**TOXIC NARRATIVES IN THE DELIBERATIVE SYSTEM: HOW THE GHOST OF NANNY STALKS THE OBESITY DEBATE[[1]](#footnote-1)**

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The deliberative systems’ account makes room for all sorts of communication and action that the classical account of deliberative democracy excluded. But should this leniency also extend to the representation of toxic narratives which aggressively oppose expertise and vilify marginalised groups? This comparative analysis explores the implications of marginalising such narratives from empowered sites of policy advice and formation. It contrasts the more restrictive Australian obesity debate, where the toxic, anti-Nanny State narrative on this issue has become taboo, with the more permissive British one, where this narrative is aired more fully throughout the deliberative system. The findings show that wider and deeper expression of the anti-Nanny State narrative in the UK has a number of net deliberative and democratic benefits. Such expression forces experts and other political actors to engage with different sorts of rationalities, enables the transformation and moderation of claims associated with this narrative to meet the dignified norms associated with empowered sites, and ultimately works to reinforce the legitimacy of political decision-making on this issue. These findings make the case for enabling representation of toxic narratives, albeit in filtered or dignified form, right across deliberative systems to empowered sites.

**Key words:** deliberative system; narrative; populism; hate speech; Nanny State; obesity; public health

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**Introduction**

Deliberative democratic theory is experiencing a turn towards an expensive systemic account. This move has a number of roots (see Parkinson 2013 for an account), but it is hard to escape the notion that a key driving force has been concern about the substantive implications of classical deliberative democratic theory: it represents, on the whole, an effort to legitimate progressive but classically non-deliberative political actors and actions within a broader conception of a deliberative democracy. For instance, in response to vocal challenges about the limiting nature of the ‘ideal speech situation’, and in particular its assumed impact on the capacity of those in traditionally marginalised groups to deliberate on an equal footing (Young 1996; Sanders 1997), almost all deliberative democrats have relaxed their understanding of deliberation and welcomed a multiplicity of communicative forms (Dryzek 2000; Cohen 2007). In response to objections about the restrictive and inappropriate demands associated with deliberative norms such as mutual respect on important political actors like activists (Young 2001), many deliberative democrats have sought to affirm the value of such democratic activity and accommodate the validity of apparently non-deliberative acts and actors in certain circumstances (Mansbridge et al. 2010; Fung 2005). And in response to complaints about the association of deliberation with formal institutions, with the implicit negation of the deliberation which occurs informally among actors unable to participate in more formal terms (Mansbridge 1999), many deliberative democrats have looked to broaden their understanding of what deliberation entails across society (Dryzek 2009; 2010). The culmination of these incremental manoeuvres, each motivated by a desire to make the deliberative ideal of democracy more accommodating of the politically disadvantaged, has been a broader move towards an emerging (though not unanimous) deliberative systems view (see Habermas 1996; Mansbridge 1999; Goodin 2005; Neblo 2005; Hendriks 2006; Parkinson 2006; Dryzek 2009; and the contributions to Parkinson and Mansbridge 2012).

My aim in this paper is not to undermine the progressive roots of this move. They are understandable and appealing. Nor is it to challenge the deliberative systems view. Indeed, it is one I endorse (see Boswell 2013). Instead, my interest is in putting to the test some of the ramifications of this move. Namely, greatly expanding the notion of what deliberation means and entails works to welcome progressively-oriented but seemingly un-deliberative or un-democratic actors and actions into the fray, but it equally welcomes an array of actors and actions that most deliberative democrats would have a good deal less sympathy for. Here, I want to explore one such hard test: *toxic narratives*.

By toxic narratives, I mean here accounts used to communicate and make sense of political phenomena that misrepresent evidence, that acerbically vilify (often vulnerable) segments of the community, and that in the process are deemed by other actors to ‘close down’ democratic discussion. Described in such terms, such accounts would classically be deemed antithetical to democratic deliberation in classical terms: they undermine the traditional understanding of reason, violate the traditional understanding of mutual respect, and threaten the traditional notion of inclusive engagement.

The emerging deliberative systems conception complicates this apparent dichotomy. Indeed, it would seem logical, given the shift in focus from isolated pockets of democratic deliberation towards an account of deliberative democracy as a whole, that the same open-minded permissiveness granted to progressive activists and actions should apply to the other side of the political spectrum, too.

