**Does the public exist ? Opening the Black Box of its Construction Process**

This paper examines the notion of *the public* in management research, and more particularly the question of how a public is constructed as a social actor in specific situations where large-scale groups may be affected by organizational or institutional policies requiring consideration of complex issues, for which relevant competence is needed. It is argued that some management theories are critically concerned by this issue - particularly stakeholder theory, which is briefly reviewed in the first part of the paper. In stakeholder theory, as well as in other governance theories, the existence of the public is visibly taken for granted. While such management theories implicitly use the notion of the *public*, they take the existence of that public for granted, and rarely pay attention to its construction process. Yet it cannot be assumed that the public for a specific class of decisions automatically exists. To exist as a relevant stakeholder group, the public must be constructed and governed. The social process of the construction, organization and maintenance over time of the public has largely been ignored in management literature - and yet at a time when decision-making with no public consultation can have dramatic impacts on a very large number of people, the question of the construction of a public is essential, particularly when the issues at stake are both complex and technical. Investigation is necessary into how a social group that exists objectively (e.g. customers of a given service, patients suffering from a given pathology, investors in a given sector or a given company, etc.) organizes itself to constitute an active and structured participant with a ‘real’ voice. A potential contradiction exists: the greater the technical complexity, the smaller the number of people sufficiently concerned to become involved. The construction of the public is investigated by drawing on three famous American authors who explored this very issue almost a century ago: Mary Parker Follett, Walter Lippmann and John Dewey. These authors concentrate upon the process of constructing the public and suggest three practical ways of solving the contradiction noted: the Community answer (Follett), the Expertise answer (Lippmann) and the Inquiry Process answer (Dewey). Building on the results of an empirical study of the nuclear industry’s Local Information Commissions (CLIs) in the West of France, the analysis will illustrate the insights that Follett, Lippmann and Dewey’s recommendations afford into the practical operationalization of the public’s construction, organization and maintenance through time. The objective of this research is hence twofold. Firstly, it seeks to understand how a social group that is concerned by a given question deliberately constructs itself as a major actor, despite its heterogeneity, over time acquiring strong skills and the ability to relevantly participate in the governance of complex activities. Secondly, it explores the conditions under which, once constructed, such a public can continue its existence (be “maintained”). The analysis finally leads to a proposed refined version of stakeholder management, and suggestions for potential further research that could be undertaken using a methodological approach based on these concepts.