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# **66F. Public Policy Analysis Re-Imagined with Web 2.0 Applications**

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## ***Abstract***

For any public policy analysis to be effective it must include the broad study of the actions, as well as interactions, of the various interveners in that particular public policy object. In the past this has not been possible because of the lack of tools to identify, communicate with and collect data from all those interacting with an object of public policy. Web 2.0 applications have, for the first time, given rise to the real possibility of creating a 'new consciousness' among public policy actors, allowing policy analysts to 'actively' survey, observe and follow public policy interactions in real time, allowing for a new means of public policy analysis to take place.

## ***Keywords***

Public Policy, Web 2.0, Social Networking, Sociocritical Approach, Policy Analysis, Technology, Application, ICT, Engagement, Inclusion, Internet, Actors

## **1. Public Policy Analysis Re-Imagined with Web 2.0**

The single greatest challenge facing those engaged in public policy analysis today is how to be inclusive of all interests concerned. It is our contention that meaningful analysis of the interest of all parties concerned with an object of public policy might be closer to a reality than ever before because of the recent emergence of Web 2.0 applications that bring otherwise disconnected segments of society together.

In this paper we will suggest that the sociocritical approach to public policy analysis, arguably the only way to accurately assess the real impacts of public policy objects, will be further strengthened by Web 2.0 technologies.

## **2. Public Policy Analysis Revisited**

Any discussion of public policy inevitably leads to some elaboration of Harold Lasswell's observations that public policy is concerned with nothing more than who, gets what, when, and how. Lasswell suggested that public policy is nothing more than the allocation of resources with the principle issue being who benefits most from those allocations.

For a public policy analysis tool to be effective it must include the broad study of the actions and interactions of the interveners in a particular object of public policy. Only through a comprehensive analysis of the interventions of the various policy interveners,

might it be possible to determine how the public policy interests of the state, industry, and public come together to influence the formation of a particular public policy.

## **2.1 Web 2.0 an Input to Public Policy Analysis**

Web 2.0 is a term coined by Tim O’Rielly, of the O’Rielly Media Group in 2004, to describe what is largely considered to be second-generation internet tools that promote collaboration and sharing. Web 2.0 applications are characterized by their ability to facilitate connections, conversations, presence and feeling through the linking of people with like interests via the World Wide Web. Web 2.0 is all about creating social networks. Examples of Web 2.0 connections today include YouTube, Facebook and del.icio.us, to name but a few. (Huang, 2007, Stephens, 2007).

Web 2.0 technologies are heralding in an exciting evolution for public policy analysis because they are, according to Stephens (2007), mashing up the public policy analysis process and facilitating interventions in the policy process where in the past they may have only taken place sporadically.

Web 2.0 applications might also be creating a new platform through which public policy intervention, with real and sustained collaboration across otherwise structurally separated spheres of interest, might actually take place. It is the connection of entities and the social building blocks that they embody that will become very powerful tools within the public policy process in the very near future.

Salmon (2005) suggested that the effective implementation of Web 2.0 applications into contextualized environments is a five-point process: the integration of already existing technologies of the users; actively working towards knowledge construction; information exchange; socialization and support. As Stephens (2007) suggested, what is being created through Web 2.0 applications is an environment within which meaningful conversations by concerned entities on a particular interest can and will take place. The networks that are created by Web 2.0 applications are characterized by the fact that they build identities as a way of uniquely identifying people in the system, foster presence as a way of knowing who is online and available, identify relationships by demonstrating how users are related, facilitating conversations by enabling linkages where they might otherwise be discouraged, creation of groups, reputation building by allowing the status of those in the system to be recognized and sharing of ideas (Stephens, 2007).

What Web 2.0 brings to the public policy equation is engagement and immediacy. Web 2.0 applications allow for direct responses to take place among and between interested parties in the public policy process. In many cases Web 2.0 applications are becoming an indispensable tool in the life of constituent users suggesting that if you can find a way to tap into the general sentiment in these environments you can gain invaluable knowledge that might have otherwise been elusive because of the lack of a clear defined way to collect and deal with those sentiments (Phippen, 2006, Huang, 2007).

## **3. The Sociocritical Approach to Public Policy Analysis**

The sociocritical approach to public policy analysis is a means by which it becomes

possible to arrive at more accurate conclusions as to how and why a public policy might have developed in a particular way.

Ideally, as was suggested by Vincent Lemieux (1985), public policy formation should involve a process of conciliation between competing interests.

A sociocritical methodology embodies the structure of analysis proposed by Vincent Lemieux (1985) and a synoptic approach to policy analysis as proposed by Charles Lindblom (1977). This methodological approach is prefaced by the need to understand the multiplicity of influences on a public policy instrument in order to understand how it has developed.

A sociocritical methodology is more effective than other analytical approaches to public policy analysis because it facilitates an understanding of, “the way in which meaning-making in central public arenas—press, broadcasting, film, education, and the rest—is increasingly incorporated into and subjected to the structures and logic of capitalist enterprise, private property, commoditization and the cash nexus (Murdock, 1995, p.91).” As Graham Murdock (1995) suggested, in order to understand how public policy comes to manifest itself in a particular manner, the role of the various interveners in the public policy process must first be understood.

