Air Pollution Workshop with Young Research Advisors, National Children's Bureau
London, 25th October 2018

Who is responsible for air pollution and what can be done?

On 25th October 2018, a workshop exploring who is responsible for air pollution and what can be done to improve air quality was led by researchers from the Social Science and Urban Public Health Institute (SUPHI) in collaboration with the National Children's Bureau (NCB). The workshop involved nine young people who are active members of NCB's Young Research Advisors group (YRAs), a network of young people (ranging from 7-18 yo) recruited from across England to receive training on research methods and ethics, and to contribute to consultations on external research projects like ours.

The workshop presented the problem of air pollution as a complex local, national and global public health concern that effects different sectors of society and is therefore as much a social and political issue as it is a scientific one. Because air pollution is something that has been shown to disproportionately effect young people, learning about what young people know and how their everyday experiences might inform ideas for tackling it relevant and valuable contributions to contemporary public and policy discussion and debate on the issue.

Our project did not measure and monitor air pollution like many citizen-led research activities. Instead we wanted to explore its public health dimensions from a sociological perspective. Given that air pollution is a complex challenge specifying who is responsible for improving it often disputed or ambiguous. Further, air pollution is a problem usually told with numbers, through alarming figures indicating rates of mortality in London due to exposure, for instance. These numbers tell particular kinds of stories about air pollution, which are not always helpful for those interested in trying to improve air quality or protect their and others health. This predicament is captured by the concept of [The Hot Potato Machine,](#) a prototype produced by researchers on the [Save Our Air](#) project at [Public Data Lab](#)[1] that seeks to understand and visually explore the ways in which responsibility for air pollution is distributed among different actors.

> *"Some issues are passed around in the same way. Who is passing the hot potato of air pollution to whom? Who is responsible and who needs to take action according to whom? Does everyone tell the same story?" (Public Data Lab http://saveourair.publicdatalab.org/hot-potato-machine/)*

We used the prototype as both a pedagogical method and research device. *The Hot Potato Machine* was originally developed by the Save Our Air to engage local policy makers, activists, businesses and citizen-led organisations in a borough in London around the shared issue of air pollution. The prototype is publicly available and free to use and adapt. Through helpful conversations and careful guidance from researchers on the Save our Air project we translated the worksheet into a format relevant for young people who had not necessarily worked on issues of air quality before. As well as

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[1] The Public Data Lab seeks to facilitate research, democratic engagement and public debate around the future of the data society. Particular thanks to Jonathan Gray, Nerea Calvillo and Lucy Kimbell who advised on the workshop plan.

encourage discussion and to bring insights from young people to bear on the problem of air pollution, the workshop was interactive and generated a series of material outputs.

To achieve the aim of both learning about air pollution and conducting research on it, the workshop had three objectives:

(1) inform young people about air pollution
(2) generate insight on young people's perspectives and experiences of air pollution
(3) conduct research to coproduce a visual map of actors involved in the issue of air pollution

The first objective was achieved through a presentation by the workshop lead about air pollution. Questions based on the first objective contributed to achieving the second objective, which was also built on and enhanced through the carrying out of objective three.

*Slide from introductory presentation by SUPHI researcher*

Telling stories with data

The third objective involved coproducing research on the way the problem of air pollution is defined by different actors in the UK. There were three groups of three young people and each group took on a different actor's perspective. We focused on quite different actors, who were likely to hold different perspectives on 'responsibility': Government; Industry; NGOs/activist. Each group/ actor were provided with a large A3 sheet of paper along with colour felt tips and stickers to report their findings on. The colour pens correlated with the four questions provided to guide their research and ensure comparison across the groups/actors would be possible later on:

(A) Why is air pollution a concern for this actor?
(B) What words are used to describe the problem?
(C) Who do they see as responsible for acting and improving air quality?
(D) What actions do they propose to improve air quality?

Published documents specific to each actor were shared by the workshop lead, but participants were also encouraged to pursue their own desk-research by looking at relevant organisations' websites, analysing relevant new media articles and finding out about specific initiatives. Many workshop participants reported activities that were actually taking place in their local areas, and one participant

discovered a citizen-led web-resource that showed live data of street level air quality in the city they lived in.
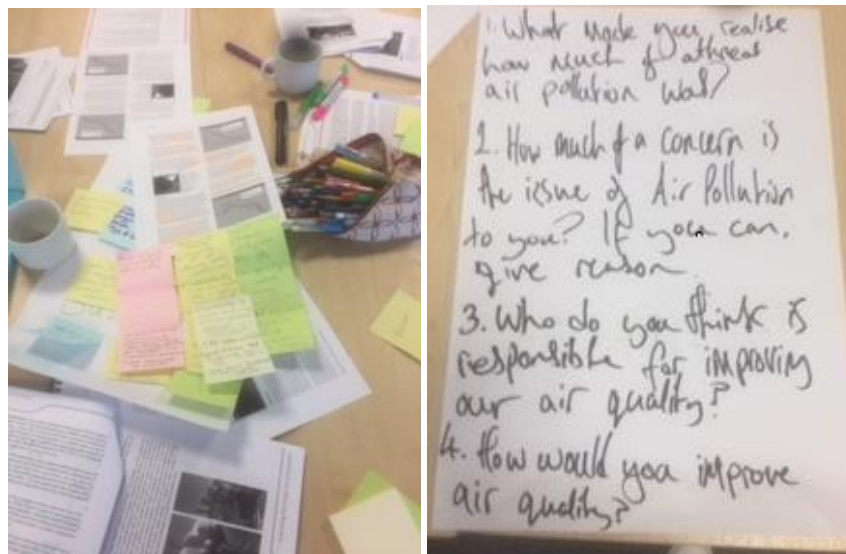
Research in progress

