

Government Communication as a Policy Tool: A Framework for Analysis

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Abstract:

Government communication is now a large growth industry in many countries. Exactly what is meant by the term, however, varies from author to author. In this paper government communication is conceived as a policy tool or instrument, that is, as a means to give effect to policy goals. Three key policy-relevant aspects of the term are examined: (1) the link between government communications and the 'nodality' or information resource set out by Hood in his study of policy instruments; (2) the role of government communications in the 'front-end' of the public policy and production processes related to agenda-setting, policy formulation and producer activities as opposed to the 'back-end' of policy implementation, policy evaluation, consumption and distribution and (3) the general aims of network management and overcoming information asymmetries which help explain the range of procedural and substantive policy tools used in government communication efforts. A model of four basic types of government communications is developed and examples provided of each general category. The implications of this analysis for cross-national comparative policy analyses of government communication activities and the evaluation of accountability and policy efficacy in contemporary governance are then discussed.

Introduction

Current governance modes have been shifting increasingly towards a pro-consultation mode which has led to the internalization and mandating of new communication practices in many jurisdictions (Feldman and Khademian 2007). These include the development and use of instruments which promote citizen empowerment such as Freedom of Information legislation, the use of public performance measures, various forms of e-government and the increased use of government surveys and advertizing among others. As a result, government communications

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is now a large growth industry in many countries and the subject of increasing attention from both practitioners and theorists.

Government communications are typically thought of as the 'sermons' in a 'carrots, sticks, and sermons' formulation of basic policy instrument types (Vedung and van der Doelen 1998). Vedung, for example, has defined a 'sermon' as:

"Efforts to use the knowledge and data available to governments to influence consumer and producer behaviour in a direction consistent with government aims and wishes" and/or "gather information in order to further their aims and ambitions" (Vedung and van der Doelen 1998).

The disparate nature of these government communication activities and the fact that many post 9-11 security inspired government actions have also prevented information release,¹ however, are indicative of the need to be more precise in what is meant by the term 'government communication'. Different foci make assessments and generalizations about trends and patterns of use exceedingly difficult (Ledingham 2003). Nevertheless, classifying and analyzing the wide range of activities and tasks that fall into the category of 'government communication' is an essential pre-requisite for such assessments which, in turn, are required if the contours and implications of new communications activity in areas such as the media and elections are to be understood.

Defining Government Communication as a Policy Tool

Exactly what is meant by the term 'government communication' currently varies dramatically from author to author, ranging from its association with all forms of political activity (Deutsch, 1963; Bang 2003) to a very specific focus on one limited type of activity, like political advertising (Firestone 1970; Young 2007). Needless to say, the consequences of the definition adopted greatly affects the conclusions reached pertaining to the growth and spread of communications activity and its impact.

Thinking about such activities as 'policy tools', however, helps to sort out the different goals and purposes of government communication, a first step towards establishing a typology of such activities; itself the first step towards effective empirical analysis and theory construction. That is, 'government communication' can be thought of as a generic name for a wide variety of a specific type or category of governing instruments, ones which typically draw upon what Christopher Hood (1986) called 'nodality' or the use of government informational resources to influence and direct policy actions through the provision or withholding of 'information' or 'knowledge' from societal actors.

As is well known, Hood (1983; 1986; 2007; Hood and Margetts 2007) argued that governments have essentially four resources at their disposal - nodality, authority, treasure, and organizational (or 'NATO' in Hood's terminology) - which they use to monitor society and alter its behaviour. In Hood's scheme, instruments are grouped together according to (1) which of these resources they primarily rely upon for their effectiveness² and (2) whether the instrument is designed to effect or detect changes in a policy environment (Hood 1986; Anderson 1977)³ (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1: Examples of Policy Instruments, Classified by Principal Governing Resource Used

Nodality/Information	Authority	Treasure	Organization
<i>Information collection and release</i>	Command and control regulation	Grants and loans	Direct provision of goods and services and public enterprises
<i>Advice and exhortation</i>	Self-regulation	User charges	Use of family, community, and voluntary organizations
<i>Advertising</i>	Standard setting and delegated regulation	Taxes and tax expenditures	Market creation
<i>Commissions and inquiries</i>	Advisory committees and consultations	Interest group creation and funding	Government reorganization

Source: Hood (1986)

Thus, in Hood’s taxonomy, most government communication activities can be seen to primarily involve the use of information-based policy tools which function as they do because of the nodal position governments occupy in public policy systems and sub-systems. This insight allows us to better describe and classify the various different techniques practiced by governments in this area, to uncover patterns in their use, and to begin to understand why these patterns exist. However, specifying the basic resource used by this tool is only the first step in the identification of specific sub-types which differ in terms of how they control or manipulate knowledge and for what purpose(s).

