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Citizenwashing EU Tech Policy: EU Deliberative Mini-Publics on Virtual Worlds and Artificial Intelligence

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Abstract

Over the last decade, the use of deliberative mini-publics as a democratic innovation to complement policymaking has flourished. The EU is no exception to this trend, holding large-scale transnational exercises such as the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) and the European Citizens' Panels. Digital technology has emerged as a topic in this type of participatory exercise, conducted alongside prolific public policy activity by the EU institutions in this domain. In this article, we ask: How did post-CoFoE citizen panels on EU tech policy play out? We examine the 2023 European Citizens' Panel on Virtual Worlds, organised by the European Commission, and the 2024 Citizen Panel on Artificial Intelligence organised by the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU. Through participant observation and an interpretivist framework, we argue that while the panels were presented as giving voice to "everyday citizens" and improving democratic legitimacy in policymaking, in practice, they served to build support for current policy that replicates the interests of big tech. Consequently, the outcomes of the panels were largely in line with recent EU public policy on further investment into emerging digital technology and public-private partnerships. We suggest that deliberative mini-publics that seek to influence EU policymaking currently (a) constitute a form of citizenwashing by aligning participant input by design with dominant private, economic, and political interests and (b) demonstrate a strategic effort to institutionalise this form of exercise as a public engagement and legitimacy-building activity in EU-level policymaking.

Keywords

artificial intelligence; big tech; citizenwashing; deliberative democracy; EU policy; European citizens' panel; European Union; mini-publics; technology; virtual worlds

1. Introduction: The "Deliberative Wave" and EU Tech Policy

Over the last decade, democratic innovations in the form of deliberative mini-publics that aim to complement policymaking have flourished across the world, in what the OECD has conceptualised as the "deliberative wave" (OECD, 2020; see also Fiket et al., in press). The EU is no exception to this trend and has innovated in its political practices by organising a series of citizen-centred processes that aim to reshape its conception of democracy and participation in a phenomenon that has been conceived as the EU's "citizen turn" (Oleart, 2023a). A significant moment came in 2021 with the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE), an exercise in which hundreds of randomly selected citizens from across the EU member states were brought together to discuss the future of Europe in four European Citizens' Panels (ECPs), transposing deliberation from the national to the transnational stage. The momentum of this large-scale exercise continued with the European Commission organising six "new generation" panels over 2022–2025 (with further panels expected), which recruited citizens from across the EU to collectively deliberate on a number of policy areas. This has been followed by increased interest in this type of participatory exercise from member states, not just in relation to local governance and national processes, but also in connecting to EU-level policy.

These innovations are commonly discussed as a partial response to criticisms of a democratic legitimacy crisis in the EU, with participatory exercises seen as having the potential (or at least the aspiration) to complement formal institutional processes by providing "added value in terms of the legitimacy...to the political decision-making process" (Barisione, 2012, p. 2), as well as encouraging a more inclusive, engaged, and informed society. Deliberative mini-publics are seen as a "new paradigm of democracy" (Landemore, 2020) that can better connect the general public to political elites and consequently further democratise policymaking processes. However, the emergence of this so-called deliberative wave has also been the result of lobbying efforts by deliberative democracy service providers (private agencies and consultancies that advise institutions on how to conduct mini-publics), the number of which has grown heavily over recent years. While historically, climate tends to be one of the main topics on which participatory exercises have been organised globally (see Smith, 2001; Willis et al., 2022) and in the EU (Galende-Sánchez, 2025), digital technology is increasingly receiving attention within mini-publics, both as a topic of deliberation and as a tool to improve deliberative processes (Landemore, 2023).

In this article, we ask: *How did post-CoFoE citizen panels on EU tech policy play out?* To explore this question, we examine the 2023 ECP on Virtual Worlds, organised by the European Commission, and the 2024 Citizen Panel on Artificial Intelligence (AI) organised by the Belgian Council Presidency (from now on, we use the Belgian Council Presidency's abbreviation, namely "beEU"). We argue that while the panels were presented as a way to give voice to "everyday citizens" and improve democratic legitimacy in policymaking, in practice, they served to build support for current EU policy that replicates the interests of major technology corporations, including Google, Meta, Microsoft, Apple, and Amazon (we refer to them in this paper as "big tech"). Although the outcome of citizen deliberations aligning with public policy is not a problem in itself, if policy has been heavily lobbied and influenced by the very profit-oriented organisations that are directly affected by the policy (Bank et al., 2021; Bouza et al., 2025; Gorwa et al., 2024; Kergueno et al., 2021; Popiel, 2018), then we are justified in questioning the integrity of the connection between the deliberative process and its outcome. In the area of EU digital policy, where big tech has been observed to be heavily involved in the legislative drafting process, such as in the AI Act (Schyns, 2023) and the Digital Services Act (Corporate Europe Observatory, 2020, 2022; Khanal et al., 2025), these panels appear to have generated an

artificial sense of democratic legitimacy for pre-existing policy positions that were significantly shaped by the input and interests of big tech. Specifically, the outcomes of the observed panels were largely in line with recent EU public policy on further investment into the emerging technology sector and on promoting its integration into private-sector business models and processes. In effect, these panels foreclosed the possibility of substantially contesting or reimagining digital governance in the EU through meaningful democratic input from public interest collective actors. Therefore, we suggest that EU-level deliberative mini-publics currently (a) constitute a form of citizenwashing by aligning participant input by design with dominant private, economic, and political interests and (b) demonstrate a strategic effort to institutionalise this form of exercise as a public engagement and legitimacy-building activity in EU-level policymaking processes. Overall, this indicates an ongoing consolidation of deliberative mini-publics as instruments within a legitimacy-building strategy centred on public involvement, one that shapes and channels the public's input to secure support for pre-established EU policy agendas in key areas.