The three groups were given just under two hours to complete their research. After lunch, this research was analysed by workshop participants so that they could begin to build a narrative about air pollution from the perspective of their designated actor. Although how to present the data was left open, creative approaches were encouraged. In one group's presentation, participants embodied the various things, people and organisations relevant to their actor, including acting out the viewpoint of a car. Another group performed a speculative interview that involved a news reporter asking an activist a series of questions whose responses were based on their research findings. The third group found that although the government is legally obliged to improve air quality, in many cases they transfer responsibility to citizens, local government and small businesses. By telling a story of air pollution from a specific actor's perspective the social aspects of air pollution come to life, enabling the challenge of air pollution to be better understood and different questions about it posed. For instance, group 1 – NGOs/ activists – created empathy through an interview that painted a human picture of the citizens that governments are meant to protect. For group 2 – Industry – the role of the car was problematised because of the tensions between the emissions it generates and its social and functional role. They captured these nuances by considering ways to use the car more carefully. Group 3 – Government – nicely captured recent shifts in the delegation of responsibility from central government to local boroughs, thus engaging with the politics of contemporary policies.
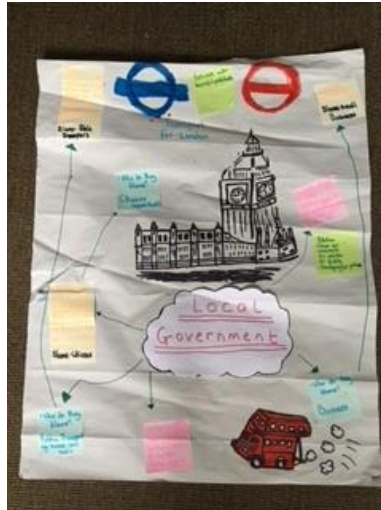
Poster visualising research findings

As each of the groups presented, we began to be able to make connections between each actor (and each group's work) thinking about how responsibility moves and changes and therefore why the issue is complex. An energetic discussion emerged from the making of these connections between different actors' perspectives on responsibility. Together we compared and contrasted what different actors' say about air pollution (the claims they make), and how they relate to one another. This was visualised with sticky-notes and string (a paper mock-up of the prototype), which was later written up in an Excel spreadsheet that now contains the findings and data from the workshop activities. As the workshop closed several participants shared their own ideas about what should be done to encourage people to act with better care for air but also others. These were innovative and one proposal included gamifying public transport with a points-based system where you gain rewards for not driving.

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Point of view (according to whom)	What words are used to describe the prob	Why is air pollution a concern for this actor?	What actions do they propose to improve air quality? (original)	Action (text for prototype)	Action (translated)	Who do they see as responsible for acting and improving air quality?
Businesses -						
Businesses		Road transport responsible for 99% of NO2	Engineering of cleaner technologies e.g. for vehicles, stop-start technology			
Businesses		Air ollution caused by burning fossil fuels, from ener	Alternatives to black cabs e.g. pedi cabs and electric vehicles			Reduce price for cab drivers
Businesses		cars make and add to pollution	Constructing air qualiy buildings	Air tight buildings		
Businesses -	Dirty diesel		Reduce engine idling			
Businesses -			Speed limits and designated route to reduce construction pollution			
Businsses -			Cab drivers motivated by awarensss damage to others' health			Recognising their role in reducing emissions
Businesses - delivery companies			UK clean air zones			
Businesses - cab drivers						
Businesses - uber						
NGOs and Activists		Bad for future generatiosn and it is not sustainable	Develop car-free zones			the government
NGOs and Activists	Beggars belief', most toxic air company award, 'protect the peole', disgusting	Care for the environment	Culture shift			the people
NGOs and Activists		People, especially children's health	Promote walking and cycling (lowers pollution but then people breathe in more emissions)			
NGOs and Activists		Care for NHS	Improve signal timings for pedestrians			Public an private transport
NGOs and Activists		Economically - fuel procies will rise due to increased traffic	T-charge			Goverment making it more expensive to drive
Government		Legally obliged to improve air pollution	Stricter emissions standards for diesel vehicles			Citizens - 'regular people'
Government	Particulate matter, harmful pollutants, pollution, clean air, emissions, air polltion, air quality, damaging air pollutants	Evidence of deaths from air pollution e.g. estmates of 40,000 deaths a year from pollution.	Spending £300 on transforming London buses			Public transport providers
Government		Pressure on NHS	T Charge and ultra-low emission zone			small businesses - Reduce driving in the city
Government						

Excel sheet with the data produced during the workshop

Next steps

Through the workshop activities participants were encouraged to think about air pollution as a social and political challenge of which their knowledge and experience of living in cities is relevant. By focussing on the various people, organisations and legislation ('actors') responsible for acting on and improving air quality we began to build a picture of its social and political relations. As well as

talking about air pollution and learning from each other's knowledge experience, the workshop activities collated different data (media articles, publications, websites, campaigns) that can be used to show how responsibility for air pollution is defined differently depending on whose perspective you listen to. We hope to build on this work in the future and by working with the Save Our Air project ultimately create a digitised version that will allow others to trace the network of social relations of air pollution and also contribute and add to it in the longer-term