Distinguishing Between Different Types of Government Communication Tools

Vedung’s definition is useful in this regard as it sets out two general dimensions of information tool use and the general purposes to which they can be put: influencing consumer and producer behaviour in economic transactions, and controlling or collecting information for politico-administrative ones. That is, a primary distinction can be made between whether the communication activities are intended to serve as devices primarily oriented towards the manipulation of policy actors and policy processes (Saward 1992; Edelman 1988) or social and economic ones involved in the production of goods and services (Hornik 1989; Jahn et al 2005): that is, between their *procedural* and *substantive* use (Howlett 2000).⁴

Substantive instruments are used to alter some aspect of the production, distribution and delivery of goods and services in society: broadly conceived to include both mundane goods and services (like school lunches) as well as a range of vices and virtues, ranging from crude vices (such as gambling or illicit drug use) to more common individual virtues (such as charitable giving or volunteer work with the physically challenged); to the attainment of sublime collective goals (like peace and security, sustainability and well-being). We can thus define substantive government communication policy instruments as those policy techniques or mechanisms which rely on the use of information to directly or indirectly affect the behaviour of those involved in the production, consumption and distribution of different kinds of goods and services in society.

Procedural tools, on the other hand, affect production, consumption and distribution processes only indirectly, instead affecting more directly the behaviour of actors involved in policy-making. These actors are arrayed in policy networks which are comprised of very simple arrangements of nodes (actors) and links (relationships), but which can result in very complex structures and interaction patterns. Policy networks include sets of formal institutional and informal relational linkages between governmental and other policy actors which are typically structured around shared beliefs and interests in public policy making and implementation. In order to pursue their preferred policy initiatives, governments must interact with other state and non-state actors who might possess diverging interests (Leik 1992). They use procedural communicative tools based on government information resources in order to attempt to alter the behaviour of policy network members involved in policy-making processes. They are only tangentially related to productive or consumptive behaviour, if at all.

Distinguishing Between the Use of Government Communication Instruments at Different Stages of the Policy and Production Processes

Making a distinction between procedural and substantive communication tools is a good first step in arriving at a reasonable taxonomy of such instruments which can inform empirical analysis and theory-building. However there is a second dimension which also requires elaboration: the stage of the production process or policy cycle upon which different communication tools focus (Howlett 2009).⁵

Many studies of procedural information tool use, for example, focus on the role of government communications as part of the agenda-setting process in government (Mikenberg 2001; Sulitzeanu-Kenan 2007) or on its role in policy implementation (Salmon 1989a, 1989b). In the case of production processes the focus has also been upon specific stages of production processes, such as the effort to affect consumption activities and actors or those involved in productive or distributive activities. These are all quite different roles, however, and they also should be carefully distinguished from each other in order to understand the links that exist between government communication strategies and activities and policy outcomes such as accountability and policy efficacy.

In general, substantive communication tools can be focused primarily either at the 'front-end' or production stage of the provision of goods and services, or at the 'back-end' or consumption and distribution stages. Similarly, procedural tools can also be focused on different stages of the policy process as depicted in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Five Stages of the Policy Cycle and Their Relationship to Applied Problem-Solving

Applied Problem-Solving	Stages in Policy Cycle
1. Problem Recognition	1. Agenda-Setting
2. Proposal of Solution	2. Policy Formulation
3. Choice of Solution	3. Decision-Making
4. Putting Solution into Effect	4. Policy Implementation
5. Monitoring Results	5. Policy Evaluation

Government communications typically do not affect decision-making, per se, but they are directed at all of the other stages of the policy process.

Four Basic Types of Government Communication Tools

This discussion suggests that government communications tools can be thought of as falling into four general types (see Figure 3).⁶

Figure 3: Four Categories of Government Communicative Tools

Stage of Policy Cycle/Production Process Primarily Targeted		Policy Purpose	
		Substantive	Procedural
Front-end (Agenda-Setting and Policy Formulation/ Goods and Service Production)		Notification Instruments/Moral Suasion	General Information Disclosure or Prevention
		E.g, Consumer Product Labeling, Prospectus disclosure laws, Government e-health and e-government portals appeals to producers with or without the threat of regulation.	e.g. Freedom of information & Privacy Laws, Performance Measures , Censorship,
Back-end (Policy Implementation and Policy Evaluation/ Goods and Service Distribution and Consumption)		Exhortation and Information Campaigns	Data Collection and Release
		e.g. Moral Suasion and Government Advertizing	e.g. Censuses Compulsory Reporting, Press Releases, Media Relations, government websites

The most high profile and thus most commonly observed and chronicled type of tool is the substantive, back-end tool focused on the effort to alter consumer behaviour: the government information campaign. This includes various campaigns waged by governments to encourage citizens to, for example, eat well, engage in fewer vices and otherwise behave responsibly. However, ‘front-end’ communication activities aimed at altering producer behaviour through provision of product and process information to customers (“*product information*”) are also very prominent. Most product-related labeling and other such activities fall into this category, as do most government e-services which are designed to encourage producers to be better aware of laws and regulations, or to produce particular types of goods and services and not others.

