

# **Theatres of innovation: Political communication and contemporary public policy**

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the last few decades there has been decisive transformation in the modes of political communication. In the postwar era, the media, and especially television, delivered political information to a public that was assumed to be homogenous and receptive. By contrast, in contemporary society, the avenues of political communication are multiplying, and are aimed at audiences that are diverse, complex and fragmented. The new modes and means of communication have hailed, among other things, a rapid acceleration in the news cycle along with a corresponding contraction of political and journalistic timeframes. In addition, developments in information and communication technologies have created a global reach that recasts the character and dynamics of political and cultural environments.

This shift in political communication has profound political and sociological effects. Of particular significance is the fact that 'power relations among key message providers and receivers are being rearranged; the culture of political journalism is being transformed; and conventional meanings of "democracy" and "citizenship" are being questioned and rethought' (Blumler & Kavanagh 1999:209).

A crucial part of this process is the growing professionalization of political advocacy and advice, as governments, political parties, and political actors have become engrossed by the imperative of professional communication. The earlier focus was simply on informing and persuading the public. Now the prime emphasis is concerned with managing the media, media image and diverse audience (constituency) sentiment. As a consequence, political consultants and communication professionals play an integral role in the political calculus driving party competition.

The expanding role of professional political communications in political processes and the political system is part of a far more profound trend in which the media has become the space of contemporary politics, rather than simply a medium (e.g. Castells 2000, 2001; Edwards 2001; Luhmann 2000; Meyer 2002). A critical dimension of this larger trend is that media logics begin to impinge on the political system and its specific set of operational rules. For instance, while political deliberation and processes require time to develop, media logic curtails time according to an imperative of immediacy and abbreviation, reducing issues and debate to discrete discontinuous items that are readily subject to fad opinion formation. Consequently, the more politics is absorbed into the space of media, the more political action is legitimised via the rules of the media system. In this scenario, political consultants and professional communicators are no longer backroom advisors but shift to centre stage (Johnson 2001; Morris 1999). Consequently there is a widespread recognition among government, opposition parties, non-government organizations, pressure groups, and business that to participate effectively in the political game requires professional media and advocacy management (Novotny 2000).

This prominence involves more than just political choreography or tactics. For example, where once party forums, pressure groups and other intermediary actors contributed to policy development and offered conduits for the expression of societal concerns, the new professionals access society directly through highly recursive survey techniques and feed them into policy, which is immediately sensitised to media strategy. Conversely this is a common strategy mobilized in response to

widespread citizen disaffection about public policy outcomes. Greater public consultation and communication in policy development is seen as a way to re-legitimise governmental action. The new professionals play a pivotal role in promoting and facilitating this strategy. In the process new kinds of policy rationalities and practices begin to develop that seem to be eclipsing older types and styles of policy formation and expertise.

This paper will investigate the new relationships that are emerging between contemporary trends in political communication and public policy. In particular it will identify and analyse how these relationships are extending beyond the traditional domain of political communication as information and persuasion to engulf governance. This has profound implications for the form of policy and more emphatically for the practice of policy making. The import of this trend will first be elaborated upon within a more general account of the contemporary recasting of political professionalism. This will be linked to the emergence of political communications as a distinct governmental domain working according to a recursive informational logic. Some key features of this new political communications especially in relation to consultation and innovation will be highlighted. These new forms of expertise and knowledge production will be explored in terms of a synthesis of strategic and symbolic action in theatres of innovation.

## **THE RECASTING OF POLITICAL PROFESSIONALISM**

In his classical account of modern politics, Max Weber identifies two key attributes that distinguish the political professional. First, the party leader and the party bureaucrat are economically dependent on politics. Second, the specific competence of the leader and the bureaucrat is a specialist knowledge of political processes and mechanisms unique to the political sphere. This can be contrasted to a newly emerging form of political professionalism associated with a shift in the centre of gravity of political organization away from party members and activists to voters. In this process the party takes its cue with reference to the electorate of opinion thus displacing one of its more traditional functions as a focus of ideological identification. The older form of mass party rallied support and built solidarity through adherence to an ideological position and a specific political culture. The new party-political problematic is how to generate a cohesion of supporters and voters construed out of the identification and resolution of diverse interests and perspectives. While the political leader remains central, there is now a far greater reliance on emotional attachment to the leader's persona than on the substance, and cultural and ideological commitments to the program that the leader may propagate. A key imperative of the contemporary party is to identify potential voters, how to reach them, and how to draw their support. A different kind of political expertise is required to deal with this reorientation and is supplied by a new cluster of political professionals including political consultants, communications and public relations experts, and pollsters (Panebianco 1988; Mancini 1999; Ward 1991; Webb 1992).

