least some of the recommendations? What scope is there for going beyond a standalone event? At the same time, a few participants also highlighted the importance of being clear up front about what was realistically achievable given the time and resources available. Clear articulation of impact was, for some practitioners, a matter of integrity:

...there’s a question there. If the process does not have an impact on their lives that they want. It doesn’t solve the larger problems in society, then there’s a question there you, you’ve had them, you’ve asked them to participate, you know you’ve asked them to make these sacrifices in order to participate, emotional or economic or whatever. And are you delivering? You know they’re kind of the impact on people’s lives that they are hoping for, and that you’re promising to some degree or another... I think that maybe that’s a fairly common question I think in terms of integrity and ethics.

Not everybody we interviewed took this view. Some considered the impact beyond the process itself to be a matter out of their hands, where implementation and accountability are the responsibility of the commissioning authority alone. This highlights the differences in how practitioners perceive their role (Bherer et al., 2017b). What commissioners do with the outputs of a deliberative mini-public was cited by many participants as a point of frustration, and one that they faced limitations in tackling.

## Context and Limitations

Most of the practitioners we interviewed reflected on the limitations of their role in a context where they are commissioned to design and deliver a process. For the most part, this was felt in what happens after a deliberative mini-public in the follow-up and response of the commissioning authority to the mini-public’s output. Some expressed frustration about processes that were robust, empowering experiences for participants but fell through in the aftermath when commissioning authorities did not follow up on the recommendations. Participants reflected on these experiences more broadly as down to a lack of accountability built into most processes, as well as hard constraints like limited timeframe, resources, or project scope. Some interviewees framed this as a structural challenge of fitting deliberative mini-publics into broader political systems:

...it’s kind of the central tension of our work...we do deliberative democratic experiences for people in the midst of political systems that are mainly not deliberative or democratic.

Another potential limitation is the commercialised context in which practitioners operate. One participant suggested that the procurement process (in the UK) encourages competition between practitioners for contracts rather than collaboration. This competition may limit transparency and collaboration across the community of practitioners, which was cited by several interviewees as important for integrity.

Transparency measures include sharing materials from a particular process, as well as sharing materials, lessons and practices with other practitioners and the broader public. Some prominent organisations in the field enact transparency through publishing the process design (e.g., newDemocracy Foundation in Australia). Another example is the Sortition Foundation who made the software for their civic lottery process open source, which means that other organisations can use it (Flanigan et al., 2021). Nonetheless, a few interviewees felt that others were resistant to transparency, and this was damaging to the field:

It makes zero sense to me that we are particularly a bunch of non-profits at the moment, that are protected, so protective of our materials that we can’t pick and choose all the best stuff and repack into the greatest thing for all of us to be using...that just, that upsets me to no end.

While it was understandable that practitioners might want to keep micro-level design processes to themselves, this was not justifiable for higher level design choices. Some participants considered the field of deliberative practice to be both collaborative and competitive and they noted an increasing number of tenders that require a consortium which could encourage further collaboration across practitioners.

In addition to competition, some studies have suggested that the professionalisation and commercialisation of the ‘deliberative engagement industry’ may become a threat to integrity where deliberative processes are reduced to a market commodity motivated by profit (Hendriks & Carson, 2008). Unsurprisingly, this was a point of contention for many of our interviewees. For a few, the choice to be a non-profit organisation was deliberate and significant for them as they expressed concern over the integrity of for-profit or commercial providers entering the field, worried they could be motivated by profit over normative commitments to deliberation. Others vigorously rejected this suggestion, arguing that:

If I wanted to be rich or have a big business, I would NOT be a specialist in democracy, I can tell you that for sure! I do this work because it’s how I can use my skills and talents to improve and strengthen democracies and because it aligns so deeply with my values. My values drive everything I do.

One participant suggested that the distinction between profit and non-profit is ideological rather than grounded in reality. Others pointed out that non-profit organisations still need to generate income and are thus not free from commercial pressures. This is especially the case if they rely on commissioned processes for their main source of income.

These insights enable us to make some fine-grained distinctions beyond the profit/non-profit dichotomy. Two interviewees suggested that—motivations aside—practitioners who rely on commissioned processes alone for income are in a more vulnerable position when faced with pressure from commissioners. In these situations, having an external backer or philanthropic funder<sup>3</sup> gives practitioners a financial safety net to fall back on, and this security could enable them to push back against pressure without the threat of loss of income. In another scenario, the commissioning body is not always the funder of the process, and this separation could also ease the pressure. Having said that, one commercial practitioner we spoke to had walked out of a contract due to integrity issues, thus incurring significant loss of income, without the financial safety net of an additional funder.

Our findings suggest, in line with previous work, that deliberative practitioners are not naïve to the commercialised context in which they operate (Bherer et al., 2017b). Moreover, our interview data suggests that practitioners care about the integrity of deliberative mini-publics: they not only walk the talk (Lee, 2014a) but also take concrete steps to uphold integrity. Participants demonstrated this in recounting the range of negative and positive experiences they had of working with commissioning authorities and how they respond to pressure exerted on them and attempts to control a process. In fact, some practitioners perceive their role as a ‘steward and trust holder’ for a larger democratic project. From this perspective, practitioners are the first stop/backstop when it comes to integrity, and part of that role is to protect the process and participants from pressure and undue political influences.