Yet deliberative democratic theorists, including those who might be identified as key proponents of the deliberative systems view, have been reticent to go this far. There remains a sense that the toxic should be guarded against, lest it penetrate too deep and poison the whole deliberative system. Most notably Dryzek, among the most vocal proponents of the systemic vision, who has long held that the ‘constellation of discourses’ in empowered space should correspond to that in public space (Dryzek 2001), and who has also previously upheld the potential systemic value of offensive or racist rhetoric (Dryzek 2010), now implies that there are significant dangers in allowing such accounts unfettered representation across empowered sites of deliberation (see Dryzek and Stevenson 2012). Chambers (2009), too, clearly positions herself as an advocate of the systemic turn in upholding the value of rhetoric in a broader deliberative democracy, but maintains a suspicion to that of a ‘plebiscitary’ type (as embodied in toxic narratives) which might inflame prejudice. And Rummens, who elsewhere fits comfortably with a systemic view (see Rummens 2012), seeks actively to ‘defend democracy’ from the xenophobic populism associated with a prevalent toxic narrative on immigration by placing a *cordon sanitaire* around empowered sites of deliberation (Abts and Rummens 2007; Rummens and Abts 2010).

Are these concerns about the poisonous effect of *toxic* forms sorts of un-deliberative or anti-democratic action well founded? How do they sit alongside the desire for an inclusive debate that is deemed legitimate by the affected public? In a complex system of overlapping sites, to what extent, where, and in what form should such sentiment—popularly held as it often is—be voiced? These are the questions which a shift in our understanding of deliberation prompt and which are the focus of this paper.

To approach them, the paper draws on extensive qualitative research of debate on the public health issue of obesity across ‘deliberative systems’ in Australia and the UK between 2007 and 2012. Specifically, it asks how and to what effect the toxic, anti-Nanny State narrative on obesity which vilifies obese individuals and their expert apologists, is represented across both systems. This is an ideal case through which to examine this issue because of the contrast in how this toxic narrative is aired in the two countries. In the former, the anti-Nanny State narrative is occasionally raised by empowered and elite actors, whereas, in the latter, it has become completely taboo. In this paper, I will draw out the implications from this contrast to argue that explicit and more subtle efforts to contain the representation of toxic narratives across deliberative systems can be problematic and potentially counterproductive.

The argument proceeds in four parts. In the first, I explore the notion of the deliberative system and outline the three functions—epistemic, ethical and inclusive—that Mansbridge et al. (2012) in their seminal introduction claim such a system should feature, with a view to developing criteria against which to benchmark the impact of toxic narratives on deliberative systems. In the second, I outline in greater detail what I mean by toxic narratives, how this concept applies in relation to the issue of obesity, and why this case is a useful one through which to assess the problem. In the third section, I apply Mansbridge et al.’s (2012) three criteria to the obesity case to show how and to what effect the toxic, anti-Nanny State narrative has been included or excluded from parts of the deliberative systems under examination. In the concluding section, I draw on this assembled evidence to make an argument for the representation of toxic narratives across as wide a range of deliberative venues as possible, most especially in venues dominated by elite and empowered actors, albeit in filtered or dignified form.

# Deliberative systems: connecting the parts and the whole

As outlined in the introduction, democratic theorists are, in the main, moving away from talking about deliberation as a very particular sort of activity (the exchange of reasons) in a very particular sort of environment (a more or less ‘ideal speech situation’) towards talking about deliberation as something altogether more expansive and messier, comprising a range of different sites and practices. These constituent parts remain important in many of these theoretical accounts (for a discussion see Smith and Owen 2013), but what unites them is an agreement that, in making normative assessments about the value and validity of particular acts, actors and institutions, the system should take priority. The parts may be lacking in one or multiple ways according to longstanding deliberative democratic criteria, but what matters is their contribution to the whole (see Goodin 2005 for the most extreme exploration).

Yet there is the risk of a functionalism here which has the potential to blur the aspects that make a deliberative approach to democracy distinct, blunting its critical edge (Smith and Owen 2013). It engenders a degree of ‘fuzziness’ in that it potentially acts as a defence of, or explanatory framework for, all manner of political action.

In an attempt to pre-empt these concerns, Mansbridge et al. (2012), in what is the most authoritative conceptualisation of the deliberative system’s view produced thus far, outline three key functions of a deliberative system. These can act as criteria against which the deliberative qualities of a system *as a whole* might be evaluated. I expand on those functions here, in order to structure my discussion of populism around them in the subsequent section.

