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Danish citizen technology panels

<http://www.co-intelligence.org/P-DanishTechPanels.html>

Note: The citizen technology panel is one form of [citizen consensus council](#).

Situation: The rapid growth of technology presents an unprecedented problem for democracy: How do we exercise our citizenship intelligently? Decision-making in a technological society requires a level of expertise simply unavailable to us common citizens who are supposed to make the decisions. The best solution currently available to us is to align with advocacy groups (the AMA, the Sierra Club) whose perspective seems to fit most closely with our own, and who do research to bolster their views. But these interest groups only address problems by battling in the political arena, leaving our country with deep divisions, constantly shifting policies, and a thoroughly confused populace. (from [The Challenge of Technology in a Democracy](#))

One solution: Danish technology panels deal with this problem directly and elegantly. By providing a demographically (not politically) representative group of citizens with top-quality information and facilitation most people couldn't even dream of -- and then feeding the results of that microcosmic dialogue back into the macrocosm of public discourse -- democratic society is given appropriate wisdom to reflect and act on.

The form of [citizen consensus council](#) most relevant to technological issues is the **Danish citizen technology panel** (which the Danes and others call "consensus conference"). (See the [Danish Board of Technology Methods](#) -- click on "Show All Methods" then "Consensus Conferences" -- for the Danes' description of this method.) (The June 2003 version of this description is more directly available on the Co-Intelligence Institute website [here](#).)

Several times a year, the Danish government convenes a panel of fifteen ordinary citizens scientifically selected to represent the diversity of the Danish population and helps them study and recommend policy guidelines for a particular technology. (In 1999, for example, a citizen panel investigated genetic engineering of food.) Citizen panel members read briefing papers and then discuss with organizers what questions they have and which experts -- from across the spectrum of opinion on the subject -- they want to testify before them. They interview these selected experts -- who, as Frances Moore Lappe notes, may be surprised to find themselves *on tap* to the citizenry, not *on top* of the decision-making process. When the citizen panel is satisfied, they are professionally

facilitated to a consensus statement about what should be done about the technology they've just studied. Their findings are presented to the government and to the press.

The Danish model is remarkable for the extent to which its process ensures that the results cannot be credibly attacked as biased.

For a story about the use of this process in the US, see [Ordinary Folks Recommend Good Policy](#).

The theory behind Danish technology panels is that, while experts can provide insight into the issues, mechanics, facts, potential blessings and problems associated with a particular technology, they are not the right people to decide what should be done about it. In a democratic society, people whose lives are affected by an issue are supposed to have an effective voice in deciding how to deal with it. Since it is The People who primarily have to live with the results of technology, it is primarily The People who should judge how to deal with the inevitable trade-offs. In these technology panels, what the people bring to the table is their dreams, their values, their humanity, and the experience of their everyday lives, needs and desires -- exactly what's missing from most official dialogue about technical issues.

The genius of these panels is that they combine two sources of vitally relevant information -- the experts' knowledge and the people's common sense and popular will -- into a final judgment. Furthermore, the diverse views of the experts and the citizens are not just left to fight it out, but rather are woven together wisely through the process of [consensus](#). The particular process used is important: The consensus used here is not the familiar Beltway political consensus, in which power holder A trades favors with power holder B, or where powerful interest groups forge lowest-common-denominator compromises at the expense of the rest of society. The sort of consensus process used in the Danish technology panels (and in other citizen consensus panels) involves creatively moving through differences and conflicts to deeper and higher levels of common ground, often with wise breakthroughs unforeseen by any of the participants. The result is a unique blending of certain fundamental principles of American democracy -- that "all voices should be heard" and "E Pluribus Unum" (out of many, one).

Of course citizen consensus councils alone can't solve the problems of technological advance. But they can provide the guidance we need to proceed in ways that our society COULD actually act on -- since it is the diverse voices of our society itself which generates that guidance. These councils are a powerful tool for conscious, wise collective evolution. If our technological crisis can bootstrap us into that higher form of civilization, it will have been a blessing.

Resources:

For more information on Consensus Conferences see

- [Consensus Conference: A Danish description](#)
- [Town Meetings on Technology](#) by Richard E. Sclove
- [A study of official Danish technology assessment activities.](#) by Sandy Heierbacher. Includes other good resource links at the end.
- [How consensus conferences are organized.](#) Adapted by Tom Atlee from Johs Grundahl.
- Further information on the technology panels is available from Dick Sclove, author of the seminal DEMOCRACY AND TECHNOLOGY (Guilford Press, 1995). He can be reached at Richard@Sclove.org. Now an independent consultant, he was founder and former director of **The Loka Institute**, P.O. Box 355, Amherst, MA 01004 / Tel (413) 559-5860 / Fax (413) 559-5811 / Loka@Loka.org / <http://www.loka.org/> that sponsored the first consensus conference in the US, mentioned above.
- [The Danish Board of Technology](#) - Assessment - Teknologiradet, Antonigade 4, DK-1106, Copenhagen K, Denmark - Tel. + 45-33/32-0503