2. Deliberative Mini-Publics: Democracy, Technology, and Everyday Citizens

The deliberative wave has triggered lively academic debate about the relationship between mini-publics and democracy. Whereas a stream of the literature champions deliberative mini-publics as a way to involve and empower everyday citizens in policymaking (Fishkin, 2018; Landemore, 2020; Smith, 2003), others question their democratising impact, especially when they have little resonance in the wider public sphere and are disconnected from traditional forms of parliamentary representation (Lafont, 2020; Lafont & Urbinati, 2024). While there are different imaginaries upon which sortition-based deliberative democracy exercises may be constructed and organised (Abbas & Sintomer, 2021), a common feature of mini-publics is their disconnection from mass politics. While deliberative democrats focused on mini-publics, such as Fishkin (2009), have attempted to connect deliberative polling more concretely to decision-making, the close relation between mini-publics and deliberative democracy tends to sideline the public sphere and large-scale political contestation. As a result, democratic legitimacy is increasingly framed as something that can be achieved independently from engagement with mass publics. Therefore, although much of the literature tends to emphasise the positive democratic potential of mini-publics, important ongoing debates about their actual impact and their connection to broader political processes are sometimes overlooked.

Consequently, in much of the deliberative mini-public literature, the public sphere is treated as replaceable by small spaces in which randomly selected everyday citizens are encouraged to deliberate and reach consensus: "The idea behind mini-publics is using sortition to create a microcosm of the citizenry: A group that has the same features and the same diversity as the citizenry, but on a smaller scale" (Sintomer, 2023, p. 205). These participatory exercises thus appear to offer a space in which democratically healthier dynamics can be cultivated through consensus-oriented deliberation. However, the emphasis on consensus often limits any articulation of dissent or structural critique, thereby reinforcing the boundaries of what is considered acceptable discourse within such settings. Despite some calls for revising the preeminent ideas of sortition and deliberation to, for instance, better link such processes with the communities most affected (Curato et al., 2025), deliberative mini-publics have generally popularised a version of democracy that focuses on the abstract, or even mythic, figure of the "everyday citizen" selected via sortition. This often entails sidelining collective actors such as political parties, trade unions, and civil society. Hence, this focus on mini-publics is in tension with the "systemic turn" of the deliberative democracy literature (Curato &

Böker, 2016), which emphasises "deliberative systems" (Parkinson & Mansbridge, 2012) rather than the procedural methods that may improve deliberation within mini-publics.

Given the difficulties of articulating a vibrant European public sphere oriented towards fostering deliberation in mass politics, the EU appears to be focused on a minimalistic conception of deliberative democracy and mini-publics. In the EU, deliberative mini-publics have historically been organised at the national and regional levels, with well-known experiences in France (Convention Citoyenne pour Le Climat), Ireland (the Constitutional Convention on marriage equality and Citizens' Assemblies on abortion and gender equality), and Belgium (the Ostbelgien Model and the Brussels Citizens' Assembly). While deliberative experiments have previously been organised at the EU level (for example, on deliberative polling within the EuroPolis Project, see Isernia & Fishkin, 2014), the CoFoE ECPs, held in 2021–2022 alongside six national panels, marked the first transnational sortition-based mini-publics convened globally. The CoFoE ECPs isolated the randomly selected everyday citizens from the political sphere and collective actors, shielding participants from the political tension of the issues being discussed (Oleart, 2023b). As a result, the ECPs were designed as "neutral" mechanisms that allowed little room for contestation of the status quo. They are "political" in that they are organised by EU institutions, but they become depoliticised insofar as conflict is deliberately minimised. Due to this, it is not evident that sortition-based mini-publics, such as these, truly have the potential to "democratise democracy" (see Talpin, 2019) when they are put into practice. It is precisely contestation in the public sphere that gives deliberative democracy its meaning, which is why establishing a close relationship between mini-publics (the micro) and both the broader public sphere and mass politics (the macro) is essential (Olsen & Trenz, 2015).

The missing micro-macro link of much of the literature has led Lafont (2020) to conceive mini-publics as a "shortcut" that requires blind deference from the citizenry at large to the randomly selected participants. In Lafont's (2020, p. 111) words, the expectation that "underlies the micro-deliberative shortcut is incompatible with the democratic ideal of self-government. Empowering the few is hardly ever a way of empowering the many." While some designs (such as the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform) do attempt to connect to binding decision-making processes, such cases remain relatively rare. The lack of a direct and explicit relationship between these experimental processes and the broader public sphere limits their democratising impact, while the sidelining of intermediary actors raises normative concerns about the exclusion of established channels of democratic representation and contestation. For participatory mechanisms to have real democratic significance, they must be embedded within a broader political field of action and must meaningfully interact with intermediary actors that play an influential role in the public sphere. This view is coherent with conceiving deliberative democracy as a "normative political theory that strives to make an impact on the real world" (see Hammond, 2019, p. 803), rather than narrowing deliberation to mini-publics as isolated exercises, detached from real-world political dynamics.

There is thus an inherent tension between the expectations of deliberative mini-publics as a democratic innovation and their actual broader democratic impact. This has been identified as a potential avenue for the co-optation of mini-publics, as they may be used to legitimise public policies without opening the possibility of truly contesting their substance (on "authoritarian deliberation," see He & Warren, 2011). This has been conceived as "citizenwashing"—with the suffix "washing" representing a critique of the strategy by which support for agendas is misrepresented by actors with disingenuous and deceptive motives, often for political or marketing purposes to gain public approval. Citizenwashing refers to the process by which "a public or

private actor [creates the illusion] of acting on behalf, or for the benefit of" a so-called representative sample of people, ostensibly involving the public in the process of decision-making while disregarding any possibility of taking their input into serious consideration (Martins et al., 2024, p. 4; on "participatory washing" in the ECPs, see Palomo Hernández, 2024). In this way, this concept describes the manipulation of participatory processes by public authorities as a misappropriation of the collective authority that citizens supposedly hold in a democracy.

