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## Serialisation and the use of Twitter: Keeping the conversation alive in public policy scenario projects

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## ABSTRACT

Scenario planning projects have been used in a variety of organisational settings to explore future uncertainty. The scenario process is often a participative one involving heterogeneous stakeholder groups from multiple organisations, particularly when exploring issues of wider public concern. Facilitated workshops are a common setting for scenario projects, typically requiring people to be physically present in order to participate and engage with others for the duration of the project. During workshops, participants progress through the stages of the process, generating content relevant to each stage and ultimately the scenarios themselves. However, the periods between workshops and other episodes of activity (e.g. interviewing stakeholders) are rarely mentioned in such accounts. Thus we know very little about what activities take place between such activities, when they occur and who is involved. This is a particular issue for larger scale scenario projects that run over a period of weeks or months and involve multiple workshops; in such cases organisers and facilitators have to consider how to maintain the interest and levels of engagement of participants throughout the duration of the project. A variety of social media exist which allow people to interact with each other virtually, both in real time and asynchronously. We reflect on the use of social media within a project to develop scenarios for the future of the food system around Birmingham, UK, in the year 2050. We explore how a particular social media, namely Twitter, can be used effectively as part of a scenario planning project, for example to engage participants and encourage contributions to the project. We suggest that Twitter can support the serialisation of strategic conversations between the face-to-face workshops. The paper considers the implications of these reflections for both the scenario process and scenario projects more generally.

## 1. Introduction

Scenario planning projects have been used in a variety of organisational settings to explore future uncertainty; a number of case studies exist describing its application in private sector (Cornelius et al., 2005; Ringland, 2006; Wilkinson and Kupers, 2013) and public policy settings (Cairns et al., 2013; Hadridge et al., 1995; Ringland, 2002). The scenario process is often a participative one involving heterogeneous stakeholder groups from multiple organisations, particularly when exploring issues of wider public concern. Facilitated workshops are a common setting for participation in scenario projects, typically requiring people to be physically present in order to participate and engage with others for the duration of the project. Bowman (2016) conceptualises the scenario process as consisting of “discursive and episodic practices” (p78) such as a series of workshops.

During workshops, participants progress through the stages of the

process, often in a facilitated setting, and generate content related to each stage in the process, and ultimately the scenarios themselves. Much of the scenario literature documents a series of prescriptive process steps relating to the development of scenarios, along with case studies that illustrate the content produced (Ringland, 2006). However, the periods between workshops and other episodes of activity (e.g. interviewing stakeholders) are rarely mentioned in such accounts. Thus we know very little about what activities take place between workshops, when they occur and who is involved. This is particularly an issue for large scale scenario projects that run over a period of weeks or months and involve multiple workshops; in such cases organisers and facilitators have to consider how to maintain the interest and levels of engagement of participants throughout the duration of the project.

This paper reflects on a year-long project that prepared the ground for the development of scenarios describing food futures for the year 2050 for the geographical region surrounding the UK city of

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Birmingham. The project was led by the New Optimists, a not-for-profit organisation, who describe themselves as a “community interest company” that creates “...platforms for scientists to promote and disseminate their work, and for their scientific endeavour to enable better informed decision-making” (New Optimists, 2016a). The project was promoted through the New Optimists Forum and was documented via their webpage, which also acts as a repository for documents relating to the project (<http://newoptimists.com/the-forum/>) (New Optimists, 2016b). A key goal for this project was to inform and influence local policy makers. A novel feature of the Birmingham 2050 project was the use made of social media, and in particular Twitter, to facilitate live reporting of workshops as they happened and to provide a vehicle for communication between workshops. The authors were involved in the project in the role of advising on the scenario process, supporting the facilitation of some of the workshops, and following events via social media.