Firstly, Mansbridge et al. (2012) claim that a deliberative system should perform an epistemic function: ‘A healthy deliberative system is one in which relevant considerations are brought forth from all corners, aired, discussed, and appropriately weighed.’ This function echoes the traditional focus within deliberative democratic theory on reason and rationality, but reimagines them in much more open terms. Far from a narrow, strict understanding of rationality as entailing the dry exchange of reasons, the ‘considerations’ involved can come in a variety of communicative forms. Moreover, a move to a deliberative systems approach in epistemic terms entails an appreciation of the competing sorts of rationality which can be brought to bear in democratic politics, from techno-legal logic to moral and cultural knowledge based on principle or experience (Hendriks 2006).

Secondly, Mansbridge et al. (2012) stipulate that a deliberative system should perform an ethical function, which they sum up as follows: ‘To deliberate with another is to understand the other as a self-authoring source of reasons and claims.’ Here, their discussion relates strongly to more traditional ideal of mutual respect in deliberative democratic theory, only once again, the requirements for what constitutes mutually respectful conduct in a systemic context are relaxed considerably.

Thirdly, Mansbridge et al. (2012) make an explicit case for the importance of an inclusive function of a deliberative system: ‘In short, a well-functioning democratic deliberative system must not systematically exclude any citizens from the process without strong justification that could be reasonably accepted by all citizens, including the excluded.’ This is entirely consistent with most earlier iterations of deliberative democratic theory, in which all affected citizens are seen as deserving of a voice in deliberation on matters of common interest, either directly or, more commonly, through a representative. A systemic view simply expands and then connects the number of democratic venues in which citizens and their representatives (of various kinds) should be allowed to deliberate.

# The ‘toxic’ anti-Nanny State narrative

Having established what the notion of a deliberative system entails and how its quality might be assessed, it is important to further outline the other key concept I draw on in this paper: toxic narratives. This is a category that, consistent with the interpretive approach adopted, emerged as a mix of deductive and inductive analysis (see Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012).

Deductively, it stemmed from an interest in the role of narrative in public deliberation. Narratives here are meant not in the sense of small-scale anecdotes of personal experience, nor in the sense of overarching discourses that shape and constrain actors beliefs (mostly) beyond their own perception: they are the broad chronological accounts that political actors give voice to make sense of and communicate about complex and contested issues (see Boswell 2013).

Inductively, the adjective ‘toxic’ emerged as a common label that the elite actors I spoke with gave to one particular narrative in my analysis—what I dub the anti-Nanny State narrative. This is an account, voiced most loudly by conservative social commentators but also prevalent among the general population, that vilifies obese individuals and their ‘apologists’. It rejects the intrusion of the ‘Nanny State’ in the lives of individuals through moves to make escalating rates of obesity (and associated chronic diseases) a ‘public’ problem. It sees attendant calls for government to respond to the ‘obesity epidemic’ by funding health prevention programs, boosting spending on treatment, or regulating the food environment as misguided, heavy-handed and harmful. Instead, it represents obesity as an avowedly private problem caused by the moral failings of the individual (and, in the case of children, their parents), in which the government should rightly play no role.

What makes this narrative ‘toxic’ is the contempt with which it is held by other actors engaged in these deliberative systems, including clinicians, politicians, health officials, NGO representatives, medical industry representatives, food industry representatives, and social movement activists. These actors subscribe to a range of narratives on the issue of obesity—some affirming the status quo, others calling for radical changes to medical funding or food regulation. However, despite their significant differences, they are unanimous in their view that the anti-Nanny State narrative is ‘plain wrong’ (interview with British clinician, March 2012). This is meant both in epistemic and ethical terms. Epistemically, it is deemed to be antithetical to reason, resting as it does on a rejection of expert claims about the complex nature of obesity—seen as it is to be affected by a multitude of cultural, environmental, economic and physiological factors outside the control of the individual (Foresight 2007)—in favour of a common sense explanation based on the old-fashioned notion of personal responsibility. Ethically, the other actors engaged in deliberation on obesity see the anti-Nanny State narrative’s prevalence in public discourse as indicative of the fact that weight remains one of ‘the last bastions of discrimination’ in society (interview with Australian clinician, July 2011). Ultimately, they deem the toxic narrative’s aggressive opposition to established experts, and the intolerant attitude and demonising rhetoric directed towards obese individuals themselves, as dangerous to the prospect of continued and constructive democratic deliberation on the issue.