We apply this citizenwashing approach to analyse EU deliberative mini-publics related to digital technology. Through regulatory instruments such as the Digital Services Act, the Digital Market Act, and the AI Act, the EU considers itself a global leader in the development of frameworks to regulate new technologies across the world (Bradford, 2020). However, its approach to digital governance (Bonnamy & Perarnaud, 2023) has faced criticism for aligning with the interests of major private technology companies, especially big tech actors (Griffin, 2023; Oleart & Rone, 2025), raising concerns about the extent to which industry influences and shapes policy (Bank et al., 2021; Kausche & Weiss, 2024). Big tech is often not only seen as part of the problem but as part of the solution, leading to regulatory responses that reflect a logic of "technosolutionism" (Morozov, 2013)—the belief that complex social issues can be addressed primarily through technological fixes.

In this context, the intersection of deliberative mini-publics and technology presents risks, particularly regarding the potential co-optation of public participation (Goñi, 2025). To date, the role of technology within mini-publics has largely been discussed in instrumental terms, focusing on civic engagement and participation technologies (such as digital crowdsourcing and open consultation platforms). Emphasis is often placed on how digital tools can facilitate and fine-tune deliberative exercises (Landemore, 2024; McKinney, 2024), rather than critically examining how participatory processes engage with technology as a subject of governance. As such, emphasising improvements such as online participation, real-time translation, or AI-assisted deliberation, often overlooks concretely situating and addressing the ways in which technology itself is shaped by political and economic structures that can impact the deliberative outcomes. This tension underscores a broader concern about how technology's role in democracy is conceived within participatory processes, where the illusion of greater inclusivity may conceal deeper structural inequalities and ultimately reinforce the perception of mini-publics as neutral mechanisms that leave little space for contesting the status quo.

Taking this theoretical framework, we analyse the recent post-CoFoE panels on EU tech policy by assessing two case studies along three aspects: (a) how EU tech policy was framed within the panels, (b) how these framings were replicated in the panel processes, and (c) how they were subsequently reflected in the panel outcomes. We follow this assessment with what this means within the context of the EU's current designs to institutionalise the panels within EU policymaking processes.

3. Methods and Cases: Deliberative Mini-Publics on EU Tech Policy

The article is based on participant observation and an interpretivist outlook (Ercan et al., 2017; Musante & DeWalt, 2010), with a constant dialogue and feedback loop between engagement with the literature and fieldwork. Both authors closely observed the two panels explored in this article (see Table 1), as well as other relevant panels conducted within the same institutional context. The strength of this approach is that theoretically and normatively informed empirical research supports the "refinement of

deliberative democratic theory, making it more sensitive to real-world constraints and opportunities" (Dryzek, 2007, p. 240).

Table 1. Panel session dates.

Panel	Session 1	Session 2	Session 3
European Citizens' Panel on Virtual Worlds (ECP on VW)	24–26 February 2023 (in person, Brussels)	10–12 March 2023 (online)	21–23 April 2023 (in person, Brussels)
Citizen Panel on Artificial Intelligence (beEU Panel)	24–25 February 2024 (in person, Brussels)	23–24 March 2024 (in person, Brussels)	20–21 April 2024 (in person, Brussels)

We selected two citizen panels as examples of national and transnational deliberative exercises oriented towards impacting EU-level public policy on technology: the European Commission's ECP on Virtual Worlds (VW) and the beEU Panel, conducted by the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU. The Commission's ECP on VW was the second in a larger set of panels that each relate to a different policy area, involving different Directorates-General (DGs) and their own (non-)legislative files (Oleart, in press). This so-called "new generation" of ECPs was established after, and out of, the CoFoE, reflecting the institution's desire to embed participatory democracy within its policymaking process. The beEU Panel, on the other hand, was established as a one-off exercise conducted within the context of the Belgian Presidency's multi-level citizen participation programme.

The panels make for relevant comparison due to their distinct similarities, particularly in terms of their EU-oriented agenda, connection to the public policy process, and thematic coherence. Both panels focused on digital technologies anticipated to have a profound impact on society, with the ramifications of their development and the full extent of their potential application uncertain. The two panels attempted to sensitise citizens to the topic through practical demonstrations of the technology, both using tradeshow-like presentations of the technology and trialling the technology in the panel itself (for example, in the ECP on VW, the second session was held in a virtual world specifically developed for the panel and in the beEU Panel, AI audio transcription was (unsuccessfully) tested in certain working groups). It is also worth noting the consistency in terms of the subcontractors organising, conducting, and facilitating these panels. More concretely, Missions Publiques, a citizen participation consultancy, organised both panels on behalf of the contracting institution, in cooperation with partner organisations that are regularly involved in conducting these types of exercises across Europe. These actors have long experience in organising deliberative exercises at the national and transnational level; for instance, Missions Publiques organised the French Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat and had a leading role in both the CoFoE panels and the Commission's "new generation" of ECPs.

The following empirical sections detail both panels by (a) outlining the policy context in which the panels took place, (b) providing an overview of the sessions, and (c) offering an analysis of how the panels were conducted. The analysis provides insight into how the panels replicated institutional and big tech-friendly policies through influence over the panel process in terms of three critical (interconnected) dimensions: framing, process, and outcome.

Framing refers to how organisers present and contextualise information on a subject ahead of and during deliberation, thereby establishing the boundaries of discussion that influence "opinion-formation on an issue

or policy" (Calvert & Warren, 2014, p. 206). *Process* focuses on procedural aspects—the institutional design and deliberative experience, which can either enable or constrain participants' engagement and critical reflection on the subject. *Outcome* concerns the work produced by the participants and its connection to the wider public and political spheres. Across these three dimensions, the organisers of the two panels were able to exert significant control over the proceedings by selecting what were considered "legitimate viewpoints… [that could be] admitted into the procedure, defining the alternatives at stake, [and/or] emphasizing some elements at the expense of others" (Barisione, 2012, p. 1). The observations below seek to provide general insight into the panels, using concrete examples to illustrate the case-specific claims we make.