The most commonly observed and chronicled category of procedural tool is the front-end procedural category which focuses on the use of *general information prevention or disclosure laws and other tools* – such as Access to Information laws – in order to provide policy network actors with the knowledge required to effectively filter and focus their demands on government

for new policy measures or reforms to older ones. However, governments are also very much involved in the use of communications to promote efficient policy implementation and positive policy evaluations, through the use of *data collection and release tools* such as media releases, data collection, surveys and, increasingly, government websites (Gandy, 1982; Hood and Margetts, 2007) to provide additional information to policy network members in specific sectoral or issue areas.

Each of these four general categories of communications tools is discussed below and some examples of their use in Canada provided.

Substantive Producer-Directed Tools: Notification Instruments and 'Moral Suasion'

Adler & Pittle (1984) describe this tool as "notification instruments" which:

"convey factual information to the intelligent target. Implicit in the notification approach is the belief that the target, once apprised of the facts, will make the appropriate decision."

Some notification tools attempt to be purely factual, ongoing and passive in nature, such as nutritional labeling on foodstuffs or health warnings on cigarettes (Padberg 1992; Baksi and Bose 2007). They are usually enacted in regulations (i.e. disclosure is mandatory) and are aimed at providing information to consumers allowing them make better decisions, or overcome information asymmetries (Jahn et al 2005) between producers and consumers, with the expectation that they will change their behaviour in some way consistent with government goals – for example, reducing smoking or eating nutritional foods. All of these activities are intended to have an effect on producers and production decisions, for example, manufacturing fewer tobacco products or producing healthier foods.

Similarly Stanbury and Fulton (1984) describe '*moral suasion*' as a more direct plea from governments to producers "whereby voluntary action is urged under threat of coercion if refused". Many countries administer important aspects of their financial systems in this fashion, for example, asking banks, taxpayers and other financial institutions to act in a certain way (e.g. keep interest rates low, or allow certain groups to borrow funds) with the implicit or explicit threat of direct government regulation if requests are ignored or go unfulfilled (Bardach 1989).

Substantive Consumer-Directed Tools: Exhortation and Persuasion Instruments

Adler & Pittle (1984) provide a definition of substantive, information-based, 'back-end' tools directed at consumers as "persuasion instruments" which entail "persuasion schemes (which) convey messages which may or may not contain factual information which overtly seek to motivate target audiences to modify their behaviour" (Adler and Pittle 1984).

These are probably the best known government communication tools. The most prominent type is the appeal from political leaders to various social actors, urging them to follow a government's lead in some area of social or economic life (Cobb and Elder 1972). Stanbury and Fulton (1984) describe '*exhortation*' as "pure political leadership such as appeals for calm, better behaviour, and high principles".

Mass media and targeted information campaigns are also highly visible examples of tools in this category, by definition, and tend to be aimed less at producers than at consumers. Some of these information campaigns are more active and less factual, but have the same intent, that is providing social actors with more information about aspects of their behaviour and its advantageous or deleterious quality, urging enhancement of the former and a diminishment of the latter. Such campaigns are often conducted at the mass level and use a variety of mass-media delivery mechanisms (commercials, broadcasts, newspaper advertisements and the like). High profile campaigns in many countries to prevent drinking and driving or encourage the purchase of Victory Bonds during wartime are good examples of this kind of instrument.

Mass campaigns began with the emergence of mass media and are now common in most countries. The information often transmitted through information instruments is not always so factual, however, but can be used to 'sell' a government's policies in the same way that other products are marketed. Many national governments are now the largest purchasers of advertising in their countries and far outstrip national brands well known for their advertising overkill, such as alcoholic beverage and softdrink companies, as well as fastfood chains. The Federal government of Canada, for example, has been the largest advertiser in country since 1976 (Stanbury et al 1983) with the larger provincial governments in the top 10 as well. Ryan (1995) noted that Federal Advertising expanded from \$3.4 million in 1968 to \$106.5M in 1992, a 3000% increase. Even inflation adjusted this amounted to a 665% increase in 25 years.