[T]he search for an answer has to begin with the recognition that the resources for cultural practice, both material and symbolic, are made available or withheld in structurally unequal ways. Moreover, these inequalities are linked in a complex way to people’s location within the system of production seen as a multidimensional space in which patterns of work labor, unemployment, and economic dependence intersect with patterns of residence and domestic divisions of labor (Murdock, 1995, p.93).

While in theory it should be possible to organize the interests of competing policy actors along the lines of their characteristics, such as whether they are state, market, or social actors. In the past this was not viable given the ambiguities and contradictions in the characteristics of the different interveners in the policy process. By chronologically examining the interventions of actors towards an object of public policy, possibly using Web 2.0 applications, it becomes possible to juxtapose a body of public policy interventions against one another thus facilitating an understanding of both how and why a particular public policy has evolved as it has.

It is useful to remember that public policy is never formed within a vacuum. Various aspects of the political, social and economic environment of the day influence the manner in which public policy decisions are arrived at. An unequal system of power and influence within the public policy process also influences the manner in which values and ideas are considered and acted upon (Simeon, 1976).

Within the public policy formation process the actions of the state are immanently important to business/industrial interests because the decisions made by the state on public policy issues have a fundamental impact on the way business is conducted.

A further element of the public policy contradiction, which needs to be addressed, is the fact that democratic capitalist states find themselves operating under the umbrella of what Max Weber termed professional bureaucracies. Bureaucracies have rationalized the way public policy is created (Miliband, 1968). Yet bureaucracies are also overwhelmed by the convergence and complexity of economic, political and cultural interests forcing them to rely on select interveners, those that they perceive to be closest to their own interests, in the public policy process to provide much needed advice.

In the context of public policy development, the state might best be understood as a clearinghouse of interests simultaneously juggling social, economic and political issues as it tries to create harmonious public policy. The relationship between the state and socio-cultural interests is complicated, if not completely obscured, by the placing of business imperatives ahead of all other issues (Bell, 1976). The role of the state in the public policy process, in an ideal situation, is to act as a countervailing force ensuring that the competing interests in the public policy process come together to produce viable outcomes.

Public policy as a technocratic process might be called, “a careful exposition of the constraints limiting the realm of possibilities and of the alternative actions open to the policymaker; through relating these constraints and actions to the preferences”(Paquet, 1989, p.173). What Paquet (1989) described was the public policy formation process as a variation of Graham Allison’s (1999) rational actor model. The problem with this model is that the actors are seldom truly rational and the environment that the policy process is born out of is seldom completely transparent. Thus what emerges is a situation that is disabling, effectively reducing the ability of some actors in the policy process to be effective in their intervention. Today, as governments find themselves engaged in ever-complicated exercises, any disengagement of actors is simply unacceptable (Phippen, 2006).

Vincent Lemieux (1985) proposes a way to get past the imperfections of the model put forward by Paquet (1989) and Allison (1999), suggesting that the function of the public policy process can be more accurately broken down into four stages: the identification of potential policy actors; the adjustment of those actors; the control of the actions; and the valuation of the actions.

Public policy as Lemieux defines it is the balancing of diverse and competing interests. The key to understanding the formation of public policy is to consider the wide array of interests involved in the policy process: the state; industrial; and public sector. Marc Raboy (1995) demonstrated, through the analysis of Canadian broadcast policy, that different policy interveners by virtue of their relationship to the state have different tactics to influence the policy process, which are in themselves influenced by the resources they possess.

Today many methodological approaches to public policy analysis tend to be instrumentalist in character. Instrumentalist approaches reduce public policy analysis to a simple function of who gets the state to accomplish specific things without considering

the implications of various interventions on the policy process over time (UNESCO, 1995, Lindquist, 1996, Landry, 1990).

To account for public policy outcomes it is necessary to understand how interveners in the public policy process have exerted their influence on the development and implementation of particular policies (Lindquist, 1996). The problem which besieges the general cognizance of public policy making, as Vincent Lemieux (1985) points out, is that public policy making is a complex process that demands more than the adherence to linear theory  $a+b=c$ . Lemieux suggested that regulation, which is translated to mean public policy in this analysis, consists of fashioning solutions to problems through the structure and function of the system itself. The problem that is continually being returned to though, is how can any public policy analysis link both the creative and analytical elements that arise out of economic, political and social forums as they interact with one another to give an accurate picture of what is happening in the public policy formation process.

### **3.1 Example of a Sociocritical Public Policy Analysis**

The analysis of the evolution of Canadian feature film policy at Telefilm Canada, that we conducted, looked broadly at three groups of interveners in the feature film policy process: the state, industry, and interested publics (Piecowy 2003). What was demonstrated, as had been previously proposed by Marc Raboy (1995) with respect to Canadian broadcast policy, was that the division of these intervention categories is by no means clear. The state for the purpose of this analysis was comprised of a variety of actors from the Ministry of Communication and Culture and later Heritage Canada, to Members of Parliament, and Telefilm Canada. Industry interveners were divided into two groups, those that were frontline producers of feature films and those who worked within the production industry. Interested publics were comprised of consumers as well as organizations that represent the creative components of the industry. In both cases the interested publics were comprised of interests that have been largely marginalized or excluded from within the feature film policy process.