The authors attended all three sessions of both panels, following each plenary session and strategically observing as many working groups as possible to capture the dynamics operating across groups and interactional nuances not reflected in formal records. Extensive field notes were taken throughout, documenting both participant and organiser interactions, alongside interpretive reflections on the unfolding process and the significance of the discussion points in broader social and political terms. This information was triangulated by comparing observations and exchanging insights with other panel observers to enhance the reliability of the data. All data was transcribed, organised chronologically, and stored securely, with participants identified only by limited demographic criteria (e.g., age bracket, nationality, etc.). Interviews with organisers and (in)formal discussions (Davis & Brown, 2024) with moderators, facilitators, and panel participants were conducted, which were systematically documented in detailed written notes to ensure accuracy and preserve contextual detail. In addition, a thematic analysis of the panel recommendations was conducted using an inductive approach to analyse the participants' output. Key terms and objectives were identified and grouped to develop overarching themes, which were summarised in concise thematic clusters. The coding was undertaken by one author and systematically reviewed by the other to ensure analytical rigour and intercoder reliability. To understand the sources and representation of information in the panels and assess potential influences on the deliberative process, the authors also conducted a documentary analysis of panel materials to identify the experts and stakeholders involved in the panels. Each actor was catalogued in a structured database according to their organisational affiliation, panel role (if available), and corresponding sector, and then grouped by organisational type to identify patterns of sectoral representation and potential concentrations of influence within the panels.

Researcher bias was mitigated through regular peer debriefing (Hail et al., 2011) between the two authors at multiple stages of the data collection and analysis, during which the authors critically questioned each other's observations and interpretations of the panels to uncover potential biases and support analytical accuracy. This process was complemented by systematic comparison of independently produced notes and analyses, enabling the authors to challenge one another's assumptions and improve the consistency of the empirical accounts. In the beEU Panel, language constraints had an impact on the authors' ability to observe multiple working groups, as only French-speaking groups could be observed. This impact was limited, however, as many of the sessions took place in plenary with multilingual translation, and similar arguments and proposals emerged across both the French- and Dutch-speaking groups. As with any interpretative approach, there is a degree of subjectivity in our description of the panels. However, the triangulation of data with multiple other sources, the application of systematic analytical procedures, and the presence of both authors at all panel sessions contribute to the reliability and credibility of the findings.

4. European Commission's European Citizens' Panel on Virtual Worlds

4.1. Context and Description of the Panel

Following the experience of the CoFoE, the European Commission established a series of ECPs in late 2022, with the aim of informing the institution's policymaking process. Rather than conducting an interinstitutional exercise like the CoFoE alongside the European Parliament and the Council, the Commission ran these exercises solo, as an inter-DG (the Commission's internal departments responsible for specific policy domains) project. To date, six ECPs have taken place, on the following topics: "food waste" (December 2022 to February 2023), "virtual worlds" (February to April 2023), "learning mobility" (March to April 2023), "energy efficiency" (February to April 2024), "tackling hatred in society" (April to May 2024), and "a new EU budget fit for our ambitions" (March to May 2025). There are also prospects of further similar exercises, such as the Young Citizens Assembly on Pollinators, that will start in late 2025. In running these exercises on a semi-regular basis, the Commission sees itself as the institution continuing the legacy of the CoFoE. The ECPs have been jointly organised by a consortium of service providers (including Missions Publiques, ifok, Deliberativa, the Danish Board of Technology, VO Europe, and Kantar Public) and the DG for Communication (DG COMM), in cooperation with the respective policy DGs related to the panel topic. Over the six panels, the choice of topics was determined by ongoing policy files and the openness of policy DGs to collaborate with DG COMM on this type of exercise. In the case of the ECP on VW, it is important to note that prior to the topic selection, Missions Publiques had been lobbying for a technology-related panel with DG COMM.

At the time, the metaverse (and, by extension, virtual worlds) was an area of interest for the Commission, with then-Commissioner for Internal Market Thierry Breton claiming that the metaverse was "one of the pressing challenges ahead of us" (European Commission, 2022). Ahead of the panel, the activities in this area mainly consisted of the Commission establishing a Virtual and Augmented Reality Industrial Coalition, which conducted workshops with key stakeholders (primarily private corporate actors and academics) and policymakers between 2021–2023. Following the ECP on VW, the DG for Communications Networks, Content and Technology (CNECT) published a communication titled *An EU Initiative on Web 4.0 and Virtual Worlds: A Head Start in the Next Technological Transition* (July 2023). While the document acknowledged the work of the ECP, it largely kept the panel's input separate, incorporating it only when referencing specific points or using the recommendations to support and reinforce its arguments. The communication also explicitly aligned the institution's vision for virtual worlds with the EU's Digital Decade policy program, which prioritises skills, business, infrastructure, and governance. The year following the panel, the European Parliament published the *Resolution of 17 January 2024 on Virtual Worlds—Opportunities, Risks and Policy Implications for the Single Market*, which mostly focused on the internal market and consumer protection.