This supposedly ‘toxic narrative’ seems to be indicative of a broader category in democratic deliberation on complex and contested issues. There is a similar phenomenon in the climate change debate, for instance, as on those surrounding welfare, drugs and immigration policies. It is a category that bears affinities with, but is not quite captured by, contemporary academic understandings of populist sentiment and hate speech. Like populist sentiment, toxic narratives like that on obesity seem to be performed in opposition to the perceived elite orthodoxy (see Canovan 1999), and feature an ‘epistemological populism’ that reifies common sense at the expense of expertise (see Saurette and Gunster 2011). Like hate speech, toxic narratives like that on obesity draw much of their rhetorical power, and develop much of their attention and controversy, from vilifying particular segments of society (see the contributions to Herz and Molnar 2012 for more on hate speech). The findings from this analysis, then, are likely to be of interest to scholars of democratic deliberation on similarly complex and contested issues.

The analysis that follows is based on an in-depth, qualitative study of deliberation on obesity across a range of sites in Australia and the UK. These sites ranged from public ones (via the mass media and public submissions) to more empowered ones associated with formal policy advice and formation (see Table 1 for a breakdown). It incorporates over 1000 documents, 25 hours of video footage, and 36 interviews with actors engaged in debate. The analysis involved first identifying the competing narratives on obesity and then assessing how, and to what effect, each was performed across the debate. The discussion below builds on the analysis of the performance of the toxic, anti-Nanny State account across public and elite and empowered sites of deliberation, and more especially focuses on the reflections elicited from actors involved on this performance.

**Table 1: The deliberative systems on obesity**

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| **Australian sites of debate on obesity** | **British sites of debate on obesity** |
| ***Total volume of data***  Documents: approx. 1100  Video footage: approx. 11 hours  Interviews: 25 | ***Total volume of data***  Documents: approx. 500  Video footage: approx. 12 hours  Interviews: 11 |
| ***Mass media***  - News articles, opinion pieces and letters to the editor from a sample of major tabloid and broadsheet publications with progressive and conservative editorial reputations  ***Data:*** approx. 500 articles, interviews with 1 journalist and 14 public advocates | ***Mass media***  - News articles, opinion pieces and letters to the editor from sample of major tabloid and broadsheet publications with progressive and conservative editorial reputations  **Data:** approx. 250 articles, interviews with 7 public advocates |
| ***2020 Summit***  - Australia's 'best and brightest' discuss critical issues, including a health stream (86 members) with particular focus on obesity  ***Data:*** Report and government response, notes and 3 hours of video footage (via Freedom of Information Act), interviews with 2 participants | ***Foresight***  - An expert-driven assessment of obesity rates, its causes, its future costs, and the regulatory and non-regulatory options for government  ***Data:*** Report and related documentation, interviews with 2 participants, interview with 1 member of expert advisory committee |
| ***Parliamentary Inquiries***  - One lengthy House of Representatives' (HoR) Inquiry into Obesity; a shorter Senate Inquiry into Protecting Children from Junk Food Advertising  ***Data:*** Reports and government response, submissions, Hansard, 8 hours of video footage (Senate), interviews with 3 MPs (2 HoR and 1 Senate) and 8 witnesses (7 HoR and 2 Senate) | ***Food Standards Agency (FSA) Board***  - The FSA Board discusses key policy issues at 10 'open' meetings every year broadcast live on television and archived online- 4 meetings in this timeframe had obesity and related sub-issues (eg. food labelling) as a major focus  ***Data:*** Meeting agendas and minutes, full video footage (12 hours analysed) |
| ***Preventative Health Taskforce***  - An expert-driven discussion and assessment of evidence around the causes of obesity and the possible solutions  ***Data:*** Reports and government response, submissions, consultation notes, interviews with 3 Taskforce members | ***Public Health Responsibility Deals***  - A collaborative body with government, the food industry and public health experts to develop non-regulatory, voluntary industry directives and policy solutions to obesity  ***Data:*** Website, interview with 1 Responsibility Deal member |
| ***Food and Health Dialogue***  - A collaborative body of government, food industry and public health representatives working mainly on food reformulation targets  ***Data:*** Communiques, website, interviews with 3 Dialogue members |  |

# Airing the toxic anti-Nanny State narrative in the obesity debate

In broad terms, my analysis of the anti-Nanny State narrative and how it was performed revealed that while it remained prominent in public sites of debate, especially in newspaper opinion columns and letters to the editor, it was much less prominent in more empowered sites in both countries. More specifically, however, this discrepancy was starker in Australia than in the UK—in the UK, this narrative was still given voice by some elite actors and in some empowered sites of deliberation, whereas in Australia it was completely taboo.