Our research question concerns *the serialisation of the strategic conversation, both during and between face-to-face workshops, with a specific focus on the early stages of a scenario planning process*. Thus, our approach differs from many of the extant accounts of scenario projects, in that we explore the overarching project process rather than focusing on the detailed steps required to generate scenarios. More specifically, our research questions are as follows:

- *Is there an ongoing strategic conversation taking place between and/or during workshops as evidenced by Twitter data?*
- *What is the nature of the conversation taking place, e.g. is it focused on a single topic or does it have multiple strands?*
- *Who is involved in the conversation?*
- *Does the conversation contribute to the development of scenarios within the project? If so, how?*
- *What can be learnt about the current or potential future use of Twitter, or other social media, to support a scenario project?*

This paper is organised as follows. The next section reviews the literature on scenario processes, the workshop setting and the increasing interest in the use of technology to support scenario processes, including the use of social media to support engagement in activities. The following section introduces the case study and analytical setting. An analysis of Twitter data used to support the Birmingham 2050 scenario project is then presented, followed by a discussion of the potential contribution of such social media to scenario projects, particularly those within the public arena or involving multiple stakeholder groups. The paper ends with a discussion of future research directions.

## 2. Theoretical context

### 2.1. Scenarios within the public arena

Applications of scenario planning can be found across a wide spectrum of organisational settings. Perhaps the most well-known case history of scenario planning is that of the Royal Dutch Shell Company within the private sector. In the public arena, Ringland (2002) differentiates between scenarios developed within the public sector and those developed to influence public attitudes. Both types of projects may be intended to influence public policy; the difference between them is in the level of participation involved in the process and the intended audiences for the process outputs.

Volkery and Ribeiro (2009) describe a continuum of functions of scenario planning according to its impact on decision-making. ‘Indirect’ forms of scenario-based decision support are intended to stimulate

wider debate about possible futures and encourage stakeholder buy-in. In contrast, ‘direct’ forms are targeted at generating options for future action and appraising the robustness of such options. They argue that ‘indirect’ forms of scenario-based decision support relate to the early phases of policy development which involve issue identification, issue framing and agenda setting. Additionally, they suggest that such forms provide “an opportunity for broader participation of societal stakeholders and open-minded discussions” (p. 1200). Ringland’s 12 step process for developing scenarios to influence public attitudes explicitly involves publicising the scenarios, a stage she likens to a marketing campaign, where one of the questions to be addressed is which channels to use to reach the intended audiences (Ringland, 2002).

A number of case studies can be found in the literature that describe the development of scenarios intended for debate within the public arena. For example:

- The Mont Fleur scenarios created to explore future developments in South Africa (Kahane et al., 1998).
- The Hemingford. scenarios created to explore the future of health and healthcare in the UK (Hadridge et al., 1995)
- Scenarios for Rotterdam, exploring the future development of the city (Ringland, 2002).
- E-Government scenarios exploring the impact of information and communication technologies on local government in the UK (Cairns et al., 2004)
- The Icrum scenarios, exploring the future of academic medicine (Clark, 2005)
- The PRELUDE scenarios exploring land use development in Europe (Volkery et al., 2008)
- Climate change scenarios developed to explore the potential development of the port of Hastings, Australia (Cairns et al., 2013)
- Scenarios for the future of Scotland and the UK (MacKay and Stoyanova, 2016)

A comparison across the cases reveals the following characteristics of such projects:

- Projects typically had an identifiable client or sponsor who was often involved or represented in the process.
- The issues addressed in each of the projects span the interests of multiple stakeholder groups. Thus a key purpose of each project is to open up debate, and engage people in thinking about the issues and range of possible futures. Some of the projects were specifically designed to engage the public in debate about the future.
- The descriptions of the cases typically focus on the steps of the process and the detail of the scenarios; little, if anything is reported about intervening periods between workshops and other activity.
- The early phases of many of the projects involved interviews with relevant stakeholder groups and individuals, including relevant experts. The material collected through these interviews was subsequently used in the development of the scenarios.
- Workshops involving multiple stakeholder representation typically took place in face-to-face settings; given the scale of some projects, series of workshops were employed, scheduled over a period of weeks or months.
- Where written reports were produced documenting the early phase of the projects, these were typically circulated to those involved in the project.
- A variety of settings and media were employed to publicise the interim and final outputs of the project, including reports, presentations, videos, dramatizations and exhibitions, as well as coverage by the press.

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