Over February–April 2023, 150 EU citizens were brought together to discuss virtual worlds across three weekends, with the aim of answering the question: "What vision, principles, and actions *should* guide the development of desirable and fair virtual worlds?" (emphasis added). In this question, the Commission immediately framed the deliberation by excluding certain broader considerations, such as questioning the very development of the metaverse, which consequently narrowed the scope of deliberation. Rather than questioning the value of developing "desirable and fair virtual worlds," ECP participants were tasked with developing a "set of guiding principles and actions for the development of virtual worlds in the EU"

(European Commission, 2023a), in the form of recommendations that would be delivered to DG CNECT and then-Commission Vice-President for Democracy and Demography Dubravka Šuica. Two in-person meetings (Sessions 1 and 3) were held at the Commission's premises in Brussels, with one online meeting (Session 2). In February 2024, an online feedback event was also held for the participants. Each session was broken down into plenary, split plenary, and small working groups. Live interpretation throughout ensured that participants were able to interact in their preferred European language.

In Session 1, participants were tasked with using their personal reflections and experiences to develop a shared vision of "desirable and fair virtual worlds" (European Commission, 2023b, p. 6). Expert-led introductory input sessions in plenary sensitised participants to the topic, while inductive visioning exercises were used in working groups to identify utopian and dystopian futures. Throughout the session, creative engagement tools were used, from collaging to an improvisational theatre performance on the last day of the session. Additionally, participants were able to experience and test certain uses of virtual worlds through an exhibition of nine stands that included primarily creative agencies, IT consultancies, and technology providers, in a tradeshow-like physical presentation of different possible uses of the technology. Session 2 was held on the Hyperfair virtual reality platform, a virtual world developed specifically for the panel. The purpose of using this digital medium was to give participants an opportunity to experience the technology, with participants each controlling a personal avatar and navigating around a simulated environment, illustrating a technosolutionist approach not only to the topic of discussion but also to the process of deliberation. In the working groups, participants built on initial "shared visions" from the previous session by identifying, discussing, and ranking core values and consolidating key actions, with a thematic deepening towards building orientations. In Session 3, deliberations concluded with a last input from experts, to help participants transition from orientations to a final list of values and principles, supported by concrete recommendations. Participants voted on these recommendations to indicate degrees of support for each. Overall, the participants came up with 23 final recommendations, broken up into topic areas and made up of "who," "what," "why," and a "justification." The panel ended with the participants handing over the recommendations to a representative from the Commission.

4.2. From Improv Theatre to a Neoliberal Agenda on Virtual Worlds

In the ECP on Virtual Worlds, investment by the EU institutions into the development of virtual worlds was presented as an inevitability. The role of participants was confined to developing recommendations that offered suggestions on how to support the establishment and development of the technology in existing economic, cultural, social, and industrial European infrastructures. Initial briefings and expert input centred on current and future uses for virtual worlds, with the metaverse and virtual reality described as a growing industry that affects all sectors and a transformative set of interconnected technologies that feature in "our everyday lives" (European Commission, 2023b). Experts presented their different uses, focusing on positive aspects and issue areas to be mindful of, avoiding more technical descriptions about how it is built, governed, or monetised, as well as its underlying infrastructures, commercial practices, and material conditions of development and deployment. As the panel results were geared towards advising governance institutions rather than technical or private-sector entities, the expert input and discussions remained focused on the broader implementation of the technology for the (economic and social) benefit of the European public, almost exclusively taking on a consumer-oriented neoliberal perspective throughout. For example, in the Information Kit (a briefing document), the first example of a benefit that virtual worlds

could provide described how virtual fittings would facilitate online shopping, followed only after, by medical, education, cultural, and fitness uses (European Commission, 2023b).

While some narrowing of topics is inevitable in deliberative settings to ensure manageability and focus, in this panel, the framing of the topic systematically limited engagement with structural dimensions that are central for understanding the full implications of the technology. This limited scope restricted the potential for deliberation on more fundamental questions about impact—for example, questions about global supply chains for parts or the energy consumption and resource extraction required to develop and maintain the technology. In addition, the role of key actors behind the development of virtual worlds (namely, private companies that develop and own the technology) was largely obscured, despite allusions by both the organisers and participants to non-EU private players, such as Meta, in the context of claims about the need for the EU to remain globally relevant, competitive, and strategically independent when it comes to emerging technologies. This geopolitical logic of making sense of virtual worlds technology as a strategic imperative was prominent throughout the panel, reframing questions of labour, resources, and ownership as issues of international competitiveness and security rather than topics for public or democratic contestation.

Focusing on the relationship between individuals and technology was encouraged by the deliberative structure of the panel, which hindered the development of a more holistic understanding of virtual worlds and the relevant (financial, social, or systemic) trade-offs that come with taking investment-focused policy positions. As an illustrative example, the group work began with the organisers tasking participants to "imagine European Virtual Worlds in 2050" (Session 1, Day 2). To visualise this, participants used magazines to co-create collages that represented dystopian and utopian visions of this future based on their personal experiences with, and understanding of, the technology. By positioning the subject as having a positive-versus-negative nature, the participants were steered to conceive the topic along these binary lines. This led to fictive speculation about the development of the technology, and, as this was early in the panel process, the participants had not been provided with enough information to adequately link the discussion to reality. The "visions" developed in this session, however, ended up comprising the foundations on which the final recommendations were built.

When participants attempted to move beyond individual experiences with the technology later in the sessions, they faced two issues: (a) they lacked timely access to necessary information and (b) when information was provided, it was not adequately contextualised, preventing participants from critically situating it within the overall discussion.

First, based on the information available to them, it was difficult for participants to get to the level of comprehension that they required on the topic. For example, early in the process (Session 1, Day 3), participants were asked to put forward questions to a Knowledge Committee (a group of experts who followed the panel and provided answers to participant questions on the topic, as well as setting up the framing of the panel) to clarify any points that were unclear to them. These questions were only addressed during a short discussion round at the end of the last day of the session (after initial deliberations had taken place and preliminary work on the recommendations had been recorded) and the answers from the Committee were provided in tandem with so-called "comedic" responses to the same questions by an improvisational theatre troupe. Despite adding an element of novelty, in practice, it reinforced the understanding of these deliberative processes as oriented towards entertaining the participants while sidelining the possibility of more critical, nuanced, or even simply informative discussion. The information

presented in this format thus failed to link up with broader political, normative, and practical questions about virtual worlds. This problematic issue continued and impacted the participants throughout the panel, as could be seen during the finalisation of the recommendations in the last working group session, when a participant asked for a definition of the metaverse (Session 3, Day 2)—despite the fact that the participants had first-hand experience of using a virtual world in the online session of the panel.