The discussion of these findings below builds on the reflections elicited from the actors involved about this phenonemenon and the discrepancy between the two cases. It is organised around Mansbridge et al.’s three criteria in order to better parse out the relationship between these un-deliberative, anti-democratic components and the broader deliberative systems in which they are situated.

## *Epistemic considerations*

The stated justification for barring or limiting the spread of toxic narratives is that they threaten the epistemic function of the deliberative system. The worry is that toxic narratives are antithetical to reason, drawing on symbolic politics to stir up prejudices and emotive responses, rather than encouraging reflection. In particular, they lionise folk knowledge as ‘common sense’ at the expense of the expert knowledge of scientists and professionals. In Dryzek and Stevenson’s (2012) discussion of the global climate change debate, for instance, they highlight the damage done by well-funded ‘climate skeptics’ in emotively undermining and casting doubt on the considered deliberative contributions of professionals and researchers. Such ‘epistemic populism’ is common to the anti-Nanny State narrative on obesity, too, where public health professionals and experts are often cast as obese ‘apologists’ or, worse still, pleading special interests, and many of the elite actors I interviewed were damning about the epistemic value of the anti-Nanny State account.

Many of the other actors I spoke to regard these attempts to engage with scientific evidence as disingenuous and calculated to create doubt. As such, the perception remains firm that advocates of the anti-Nanny State are ideologically and prejudicially driven. Indeed, for some, the apparently wilful antipathy to expertise means that advocates of this narrative deserve no place at the elite table. One of my interview participants summed this sentiment up succinctly:

“I think one of the frustrating things for me is that everyone’s got their own opinion on this issue. Everyone thinks they’re an expert because they’ve got a mouth” (interview with Australian clinician, June 2011).

The motivation behind this statement is understandable. It reflects frustration at a pervasive and simplistic view in public life about an issue that the expert involved knows to be a good deal more complex. However, as this quote would indicate, such an interpretation of toxic narratives in epistemic terms, however well-intentioned, actually begins to look decidedly elitist. It mobilises an excessively restrictive understanding of reason or rationality—one ill-suited to the broader ambitions of the systemic view of deliberative democracy. The privileging of one sort of rationality (professional expertise or scientific evidence) over another (cultural knowledge or common sense), is highly problematic. This is not to indulge in a simplistic argument that valorises common sense at the expense of elite technical knowledge, nor one that even attempts to describe them as necessarily equivalent in importance. It is to take seriously the need for deliberative democratic venues of various kinds to have a place for different types of rationalities, drawing on different sorts of evidence (empirical versus experiential or anecdotal) and involving different sorts of actors (expert versus lay). Indeed, it is the opportunity for engagement among different types of rationality that is at the heart of the epistemic function of a broader deliberative system (Hendriks 2006).

In practice, several of my interview participants in both countries reflected on how productive such engagement could be, describing how and why they took it upon themselves to tackle anti-Nanny State ‘prejudice’ in the media and broader public domain. One explained:

“I was very concerned that the message in the media should be constructive. When I become involved it was very voyeuristic. You know, articles in the newspaper ‘Big fat man, isn't it horrible? Isn't it amazing that he can't get out of his house because the door's too small.’ I wanted to kind of redress the balance. So apart from quality and trying to get a scientific opinion included, I also started to work with more popular media—TV and radio and newspaper publications—to make sure they had a balanced view as well. Actually, we shouldn't underestimate the power and influence of the media on normal people” (interview with British clinician, March 2012).

In the UK, unlike in Australia, occasional elite representation of the anti-Nanny State narrative has enabled higher profile engagement of this sort conducted across a broader range of sites. This occurred most prominently in response to Conservative Party leader David Cameron’s 2008 speech on ‘moral neutrality’ and the need for social ‘victims’ (including those of obesity) to assume greater responsibility for their plight (see Porter 2008).