There are profound differences between these new political professionals and the traditional party advisers and bureaucrats. The new professionals' expertise is not limited to the sphere of politics. Their expertise in advertising and public relations know-how, media and communications competencies, social research and polling

techniques are applied to other fields as well. Indeed, many of these new professionals draw a greater part of their income from areas other than politics. Politics is but one field of operation in which they employ their skills. In the US political consultancy is a robust industry with a strong professional profile (see for example the activities of the American Association of Political Consultants). The rapid expansion and growing sophistication of techniques and instruments used in this field has led to a market of expertise offered by this new breed of strategic consultants (see *inter alia*: Farrell et al. 2001; Hecló 2000; Johnson 2000, 2001; Lees-Marshment 2001a, 2001b; Mancini 1999; Mann 2002; Mills 1986; Lilleker & Negrine 2002; Negrine & Lilleker 2002; Novotny 2000; Ornstein 2002; Palmer 2002; Thurber 1998, 2000). Consequently the packaging and marketing of policies and politicians has become an increasingly professional business, beyond the exclusive hold of leaders and activists.

### **Instruments and techniques**

Political consultants and professional communicators are now crucial players in election campaigns and the ongoing business of government. They apply a range of sophisticated techniques to modern political practice, including precision polling, focus groups, opposition research and response strategies, speech writing and campaign messages, branding and media packaging (Gaber 2000; Gandy 2001; Johnson 2000). These techniques are mobilized for the purposes of traditional political communication such as persuasion and information. However they are also a means by which to research and test political 'products' and 'anti-products' – policies, strategies, party and politician image – for the political market place, especially for electorally sensitive constituencies. In the process, these products can be tailored for specific target audiences. This cycle of market research becomes particularly intense during election campaigns, usually on a daily basis through the use of focus groups. The strategic focus of political marketing is less about facts and figures, objective performance and policy detail, and more about image and presentation. The lingua franca is emotion, moods and feelings, with focus group research providing the essential data for this new 'designer' and packaged politics (Franklin 1994; Hamilton 1995; Kavanagh 1995; Maarek 1992; O' Cass 2001; O'Shaughnessy 2002; Scammell 1995, 1998, 1999).

Key instruments in the repertoire of the new professionals are the various techniques of accessing and gauging societal attitudes and sentiment. When party organizations stretched across societies, they were conduits for information transfers, a means by which to monitor moods and sentiment, and a crucial forum for reciprocal communication between voters and party activists. The changing function of party diminishes its access to this sort of information and two-way communication. In the wake of this shift, polls and focus groups offer an alternative mode to circulate information and to test opinion, emotions and perceptions. While systematic polling dates back to the 1930s, it has become more and more a central component in the calculations of political parties and political decision makers. Equally, the social bases of mass-based parties involved a fairly undifferentiated set of social divisions that clustered around identities of interests, values and political cultures. In contemporary advanced societies, these social bases have fragmented into far greater horizontal social differentiation and sectoral publics with a corresponding

proliferation and segmentation of perceptions, moods, requests, needs and values. Developments in polling techniques and technologies offer ways to access and respond to this new social differentiation. More than this they enable the generation of rapid response strategies given the significant contraction in turn-around time in data collection and analysis (Mancini 1999: 238-239; Ward 2003b).

The growth in the use of these techniques outside election periods is indicative of the expansion of political marketing in the phenomenon of the 'permanent campaign' (Hecló 2000, 2001; Sparrow & Turner 2001). But the use of these techniques is not limited simply to an ongoing popularity stakes. More and more they are mobilized in the production and monitoring of policy in various ways. This has given rise to a growing body of research on how 'public opinion' impacts on policy making processes at a number of levels (see e.g. Burnstein & Linton 2002; Cohen 2002a, 2002b; Cook *et al* 2002; Hills 2002; Ohren & Bernstein 2001; Shah *et al* 2002; Soroka 2003). The polling industry itself has even investigated the question of what the public thinks the role of public opinion should be in policy making (see Brodie *et al* 2001).