Second, expert input leaned heavily in favour of (technocratic) Commission staff, seconded by academics/researchers, and closely followed by corporate representatives and IT consultants. Limited explanation of the experts' positionality (and potential conflicts of interest) made it challenging for participants to situate the input within broader socio-economic and corporate interests, impeding their ability to critically evaluate and engage with the information. For instance, Groupe Renault's Director of Industrial Metaverse & Quality was invited to speak as an expert during Session 2, and the panel organisers played a three-minute (promotional) video entitled *Discover Renault Group's Industrial Metaverse*, produced by the company and celebrating its prowess in using virtual worlds to streamline industrial processes. Notably, this video was presented without any framing of its inherent subjectivity, and no alternative or critical perspectives were offered.

The influence this had on the final recommendations is clear. More than a quarter of the final recommendations related to research, innovation, development, and the EU labour market. The recommendations themselves were directed towards the EU institutions, with member states expected to cooperate and the private sector to comply with the suggestions. In fact, only one recommendation mentioned penalties (Recommendation 13) for non-compliance by companies, although it was mentioned as secondary to a rewards incentive scheme. Similarly, only one recommendation mentioned binding legislation (Recommendation 12). Most of the other recommendations called for (unspecified) compliance with the panel's suggestions, often framed in terms of collaborative engagement. Several recommendations, for instance, emphasised the need for close cooperation between companies, researchers, and the EU institutions "to develop and regulate virtual worlds in accordance with the values of the EU" (Recommendation 5; see European Commission, 2023a, p. 41), while also expressing concern about the possibility of legislative or regulative efforts negatively affecting the competitiveness of firms (Recommendation 7). Overall, this orientation reflects an alignment with the EU's pro-business agenda, privileging innovation and competitiveness over stronger regulatory safeguards and protections.

5. beEU Citizen Panel on Artificial Intelligence

5.1. Context and Description of the Panel

Between February and April 2024, the Belgian Federal Public Service of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation (FPS Foreign Affairs), in cooperation with Missions Publiques, Glassroots (a participatory exercise and facilitation consulting firm), and VO Citizen (a communications agency), held a citizen panel on AI within the framework of the 2024 Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU. With a history of regional panels and deliberative exercises in the country (e.g., Ostbelgien Model, G1000, Brussels Citizens' Assembly), FPS Foreign Affairs had previously organised a national panel at the federal level as part of the CoFoE on the topic of European democracy (also in cooperation with Glassroots). The beEU Panel was conducted with the aim of being a source of inspiration (Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, 2024) for the European strategic agenda 2024–2029 (adopted two months later, on 27 June 2024),

to influence the Belgian contribution to the upcoming discussion in the Council. This process ran shortly after the trilogue in which the three EU institutions reached an agreement on the AI Act (9 December 2023).

A total of 60 Belgian citizens attended three in-person sessions in Brussels. Similar in format to the ECPs, the sessions were broken down into plenary sessions and small working groups. The panel was described as a space to "exchange opinions, complaints and concerns regarding the development of AI within the EU, and to formulate proposals on the direction the EU needs to take in this area in the coming years" (Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, 2024, p. 4). As in the Commission's ECP on VW, such framing already implicitly assumed the inevitability of the development of AI, which meant that questioning or contesting either the development itself or the growing centralisation and embeddedness of the technology fell outside the scope of the panel. In this way, the organisers sought to centre the discussions around *how* AI might be encouraged to develop, emphasising a strong geopolitical component by stressing that Europe is "lagging behind" other global actors such as the United States and China (on the securitisation of EU tech and AI policy, see Mügge, 2023, 2024; Youngs, 2025). Three questions were specifically set for this panel: (a) What is the citizen panel's view on the further evolution and development of artificial intelligence in Europe?; (b) What risks and opportunities are associated with these technologies in our society?; and (c) What should European players (both political and private) focus on over the next five years to meet the challenges of today and tomorrow? Rather than more prescriptive recommendations, the panel was mandated to develop broad "visions," which aimed to avoid determined courses of action for the EU or other actors.

In Session 1, participants were introduced to the topic of AI, starting with the context and purpose of the panel, by resource persons (experts who presented specific subtopics or issue areas and answered participant questions). These experts contributed primarily by providing positive perspectives on AI's potential across different fields, with some exceptions, notably concerning deepfakes. A demo was organised to present 15 different types of AI applications in sectors such as medical, mobility, weapons/defence, employment, and media, followed by small working group discussions in which participants shared personal experiences about their understanding of AI. In Session 2, participants received input from resource persons about opportunities and concerns in current AI development. In working groups (that were shuffled between sessions), participants examined the impact of AI on a societal level. In Session 3, participants finalised their deliberations, ending up with a total of nine key messages made up of a loose set of "observations," "key messages," "visions", and "avenues to explore"—each with different formats, lengths, and levels of detail. Resource persons gave feedback on the work, after which participants were given time to individually reflect on any questions or comments they had on the work of the other groups. Each vision was then voted on and validated in plenary, with citizens able to share their reasons for/against their vote. The event was closed by a representative of the FPS Foreign Affairs, who guaranteed the citizens' work would be passed to the political level.