This also works the other way. The closer ‘lay’ commentators and contributors can get to empowered sites, the more they can engage with and challenge the supposedly sound evidence supporting expert-led narratives around greater health spending or stricter food regulation. Contrary to the perception of most of the elite actors that I interviewed, the point is not that advocates of the anti-Nanny State narrative reject scientific evidence wholesale. It is more that they adopt an outsider status to interpret such data differently to the experts who produced them, and use them to support entirely different conclusions (see Fischer 1998 on the general point; see Boswell 2014 for more detail on this case). Indeed, some proponents of this toxic narrative went out of their way to summarise key scientific findings on obesity to substantiate their claims (e.g. Sammut 2008). Though perceived by many—and perhaps intended by some of the anti-Nanny State proponents—as deliberate manipulation or obfuscation to create doubt on the issue, such efforts are part of a broader process in these deliberative systems whereby expert claims about ‘the evidence’ are questioned and critiqued (see Boswell 2014 for much more on this). Indeed, one interview participant confided in relation to this line of questioning:

“It is pretty much in my view an evidence-free area. There is virtually nothing proven to reduce or prevent obesity apart from famine and pestilence and they are the only evidence-based interventions you might consider” (interview with Australian researcher, July 2011).

The findings on this dimension suggest, then, that far from damaging the epistemic quality of deliberations, encounters between the lay-dominated anti-Nanny State narrative and more expert-led accounts enabled constructive engagement and mutual scrutiny among different forms of rationality.

## *Ethical considerations*

Another potential justification for barring this toxic narrative from elite and empowered sites relates to the ethical function of the deliberative system. Namely, there is a strong perception that the manner in which this narrative is typically performed negates the deliberative ideal of mutual respect, working to marginalise and exclude the minority against which the populist identity is so often forged and mobilised. Claims associated with this narrative on obesity often denigrate obese individuals themselves as grotesque ‘baby elephants’ who act as ‘parasites’ on the health service. More common still, they berate the ‘neglectful’ parents who have overseen the childhood obesity epidemic in both countries. Moreover, this narrative is typically voiced in a particularly acerbic tone—one that undermines any goodwill in public debate and reveals a distinct lack of respect for other actors engaged in the issue. It seems to embody in this sense precisely the sort of ‘plebiscitary rhetoric’ which Chambers (2009) sees as such a threat to ethical deliberation.

Yet the evidence collected in this analysis would suggest that such an interpretation is overly simplistic, and risks being inattentive to important dramaturgical cues which shape and soften the ‘hard edges’ of this toxic narrative. That is to say, in the UK, where this narrative was represented to some degree in elite and empowered sites of deliberation, it was much more respectful in tone and moderate in content, in keeping with the performative norms of these sites.

Through ‘shock jocks’ and other such actors in the mass media and broader public sphere, for instance, this toxic narrative on obesity in both countries was typically nasty and acerbic in tone. Yet as such ‘wild talk’ filtered through different venues of public deliberation, there has been a tendency towards moderation. In Australia, libertarian think-tank publications and newspaper editorials, for example, give expression to this narrative in ways that refrain from persecuting the obese (e.g Sammut 2008). And, on the handful of occasions on which such sentiment has been expressed in elite deliberations in the UK, it has been much milder still. Lord Lawson expressed frustration at the Coalition government’s policy directives in relation to obesity, for instance, but did so in a way that conveyed a degree of empathy for obese individuals rather than the disdain typically associated with this account of the issue:

“My Lords, as someone who has been there and done that, and indeed written a book about it, may I say to the noble Earl that he is absolutely right that this is not something that the Government can do on their own—indeed, may I suggest that it is not something that the Government can do at all? There is a genetic element, which the Government cannot do anything about, and the rest is about eating less and drinking less” (House of Lords, Oct 19, 2011).

Overall, then, in understanding deliberation as occurring within and across a complex system, then, we can see that norms of the different democratic venues that make up this system, and the range of actors they involve, prompted more respectful renditions of this toxic narrative. Though this response to performative or dramaturgical cues could be seen as problematic of its own right—as a more subtle form of elite censorship than outright marginalisation—the interpretation I offer here is that such transformation is not just an inevitable aspect of systemic deliberation, it is in this case a positive one that renders this ‘toxic narrative’ more amenable to engagement with other accounts of obesity.