Whilst most interviewees recognised the significance of this responsibility, some emphasised not their own role but that of participants’ in upholding integrity, including in response to pressure from commissioning authorities and stakeholders. They argue that participants are the ones with democratic legitimacy, and that the more control practitioners have over the process, the less democratic it is. Ideally, practitioners should have a ‘light touch approach’ in a process and participants should have greater autonomy. This could have a greater role in shaping the remit and design, the selection of information and witnesses, and the production of the recommendations and report writing. These interviewees suggested that the more control participants have in a process, the less opportunities there are for manipulation and undue influence. Nonetheless, a few participants reported instances where stakeholders had attempted to contact and influence participants (or infiltrate the process in some way), or where participants had themselves attempted to undermine the integrity of the deliberative process (see also Carson, 2017). These experiences suggest that practitioners must be alive not only to pressure exerted on themselves, but also on participants. Interviewees who recounted these stories demonstrated this awareness and took measures to ensure that participants were either protected or equipped to deal with this kind of interference.

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<sup>3</sup> Having a philanthropic backer is not without its own ethical risks such as vested interests.

## CONCLUSION

These findings suggest that practitioners uphold the integrity of deliberative mini-publics in a number of ways. Of primary importance is the use of experience to avoid past mistakes and to foster a more robust approach to possible challenges from the outset. The practitioners we interviewed emphasised the importance of laying out clear expectations with commissioners, stakeholders and participants about their roles during a deliberative mini-public and acceptable conditions and behaviours. Practitioners have a number of red flags and red lines that they look out for, although in practice this can mean working to navigate tensions and pressures rather than stepping away from a project.

Whilst some practitioners rejected the notion that being a commercial organisation implies that practitioners will privilege commissioners’ interests over the integrity of the process, there was some concern about large consulting firms entering the field of deliberative practice. Whilst for some the concern related to their for-profit status, there are other reasons to be concerned. Insights from practitioners highlight how important experience is in informing how practitioners navigate challenges to integrity. The danger here is that new companies entering the market do not have the very specific and extensive experience that many established, independent practitioners have, and thus may not be well equipped to deal with these challenges. Moreover, whilst many of our interviewees emphasised how their values align with those of deliberative democracy and voiced their commitment to those norms, there is a concern that new firms—whose main area of work is not deliberative mini-publics—may not share those values.

Alongside the commercialised context in which practitioners operate, it is also important to highlight the other structural constraints that practitioners encounter. Participants highlighted a number of challenges relating to the political systems they are working in that make it difficult to design and deliver impactful deliberative mini-publics. The most frequently mentioned was that of elected representatives or public servants not being fully invested in what a deliberative mini-public really means or requires. There are a variety of reasons for this: lack of political will or cross-party support; politicians seeking to use the process to boost their reputation; and negative experiences of public participation in the past. This can also be attributed to the simple fact that deliberative mini-publics remain a relatively marginal and novel practice around the world, thus most commissioning bodies have little experience of how they actually work. Other political constraints come from fear about public backlash related to mini-publics and their high political stakes, which can lead to attempts to control a process that inevitably has an element of unpredictability to it. Many interviewees recognised that politicians may have specific outcomes or instrumental goals for a mini-public and that this, in itself, is not necessarily a problem. The problems mentioned here are also distinct from overt manipulation and co-optation of a deliberative process as seen in Hungary (Oross & Tap, 2021).

Ultimately, participants highlighted a number of factors that often overlap and can prove challenging to deal with in practice. These factors cannot all be attributed to the commercial nature of the relationship between the commissioner and the commissioned practitioner. This context may make it more difficult to uphold integrity in the face of such pressure, particularly for those who rely solely on commissioned work for their income. However, my findings indicate multiple ways in which practitioners not only push back against pressure from commissioners, but also use these experiences to iterate and improve practice. Importantly, it challenges the notion that deliberative mini-publics are off-the-shelf ‘products’ dished out indiscriminately. Instead, the practitioners demonstrate, in line with previous research (Bherer et al., 2017b), an astute awareness of the different contexts in which mini-publics are deployed and the ability to respond with agility and resilience.



The findings presented here also have implications for the future of deliberative mini-publics in a commercialised context. The current expanding interest in these practices means that increasingly large consulting or polling firms are commissioned to conduct deliberative and participatory processes. The danger here lies in the possibility that these firms could effectively push out smaller, independent operators out of the market (Chilvers, 2017), with the knock-on effect that the experience of dealing with integrity challenges is also diminished. My findings suggest that it is this aspect of commercialisation that concerns some practitioners, rather than the presence of commercial providers *per se*. Future research should investigate the ways in which specifically these larger firms—whose main concern is not deliberative mini-publics—navigate the integrity challenges discussed here.

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