5.2. From Black Mirror to the AI Act

As awareness of AI has steadily risen in the public agenda over recent years, the beEU Panel organisers anticipated that participants would have a pre-existing understanding of the broad lines of the debates on the topic. However, rather than correct any basic misconceptions or ensure there was a common comprehension of what AI referred to among all participants, the organisers chose not to provide any initial

briefings or informational material. Throughout the first session, strict definitions of AI were avoided, with the organisers centring discussions on "what citizens thought or felt when AI was brought up, rather than a strict presentation of what AI is and what the current challenges are" (Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, 2024, p. 42). As a result, the early deliberations lacked a common understanding of the topic, with the participants' initial grasp of AI more likely shaped by the hands-on demo on the first day of the panel, where practical demonstrations took precedence over structured explanations from experts.

Another factor shaping the participants' understanding of AI was curated cultural representations introduced early in the process. A list of books, films, and TV series was shared with participants, including books authored by the president of Microsoft (*Tools and Weapons: The Promise and the Peril of the Digital Age*) and the co-founder of (Google) DeepMind and CEO of Microsoft AI (*The Coming Wave: AI, Power and Our Future*), sci-fi films like Stanley Kubrick's *2001 Space Odyssey* and Denis Villeneuve's *Blade Runner 2049*, and speculative fiction television series like *Black Mirror*. This blend of corporate hagiography and dystopian narratives presented participants with a rather artistic and staged rendering of AI, which may have shaped their perceptions of the technology in a way that was more abstract and less grounded in practical, technical realities.

Furthermore, when the conversation moved towards more concrete examples drawn from current events, discursive filtering became evident at the organisational level, with facilitators acting as gatekeepers between experts and participants. This type of filtering became particularly visible in how sensitive or politically divisive examples were handled during discussions. For example, in a Q&A following a presentation on AI and defence, a participant raised a critical point in plenary, observing that while the Ukraine–Russia War was frequently referenced in defence-related discussions, Israel's ongoing genocide of Palestinians (Amnesty International, 2024) was noticeably absent—despite well-documented use by Israel of AI-enhanced warfare (Fatafta & Leufer, 2024). Before the participant finished speaking, a moderator interrupted the comment and moved directly to another participant, effectively curtailing the intervention. Although the expert later briefly acknowledged Israel's use of AI in perpetrating violence against Palestinians, this incident highlighted how facilitation practices in this panel actively shaped the boundaries of deliberation through real-time management of voices, which delimited which geopolitical examples were permitted space within the discussion.

Although AI is now a ubiquitous topic, fully grasping its complexities requires dedicated time and research. By relying on external experts, consultants, and fictional narratives to shape participants' initial exposure to AI, the organisers effectively ceded some control over how the topic was framed from the outset. Given that the more than 40 experts involved in the panel largely came from research and academia, consulting, and market-driven fields, their influence may have subtly framed the discussion towards specific applications and perspectives on AI. Notably absent were critical experts from civil society focused on data rights, labour, digital justice, trade unions, and public interest advocacy groups, who argued contemporaneously that the EU's AI Act "fails to set [a] gold standard for human rights" (EDRi, 2024, p. 1). The panel also failed to discuss the "hidden labour powering AI" (Muldoon et al., 2024), mostly located in the Global South under conditions of exploitation. These absences excluded perspectives that might have foregrounded questions of power, accountability, and rights. This detached approach evolved over the course of the panel, with the organisers revising this stance and exerting more control over how AI was presented and discussed as the sessions progressed. The clearest example of this was in the shifting composition of resource persons. Organisers cited concerns over initial high

levels of criticism about AI among participants in the early sessions, prompting changes to the resource person selection in the last session to "re-balance" this negative perception—even if no frontal critiques were actually put forward by experts. These late-stage changes imply a pre-existing expectation of what participants were expected to discuss and draw conclusions on.

The panel followed the standard participatory structure of the ECPs, replicating elements of the process such as starting deliberations with binary opening discussions (in this case, discussing what would be desirable and undesirable for the future of the technology). After introducing the participants to the topic, a number of themes were developed during Session 1, which were rotated between working groups in Session 2. These topics included: climate, health, the EU's position in the world, EU autonomy, democracy, media, work, education, defence, and security. Organising discussions around separate thematic categories encouraged participants to approach these topics in silos, rather than consider the crucial intersection of, and transversal ramifications between, these issue areas. Furthermore, multiple themes were clearly within the same broader field of "security and defence," in terms of looking at the EU in opposition and competition to external actors, clearly prioritising a geopolitical outlook to make sense of AI.

Concerning the outcome of the panel, the structure of the participants' contributions followed a clear progression: initial observations led to key messages and culminated in overarching visions. While the wording of the observations conveyed a certain degree of apprehension—with frequent references to concerns about the risks associated with AI (14 mentions across all nine vision texts)—the visions themselves appeared to prioritise positioning the EU as a leader in what is seen as a global AI race. They emphasised maintaining competitiveness in research, development, and an EU-driven normative regulatory role within the rapidly expanding international AI industry. Overall, the visions offered abstract proposals regarding integrating AI into existing EU industries and infrastructures, with little meaningful engagement with the potential broader consequences of the widespread adoption of AI or the development of the technology itself. For instance, economic considerations were dominated by calls for incentivising private investment, minimising taxation, and fostering public-private partnerships, with little attention given to broader ethical, social, and environmental implications or examining how to mitigate potential negative societal or global impacts.

According to the organisers, the panel was intended as a "message to society, not just political players" (Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, 2024, p. 42), strongly suggesting that the output was never designed to serve a concrete policy objective. This approach mirrors what was observed in the Belgian national citizen panel during the CoFoE, where organisers explicitly aimed to "avoid politicizing the process" (FPS Foreign Affairs, 2022, p. 8). Ultimately, the panel showed more of a will from the organisers to put AI and citizen participation on the Belgian Presidency's agenda rather than sincerity in gathering public opinion on AI and collecting impactful and original ideas from participants.