## *Inclusive considerations*

The notion that excluding a popular narrative from deliberations can aid inclusiveness might seem paradoxical, but it relates closely to the ethical concern discussed above. The worry is that toxic narratives, voiced so aggressively and emphatically by their proponents, threaten a paralysing polarization that may serve to ‘shut down’ deliberation in the broader system. The toxic narrative, in this sense, is thought to risk poisoning the deliberative system as a whole if it is allowed to spread too far. The implications of this objection do not necessarily lead to a barring of the narrative altogether—although this is a well-worn argument in the literature on hate speech (see Gelber 2010)—but, germane to the case under discussion, is more likely to engender exclusion from elite and empowered sites by way of a *cordon sanitaire* (Rummens and Abt 2007). The idea is that working to prevent expression of toxic narratives like the anti-Nanny State one on obesity will serve to reduce the risk of polarization and paralysis in the deliberative system as a whole.

This is the view that the majority of actors I spoke with subscribed to. The absence (in Australia) or lack of prominence (in the UK) of the anti-Nanny State narrative from more empowered deliberations that I noted was, for them, a welcome finding. For these actors, active inclusion of such views would give this toxic narrative undue exposure and risk rendering deliberative sites dysfunctional. For example, when questioned on the ramifications for democratic debate on the issue, one public manager involved in setting up and steering such venues replied emphatically:

“Wagging your finger at people and saying you’re a bad person just go and lose weight, it doesn’t work on any sort of scale… [F]rom a public policy, evidence-based perspective, there’s absolutely no value in that argument in terms of changing anything. And it’s a very dangerous argument. I think even the libertarians and right wing think tanks would recognise this because it can be used to shut down debate about what is of value and worth” (interview with Australian senior public servant, June 2011).

Yet on the few occasions when elite actors, or actors in elite venues, voiced the toxic, anti-Nanny State narrative about obesity in the UK, this was clearly not the case. Indeed, their claims prompted a great deal of interest and debate, with elite actors gaining much publicity in their rebuttal of the anti-Nanny State account. Professor Steve Olds’ opinion piece in *The Guardian*, for example, which gave voice to at least some important elements of the anti-Nanny State narrative, prompted public health experts and community activists to restate and reimagine their refutation of the populist claims he invoked. Lord Lawson’s anti-Nanny State claims on obesity in the House of Lords, too, provoked an outpouring from the community of actors committed to government action (of various kinds) on obesity, justifying their positions in ways that more closely engage with the populist resistance. Such instances are indicative of the ‘flowering of deliberation’ that Dryzek (2010) notes can occur in response to even the most seemingly un-deliberative, anti-democratic outbursts in the deliberative system.

Conversely, it has been the taboo surrounding the toxic narrative in Australia that serves to stunt and ‘close down’ deliberation across the broader system in that country. On the one hand, it denies representation to a popularly held narrative, in the process fuelling resentment and a sense that democratic policymaking occurs primarily by stealth. Indeed, even the most libertarian actors engaged in empowered sites of deliberation make a point of not engaging with this toxic narrative, though they appear to believe in it themselves. I encountered one such instance involving an industry group lobbyist. In both his public statements and his initial interview responses, he gave voice to a moderate narrative on this issue. He spoke at length about the complex nature of the problem, of how it was nobody’s fault, and of the need for a coordinated state and societal response. However, after we had built up something of a rapport, the tenor of his answers began to change, and he opened up as if he felt safe to finally speak his mind:

“What probably annoys me a little bit is that there seems to be all of these excuses, or all of these options for parents to abdicate their responsibility. It’s ...until the child is of working age and has their own disposable income then what goes in their mouth absolutely has to be the parents’ responsibility, paring it back to its most basic issue” (interview with Australian food industry representative, July 2011).

On the other hand, the taboo barring the anti-Nanny State narrative from elite and empowered deliberations in Australia can also condition and cow the advocacy of the very actors who seek to limit its spread. In the UK, where efforts to ‘defend democracy’ in this way have been more relaxed, elite expressions of the anti-Nanny State narrative have occurred from time to time (and been engaged with vocally by other actors), this account is considered a constituent but minor view within the broader deliberative system. But in Australia, where the view has become completely taboo and has not been engaged with in empowered sites, there is an acute sense of looming threat among elite actors about the prevalence of this perspective in the broader public sphere. Where none of my UK interview participants discussed key terms associated with the populist view like ‘personal responsibility’ or ‘Nanny State’ unless prompted, many of their counterparts in Australia volunteered them and referred back to them often. One interview participant even began our interview by almost instantly claiming:

“The term they use in the debate is the ‘Nanny State’. It’s very, very effective. So as soon as it’s not personal responsibility…when we demand action, they always fall back on the Nanny State” (interview with Australian public health advocate, April 2011).