Specific national issue campaigns can be very costly. Alasdair Roberts and Jonathan Rose (1995) for example, conducted an in depth study of a mass media campaign conducted by the Federal Government of Canada to introduce a new Goods and Services Tax in 1989-1990. They found the federal Department of Finance to have spent \$11.6 million on public education in a combined print/radio/tv campaign, \$5M on direct mail materials, \$5M on a call centre; Revenue Canada (Customs) to have spent 10.6M on advertizing, 9.2M on instructional material; Revenue Canada (taxation) to have spent a further \$28M advertising a GST credit; while a specially created GST Consumer Info Office spent \$7.4M on advertising and \$6.9M of production, The total for this one campaign was \$85 million. This was more than largest private sector advertisers spent in all of 1989. For example, Proctor and Gamble, with its hundreds of consumer products, had a total advertising budget of \$56.7 Million.

Procedural Tools Affecting Agenda-Setting and Policy Formulation: General Information Disclosure and Concealment

Stanbury and Fulton (1984) describe common 'front-end' procedural policy tools as *monitoring and information disclosure instruments* (for example, environmental audits, ombudsmen, prices and incomes commissions as well as freedom of information and privacy laws). All of these tools can involve information bans or release prevention as well as information disclosure; they can be general or specific in nature; can be focused on individuals or the public and can be mandatory or optional in nature.

Freedom of Information legislation allows access to individual's own records and those of others, - with numerous exemptions - again many benign (to protect other individuals from unnecessary disclosure) and (access to information) allowing access to documents and records of others, - with numerous exemptions - again many benign (to protect individuals from unnecessary disclosure - privacy rights. These legislative arrangements were a feature of Scandinavian

system of ombudsman for administrative control and were introduced in many countries in the 1970s and 1980s (Relyea 1977; Bennett 1988, 1990, 1991, 1992; Bennett and Raab 2003; Bennett and Bayley 1999; Howe and Johnson 2000). *Whistleblower Acts* are an extreme example of the use of communication tools focused at the individual level. They are bills intended to protect people who speak out about problems in the government's bureaucracy. Through such legislation, bureaucrats are often offered legal protection against reprisals for reporting government wrongdoing.

There is also a wide range of these tools designed to protect certain kinds of information on government activities or in government files from entering the public realm or in suppressing certain knowledge or information considered undesirable. These include protecting not only information collected by governments but that which comes into their possession (for example from foreign government or via documents filed in court cases etc.). These range from wartime (and peacetime e.g. Ontario film censors board) *censorship* and bans on political parties and speech (e.g. hate crimes legislation etc.) to *Official Secrets Acts* (like UK) with various levels of confidentiality and penalties imposed for publicizing or releasing government secrets.⁷

Procedural Tools for Policy Implementation and Evaluation: Data Collection and Release

Stanbury and Fulton (1984) also discuss several tools in which affected parties are given information on government plans, like *public hearings*; the discrete use of confidential information such as *planned leaks* to press or planned public disclosure of government intentions; as well as *government media relations and communications strategies* intended to legitimize government actions and pre-empt criticism and dissent.

Some of these tools are used in order to generate information, such as *inquiries, surveys and polling*. Government information requests can be very focused and can be quite secretive (for example, in the immediate aftermath of the 9-11 airline hijackings when the US government urged credit card companies to provide records of suspicious activities by suspected hijackers). *Benchmarking and performance indicators* are more visible but similar tools involving the use and publication of indicators of government and non-governmental performance designed to collect and release information on specified activities of organizations against set written standards (Benjamin 2008; Sharma and Wanna 2005).⁸ Many recent government efforts at *e-communications* (websites, maillists, wiki's, twitters, and the like) also fall into this category.

Tools in this category can also be used to prevent specific types of information from circulating. *Privacy Acts*, for example, exist in many jurisdictions as a counterpoint to access to information laws in which specified information is excluded from such acts. Some jurisdictions have specific legislation devoted to this subject, usually with a focus on protecting personal information in areas such as health, financial or tax matters, and with respect to criminal proceedings.

Conclusion: General Comments and Patterns of Use

As has been set out above, there are many different kinds of government communication activities and the lack of an effective taxonomy or framework for their analysis has made generalizing about their impact and patterns of use quite difficult. Conceiving of such activities as information-based policy tools helps to highlight the similarities and differences between

different instruments and helps develop a relatively parsimonious taxonomy of their major types which can facilitate national and cross-national studies of their use and impact.