6. Conclusion: Citizenwashing EU Tech Policy through the Institutionalisation of Deliberative Mini-Publics

While deliberative mini-publics are often seen as having the potential to complement formal policymaking structures by empowering people to take ownership over part of the political process (Beauvais & Warren, 2019), in practice, the participants of these panels were subject to the influence of unequal and undisclosed

political and stakeholder dynamics. As a result, participants were relegated to a performative role that reproduced these same dynamics at the micro level, with the panels promoting public engagement in support of existing EU tech policies. Although, as noted earlier, alignment between deliberative outcomes and public policy is not inherently problematic, when those policies have been shaped by powerful industry actors with a vested interest in particular outcomes, deliberative panels risk functioning less as sites of genuine public input and democratic engagement and more as mechanisms for legitimising pre-formed institutional agendas. The two ECPs on EU-level tech policy examined in this article can therefore be understood as exercises in which participants' voices were instrumentalised to reinforce and legitimise preexisting EU institutional policy positions. By channelling deliberation into narrowly defined and politically sanitised frameworks, this approach effectively depoliticises democratic participation and reflects the institutional tendencies in the EU to prioritise procedural formalism and consensus-building over substantive deliberative contestation.

The political agency that participants ostensibly held during the panels was, in reality, a carefully curated narrative by the organisers, who portrayed the panels as significant political statements. For example, during the ECP on VW, the first day coincided with the one-year anniversary of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. This occasion was marked by testimonies from Ukrainian women, framed within a broader narrative about the panel's role in protecting and strengthening European democracy. Similarly, in the beEU Panel, the then-coordinator of the Belgian Presidency repeatedly emphasised the broad social and strategic significance of AI and the participants' input within the rotating Presidency framework. In both cases, a political framing of the panels was strategically leveraged to amplify the perceived significance of the participants' role, without affording space for any meaningful contestation of the established status quo in EU tech policy. This reflects a broader trend in EU-level deliberative exercises, where the emphasis is placed on participation as the object of the exercise rather than a tangible impact on public sphere debates or policy development, while often accompanied by unsubstantiated claims of cultivating a more inclusive, engaged, and informed democratic society.

The instrumentalisation of participants is further illustrated by the institutional effort to connect different deliberative exercises. The organisers enlisted ambassadors from previous panels to endorse the format to new participants, with the aim of enhancing the credibility of the format. For example, during the first session of the beEU Panel, a get-together and Q&A session was held with participants from previous national and European citizen panels. This session coincided with the ECP on Energy Efficiency, and participants from both panels were invited to attend a joint evening event. Similarly, participants in the ECP on VW were informed that the choice of topic had emerged from the work of CoFoE participants. These efforts attempted to make participants feel as though they were part of something larger than the panel itself—a new type of "citizen-focused" democracy in the EU, that connects to a broader "wave" of participatory exercises. Although participants may have felt engaged in a meaningful democratic process, this affective dimension does not preclude the possibility of overall instrumentalisation. Framing the panels as part of a broader democratic endeavour can itself become a technique of artificial legitimation, particularly when it hides the limited and narrow nature of deliberation and the role of corporate interests.

There are important normative implications of our empirical work. The increasing institutionalisation of deliberative mini-publics as a permanent feature of EU policymaking risks undermining rather than enhancing European democracy. The introduction of this type of depoliticised deliberative exercise has so

far reinforced the technocratic dynamics of EU policymaking and the preexisting narrow conception of EU democracy (Oleart & Theuns, 2023), excluding mediating democratic voices (such as trade unions, civil society, and political parties) and minimising potential contestation of the status quo. This trend of co-opting citizen participation is unlikely to reverse, as the European Commission is actively promoting the institutionalisation of deliberative democracy across Europe. On top of the ECPs, at least nine projects launched between 2023 and 2025 under the Horizon Europe Research and Innovation funding stream (one of a number of different EU funding streams) explicitly focus on developing deliberative democracy instruments and mechanisms, with over €25.83 million allocated to these initiatives over just a couple of years (including the projects AI4Deliberation, EU-CIEMBLY, IDEAL, iDEM, INSPIRE, MultiPoD, ORBIS, PERYCLES, and ScaleDem). This figure does not even count the additional projects funded through other EU streams, past initiatives, or forthcoming funding calls, nor does it include ongoing projects which use deliberative democracy methodology centrally within their activities, such as local climate assemblies or mini-publics more generally (of which there are many). This significant financial and institutional investment reflects the Commission's conception of the value of this type of exercise within its own processes and national contexts. Under the guise of democratising EU policymaking, the EU is mobilising deliberative mini-publics, while avoiding questioning its pro-business policies on multiple policy areas, including technology (Bouza García & Oleart, 2024; Obendiek & Seidl, 2023). As a result, the "new generation" of ECPs continues to reinforce existing EU policy frameworks rather than opening the possibility of contesting them.

That said, our critique of citizen panels on EU tech policies should not be mistaken for a wholesale rejection of deliberative democracy. Rather, it targets the minimalistic version of deliberative democracy that is illustrated by these panels. The depoliticised and consensus-oriented conception of citizen participation is gaining ground, despite critiques such as Machin's (2023, p. 17), who warns that "if there is to be a genuine sustainability politics, then democrats should refrain from demanding consensus, quantifying agreement, and reducing political participation to deliberation." Although directed towards sustainability issues, this resonates with digital policy deliberations in the EU. As the topic of technology becomes increasingly entangled with other policy domains, there is a growing risk that this tendency to focus on a limited conception of participation and democracy will continue, particularly on public policies related to digital regulation, where the hegemony of big tech and a technosolutionist outlook go unquestioned, and where panels risk serving as "citizenwashing" exercises that strengthen these dynamics. This emphasises the importance of remaining vigilant that deliberative mini-publics are not co-opted by executive institutions to push agendas under the guise of "listening to everyday citizens."

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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