

REELER's guide to making a mini-public

“(…) I have heard concerns here today that I had never thought of and they have affected my opinion about robots in our lives (…)”

Member of the European Parliament after attending REELER's mini-public in Cambridge

You want to have some impact? Create input and change?

Maybe you have a message and want to discuss it with someone?

You have ideas, need feedback to create a common understanding?

If so, the method of a so-called “mini-public” will be a highly effective way to help you foster and implement your ideas and developments.

What is a mini-public?

Mini-publics are used as a methodology in the political sciences and as a tool to increase public engagement with politics and government. The main goal of the mini-publics is to give citizens ‘the stage’ and putting the professional experts on the margins. We found that experts have particular kinds of knowledge and expertise that is crucial, but often these experts and non-experts do not come to the table with equal resources, knowledge or confidence.

We changed this within the REELER project and conducted three mini-public events from 2017-2019 where experts met citizens and were able to discuss and create a common understanding and give feedback to both politicians, private companies and researchers.

Why is it useful for you?

This method is useful for you who wants to change, form and discuss people's opinions by giving them updated research data and news. By creating a setting where these can be discussed, shaped and reproduced you will be able to see how people change into having a knowledge, based on research and not assumptions.

Who or what is REELER?

REELER (Responsible Ethical Learning in Robotics) is an interdisciplinary EU project involving 4 European partners from the fields of anthropology, learning, robotics, philosophy, and economy.

With the multidisciplinary profiles, REELER aims to assure collaboration, comprehension and acceptance of knowledge about responsibility, ethical and societal issues relating to robotics.

REELER is producing powerful instruments to foster networking between traditional robotics disciplines and new research fields, like Science and Technology Studies (STS) in order to use the potentialities of future robotics projects.

More info:

<http://responsiblerobotics.eu>

How to do a mini-public?

Let the truth be told: it is not easy to organize a mini-public! The ongoing recruitment and interaction with the public requires lots of communication and personal contact. To help with the practicalities, REELER has made this step-by-step guide for you, who wants to know more about how to organize a mini-public and what to be aware of.

1. Theme

First, you need to choose your theme. Be clear in the beginning, it makes it easier to advertise, and your guests will know what to expect from the event. Our three themes were reflecting robots in 1. healthcare, 2. work and 3. Agriculture. By that we ensure that EVERYONE would be able to relate to the thought of interacting with robots, whether as a patient, visitor, or care personnel in a hospital or in a nursing home, orduring work when utilizing assistive devices for heavy lifting, or encountering robots in the fields, where agriculture really brings a global contact. The theme should be specific enough for deliberative exploration, but general enough that persons of diverse backgrounds or professions could relate and reflect upon the theme.

2. Budget

You don't need a huge budget to host a mini-public. We have held some in free university rooms with some cool drinks and pizza, but we have also hosted events where we rented conference rooms in very old and historical museums. Both settings provided fruitful stages for discussion.

3. Recruitment

Choose who and how you want to invite the public. At our first mini-public in Cambridge in 2017, we invited a very broad audience. Flyers were handed out in the streets, the local radio station advertised and discussed the topic with us, so we ended up with both high-ranking politicians, pensioners, and young students. At the 2018 mini-public in Copenhagen we invited a broad audience, but targeted those working within a few specific industries. Politicians, workers, researchers, and unionists came to discuss the future of work life with us. Lastly, our mini-public in Hohenheim (2019) took place at a university where we invited students from two different fields (agriculture and economics) to discuss robots with regard to sustainable development.

Remember that quantity does not ensure quality. Just because you are having a lot of people attending the event does not mean that you get a lot of good input. Obviously, chances are higher that you will, but you also need the capacity to work and digest the output afterwards. The larger audience offered more opportunity for collecting input of statistical significance, whereas the smaller audiences allowed for more in-depth group discussions. All of the mini-publics had room for good small-group table discussions.