Distinguishing between information tools that are procedural or substantive in nature is a first step in the development of this taxonomy. The second step is to distinguish between those procedural and substantive instruments that focus on the front-end of policy and production processes and those which focus on the back-end. Taken together these two criteria reveal four distinct types of communication instruments: *product information; consumer information campaigns; general disclosure tools and data collection and release tools.*

Classifying communications instruments in this way is the first step towards the development of empirical assessments of the rationale for their use and uncovering any patterns of their employment, both spatially (cross-nationally) and temporally (historically). Hypotheses suggested in the literature, for example, include the arguments that information instruments will tend to be used only in situation where:

- (1) 100% compliance is not required for a policy to be effective;
- (2) government and public interests coincide (e.g. on health awareness) so that government appeals are likely to be favorably received; and
- (3) only in relatively short-term crisis situations (Rose 1993) when other tools may require too much lead time to be effective; where
- (4) it is otherwise difficult to impose sanctions and where
- (5) the issue in question is not very complex (technological or legal) in nature but can be reduced to the level of advertising slogans (Romans 1966; Vedung and van der Doelen 1998).

Organizing case studies according to the criteria set out above helps to evaluate this and other such hypotheses in a fashion which leads to clarification and theory development, rather than confusion.

Endnotes

¹ Moves in the direction of increased consultation and information release are fraught, since moves in this direction involve trade-offs between some rights such as the public's 'right-to-know' and state security issues or an individual's right to privacy. Any general diminishment of state power can be reversed in times of war or crisis, as has been the case in many countries in the post 9-11 environment of the U.S.-led 'war on terror' where concerns with state and collective security in times of war or terrorism have lead to a renewed emphasis on restricting information disclosure, as we have seen recently in many countries.

² This formulation is useful in providing four clearly differentiated categories of policy instruments. While each tool, to a certain extent relies on all four resources (for example, a tax is a treasure tool but is also administered by an organization, relies on government authority to be collected and on the provision of information to taxpayers about its existence), in this scheme each tool may be classified according to the primary resource it involves (in the case of a tax, this is 'treasure').

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- ³ However, for our purposes, this second distinction is less significant since communication is commonly two-way, allowing a simpler taxonomy of basic governing tools and resources to be set out
- ⁴ At their most basic level, government actions fall into two types depending on their general goal orientation: one type of action proposes to alter the actual *substance* of the kinds of activities carried out by citizens going about their day-to-day tasks, while the other focuses more upon altering behaviour in the policy-making *process* itself. '*Procedural*' policy tools are used to accomplish the latter purposes, while '*substantive*' policy instruments are those used to affect the former (Howlett, 2000).
- ⁵ The different stages of the production process are well known and do not require further elaboration here. However the same cannot be said of the policy process. While different models of policy processes exist, historically, one of the most popular means for analyzing public policy-making has been to think of it as a set of interrelated stages through which policy issues and deliberations flow in a more or less sequential fashion from 'inputs' (problems) to 'outputs' (policies). The resulting sequence of stages is often referred to as the '*policy cycle*' (Jann and Wegrich, 2007). In this model, *agenda-setting* refers to the process by which problems come to the attention of governments; *policy formulation* refers to how policy options are formulated within government; *decision-making* is the process by which governments adopt a particular course of action or non-action; *policy implementation* relates to how governments put policies into effect; and *policy evaluation* refers to the processes by which the results of policies are monitored by both state and societal actors, the outcome of which may be reconceptualization of policy problems and solutions.
- ⁶ As Hood (1986) noted, all policy tools can be targeted at different levels of society. In the case of information-based tools, Adler & Pittle (1986) have suggested a division along the lines of targeting individuals, groups and populations as a whole.
- ⁷ Censorship has occurred in many countries during wartime but also in peacetime e.g. film or theatre censorship. This latter use has been slowly whittled away as individual rights in democratic states have been ruled to trump government or collective ones (Qualter 1985). However, Official Secrets Acts are the most important statute relating to national security in many countries and are designed to prohibit and control access to and the disclosure of sensitive government information (Pasquier and Villeneuve 2007). Offences tends to cover espionage and leakage of government information. The term "official secrets" varies dramatically from country to country but broadly, allows governments to classify documents and prohibit release of different categories for sometimes very long periods of time (e.g. 50-75 years).
- ⁸ Of course, there are problems in both the private and the public sector in terms of agreeing what to measure and how to do so (for example whether to measure inputs vs outputs) which have limited their spread (Papaioannou and Bassant 2006; Johnsen 2005; Adcroft and Willis 2005; de Lancer and Holzer 2001; Van Dooren 2004; Cohen and Santhakumar 2007).

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