The same participants also reflected that their public statements were conditioned by fear of being cast as a proponent of the Nanny State, leading them to mute or muffle some of the bolder ideas they believed in. Indeed, it is worth noting that while a radical leftist narrative on obesity (as a manifestation of deeper social problems brought about by inequality) has enjoyed traction both in the public sphere and in some elite sites in Britain, it has been almost completely absent from the Australian debate (see Olsen et al. 2009). Despite the fact some interview participants reported to me in private that they saw considerable value in this more radical interpretation of obesity, none were willing to advocate it publicly for fear of a backlash.

The sense overall, then, is that the ‘ghost’ of the Nanny State stalks elite deliberations in Australia. The conscious exclusion of this toxic narrative weakens perceptions of legitimacy among populist critics and, just as importantly, among the other political actors themselves.

**Discussion**

I earlier made the case that the ‘toxic narrative’ on obesity is indicative of a broader category of notable importance for broader thinking about deliberative systems. As such, it is important to note that the argument made from this case does not lay the grounds for the active incorporation of all views in all sites of every deliberative system. The separate ‘functions’ that Mansbridge et al. (2012) isolate are not meant to be applied hydraulically, insensitive to timing or context, and there may be cases in which these criteria conflict. In particular, there clearly can be cases in which toxic narratives may threaten the ethical function of the deliberative system, inciting hatred and violence, and exclusion via a *cordon sanitaire* would perfectly defensible in the terms set out here.

Yet, the performative or dramaturgical logic underpinning the moderating transformation in the UK case gives reason for optimism about a more permissive default setting. There would seem to be a strong tendency for the range of democratic venues involved—both because of the norms they promote and because of the range of actors they entail—to encourage the filtering, challenging and subtle transformation of anti-intellectual and/or vitriolic language and conduct, reimagining and substantiating the prejudiced and inflammatory ‘wild talk’ of toxic narratives in much drier, more equivocal terms. This is, after all, not something that occurs only in relation to toxic narratives. Indeed, it is something that is enormously frustrating in this debate for proponents of progressive, transformative narratives on obesity in Australia and the UK (see Boswell and Corbett 2014). Likewise, in more general terms it can be a frustration for progressive activists on all sorts of issues, as their ideas and claims are watered down and emptied of most of their transformative potential the closer they get to the locus of power (e.g. Smith and Kern 2009).

**Conclusion**

So, though difficult to extrapolate too far from the specifics of this case, the results here firmly suggest a cautious scepticism towards collective efforts to bar or marginalise toxic narratives from empowered sites in deliberative systems. Indeed, the argument I have advanced here sees the toxic narrative on obesity as an important component to be linked, albeit filtered via the dramaturgical cues that shape communicative action in more or less constructive ways, throughout the deliberative system as a whole. Rather than distorting the epistemic function of a deliberative system, the expression of the anti-Nanny State narrative across deliberative sites (in the UK) forces experts and other political actors to engage with different sorts of rationalities. Rather than necessarily violating the ethical function of the deliberative system, the UK experience shows that inviting adherents to this toxic narrative into elite deliberations can have a transformative effect, encouraging them to moderate the tone and content of their claims to meet the dignified norms associated with such sites. And rather than shutting down debate or leading to dysfunction, the active inclusion of proponents of this narrative into such sites can actually work to reinforce the legitimacy (both real and perceived) of political decisions and the processes that lead to them.

As such, the deliberative systems approach, with the significant expansion and relaxation of what constitutes and supports deliberation that it engenders, appears to have survived the ‘hard test’ I have set for it in this paper. Indeed, even in substantive terms, the impulse to ‘defend democracy’ from the perceived threat of toxic narratives can be self-defeating. It can easily engender over-reach, leading as it does in the Australian case to unnecessary exclusion from empowered deliberation. The resultant weakening in the legitimacy of democratic governance in turn is only likely to fuel toxic sentiment—a point germane in this case but which also has important lessons for other such cases, particularly as calls grow for an abandonment of the democratic process to facilitate urgent action on issues like climate change (see Hamilton 2012).

Welcoming adherents of the toxic narrative into empowered deliberation instead can validate or at least engage with the prevailing ‘common sense’ on the issue, de-radicalize these actors and moderate their public advocacy, and strengthen perceptions of legitimacy more broadly. Doing the right thing substantively and doing the right thing procedurally may not be so incompatible, after all.

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1. This paper is forthcoming in slightly amended form in a special issue on ‘Deliberative systems’ in *Policy Studies*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)