4. Experts

When choosing your experts, also take their role in society into consideration. Do you want to have an expert who should be neutral? Or do you crave someone with a decided

opinion? Another possibility is to mix neutral experts with pro and con perspectives. Our first mini-public hosted in Cambridge, we chose to invite our own REELER experts to come and share their expertise. In Copenhagen, we had two different panels: one filled with national politicians and the other one with national researchers. In Hohenheim we invited local experts to share their knowledge with the audience and present current debates within the field. You may see that experts can be found everywhere you just need to ensure that they can offer you what you need for your mini-public.

5. Recruitment

You need to spend A LOT of time on recruitment and advertisement. For our events we must admit that we underestimated the work of recruitment. Spreading flyers and writing not just group emails but also personal emails, making phone calls takes a lot of time. For our event in Cambridge we even did radio interviews to introduce the public to our theme. Also, social media is a useful tool; Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat might be interesting for your audience? But no matter what channel, we figured out that the personal contact and the follow up and word by mouth technique worked the best and it was all worth it, for our mini-public in Copenhagen we ended up with over 100 participants.

6. Feedback Collection

There are multiple ways of collecting feedback. We used multiple methods which ensured us to have a big data set full of public concerns, wishes, and thoughts about robots. In Cambridge we used manual tools with sticky notes and big flipcharts to collect and share all the thoughts of the audience. For the event in Copenhagen, we used sticky notes again, but also used an app (Mentimeter) which gives presentations the opportunity to get real-time feedback from the audience, with quick visualizations (word clouds, e.g.). We used Mentimeter again in Hohenheim, but did not use sticky notes that time. With the natural transitions between the invited expert presentations, the audience had the chance to discuss the shared knowledge, which we recorded (with consent and handled anonymously) on audio devices and transcribed it afterwards. Remember that a mini-public is not an event which needs to be ticked off in the process of developing something. A mini-public is a methodology to help you get data, knowledge and feedback to afterwards work WITH this input.

7. Location

When holding an event and inviting the public it might be a good idea to have a location which is offering something unusual for the audience. We tried this during the mini-public in Copenhagen where we held the event in a conference room in the workers' museum. It was an extraordinary setting, which all participants have been thankful for having seen, but it is not always manageable to find these locations and afford it. For our mini-publics in Cambridge and Hohenheim, we used the facilities offered by the universities, which ensured that we had the technological equipment needed and had enough chairs and desks to work on. Locations don't need to cost a fortune and they

will often just add to the good experience for the audience. Try to think outside of the box: Maybe you also have a local museum which could help you?

8. Language

Are you aiming for an international audience? Or a more local one? Is everyone going to feel comfortable if the event is hosted in a foreign language? If it is an international event, is English really the best language, or would Spanish, Chinese, French, or Russian be better? Do you need a translator or a sign language interpreter? Language is a lot about including people and the aim of a mini-public is that everyone needs to feel welcomed, invited, and comfortable to share their input. Our mini-publics were held in English and Danish depending on the audience. We chose the local language in Denmark, to be able to include everyone, also people who might not feel comfortable speaking English. During our mini-public in Hohenheim, our very international audience did not speak German, so the event was held in English, which allowed everyone to contribute. In Cambridge the mini-public was held in English and no challenges were faced there.

9. Outcome

Have you thought about what you actually want to archive with the mini-public? Is it a product you are planning to sell? A report for the parliament? Or, are you planning to give some feedback to the city council on the development of biking lanes?

Our mini-publics contributed in multiple ways to the REELER project: the data was incorporated into reports handed to the EU and to conferences in the parliament. Further, the data was used to develop a toolbox and a game for engineers, and the research publication [*Perspectives on Robots*](#). The only importance is that you use the data for actively engaging citizens in decision-making, since a mini-public is a way to give the public the power to come with input for bigger developments. So: think about how YOU can ensure that EVERYONE is getting heard in OUR society.

10. Food and drink supplement

Do not take others' time for granted! People are giving you their input and knowledge, so what can you offer them in return? We ensure to have coffee, tea, and water ready for the event, and also offered some snacks in between. Depending on the length of the event you might need to offer more than just a snack and you can even consider letting the audience spend some days together. Obviously, you will need to think about accommodation as well, and set a budget for it.