Vincent Lemieux (1985) suggested that a way to assess the success of public policy is to look at the interventions into its formation in four stages: the identification of potential policy actors; the adjustment of those actors; the control of the actions; and the valuation of the actions.

Public policy as Lemieux defined it was a fine balancing act of diverse and competing interests and only by understanding these interests as represented by the various interventions of parties in the policy process itself could public policy be understood.

Canadian feature film policy as exemplified through Telefilm Canada's feature film fund exposed a fundamental dilemma in both the Canadian feature film policy specifically and the public policy process generally. This dilemma in simple terms is the inability of feature film policy to simultaneously reconcile the contradictory objectives of culture and commerce without one of the objectives being marginalized.

Canadian feature film policy can be characterized as a complex, often contradictory evolving relationship between cultural and commercial objectives attempting to appreciate the most basic questions about public policy: who is getting what, when, and how. The problem confronting Canadian feature film policy, as was suggested throughout our analysis, was that it is inextricably tied to multiple conflicting interests: Telefilm Canada and its competing mandates; feature film as an industry; and feature film as a cultural vehicle.

What was quickly realized was that the process of public policy analysis needs conceptual revision. The revision being suggested is simply a more relational approach considering the multi-layered relationship of actors across society (Lemieux, 1987). As was suggested by Raboy (1994, p.292) public policy must be, "grounded in a refined appreciation of the capacity and responsibility of national states, economic realities, and the social demands expressed by various publics."

The main questions implicit in the discussions that have taken place around feature film policy since before 1981 have been centered on the issue of the wants and needs of the Canadian state, the feature film industry and the public. In real terms the wants and needs of all parties to the public policy in question was unknown, biased and skewed in the direction of industrial/political interests. Is Canadian feature film policy leading to the creation of feature films that Canadians want and need as the policy would suggest? The simple answer is no. Why? Because there was no means to truly assessing the wants and needs of all constituents concerned.

While it has been suggested that public policy formation is the process of balancing competing interests, in the case of feature film policy, a balance of interventions did not exist. It also needs to be pointed out that the multiplicity of influences, which would seem to embody a cross-section of state, industry and interested publics in reality is very limited. Through checks and balances put in place via the public policy process itself, only the state and a very select group of industrial interests appeared to be involved in the formation of feature film policy.

The analysis of the development of Canadian feature film policy, as Stanbury (1987) and Miliband (1968) suggested in terms of their general discussions of public policy formation, exposed the degree to which the state and the Canadian feature film industry have generally worked together to set the terms under which feature film policy is created. It is the complicity of the state/business relationship, which has led to the marginalization of all other interests in the public policy process and the shifting of feature film policy from a cultural and commercial/industrial policy to principally a commercial/industrial one.

#### **4. Public Policy Analysis Reboot: some tentative conclusions**

Public policy, as Vincent Lemieux defined it, is nothing more than a fine balancing act of diverse and competing interests. Lemieux suggested that the only way to really understand public policy, and its variations, was by understanding the interests

represented by the various interveners in the public policy process.

Web 2.0 applications offer the possibility of turning public policy analysis on its head, and in the process, making sociocritical public policy analysis an even more powerful policy tool. Web 2.0 application allow for the positions of the various actors within the public policy process to be recast by facilitating a leveling of the individual ability of actors to communicate. It is our opinion that the public, as opposed to the state or industry interests, will in the very near future play a much stronger role in the public policy process simply because of the networking potential of Web 2.0 applications.

If policy decisions were disseminated via a WIKI like tool or using things like Facebook, the possibility for groups to interact via action TAGS and to actually trace their inputs to resultant actions becomes possible.

As has been suggested above, for a public policy analysis tool to be effective it must include the broad study of the actions and interactions of the varied interveners in the creation of a particular public policy object. In the past this has not happened because of the inability to identify and communicate to all interveners. Web 2.0 applications are creating a 'new consciousness' among the public allowing them to see how they and others can intervene in the policy process and track those interventions over a period of time facilitating longitudinal policy studies. There is no better example of the ability to engage the public than Facebook, which holistically brings individuals and their social networks together both as individuals, friends, and larger groups.

An effective public policy analysis tool must consider the differential treatment by the state of public policy interventions and the interplay between the state, industry and the public. Before Web 2.0 applications the state and industry worked very closely while the public found itself largely excluded from the public policy analysis process because of the public's lack of organization. But with Web 2.0 applications the public finds that it not only has a voice but a forum to effectively and easily organizing interested individuals.

What is needed for the analytical environment within which public policy lives to change? Simply the willingness of all parties engaged in the process to accept that engagement is not an option but a necessity. It is also imperative that public policy analysis embraces the idea that public policy itself is the outcome of a negotiation of conversations and these can be effectively facilitated today via Web 2.0 applications.

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