One of the central debates in the scholarly literature revolves around the questions of whether policy is increasingly poll-driven or not, of whether politicians pander to public opinion and if so how and to what degree (for an overview see Manza *et al* 2002; Manza & Cook 2002). Robert Shapiro and Lawrence Jacobs mount a strong argument against the political pandering thesis maintaining that policy is not fundamentally poll-driven. However they do not dismiss the use of polls in the policy process. Indeed they argue that decision-makers use 'crafted talk' that draws on polling information to convince the public that policy is contiguous with their moods and needs, even when the policy has its origins elsewhere (Jacobs & Shapiro 2000; Shapiro & Jacobs 2001).

### **Independent policy agencies**

The other critical dimension concerning policy and the new professionalism involves the rise and proliferation of independent agencies engaged in research on public policy issues, the crafting of policy and the influencing of public opinion, operating at national and global levels (see *inter alia* Bakvis 1997; Denham & Garnett 1999; Smith 1991; Stone 1996, 2000a, 2000b; Stone *et al.* 1998; Struyk 2002). These agencies include think tanks, independent policy institutes and political consultancy firms. Increasingly governments, parties and other organizations have drawn on these agencies services and in some case become heavily reliant upon them for sourcing policy and its development. This contrasts with one of the important functions performed by the mass-based party in the development of positions and policy proposals. Indeed, in the cut and thrust of exchange and debate about policy, the older style party constituted its identity and articulated its course of action (Mancini 1999: 240). In this sense the outsourcing of policy formulation can be seen to contribute to an instrumentalization of party identity and direction.

Beyond this, these 'independent' policy agencies are not just a source of expertise, research, and advice on policy issues. While some are notable for their strong ideological orientations, many become independent sources of political pressure

themselves, propagating research on policy issues, setting policy agendas, and cultivating communities of opinion. This raises the issue of the blurring of research capacity and policy advocacy, especially in relation to the status of outsourced government policy. As in the case of the insinuation of professional communicators into governmental communication, this professionalization of policy through outsourcing poses the question of the accountability of non-official expertise in a democratic polity (see Considine 2002). Moreover, the new political professionalism seems to be indicative of a broader trend in which the distinction between public and private rationalities and instruments is tending to break down. For instance, the phenomenon of the permanent campaign clearly illustrates this smudging, if not elimination, of the former demarcation of the contestation for political office (campaigning) and the public exercise of legitimate power (governing) into a continuum (see Hecló 2000: 10). This broad trend has significant ramifications for governmental action.

## POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AND GOVERNANCE

Political communication has become a central preoccupation of governance (see Bang 2003a; Ward 2003a). This is symptomatic of contemporary network society in which information is the key productive resource. In the economic sphere, this means that the productivity and competitiveness of economic units of all kinds is determined by the capacity to generate knowledge and to process and manage information. In the older industrial paradigm, the value of information resided in the capacity to operationalise knowledge into material processes. By contrast, in the current era the creation and circulation of information becomes the end in itself, information working on information. Moreover, flows of information are fundamental across all areas of social action in network society. These flows are structured in networks of connection that generate and diffuse power. Power tends to become de-linked from older institutional forms and relocated in the shifting codes of information and images of representation and identity. In this sense, the new problematic of power revolves around the capacity to manage and control information flows (Castells 2000; Crozier 2002; Graber 2003; Melucci 1996a; Urry 2003). This is simultaneously communicative and regulatory in scope, and positions political communication as a distinct 'governmental domain' that is ubiquitous (see Hansen et al 2001).

The suffusion of political communication across the range of governmental operations signals a dramatic shift in the definition and understanding of political communication. Hitherto the system of political communication has been understood to be the construction, distribution and reception of political information for the purposes of constructing alliances, winning consent and creating meaning. In this formulation political communication was viewed as a *medium* through which information and persuasion was conveyed and exchanged. This is indicative of an exchange logic that construes communication in terms of 'things' being exchanged between distinct entities from here to there. By contrast, contemporary political communication is a *mode* of operation, in which information flows transform things and entities, and in the process, transgress former boundaries. This is more of an informational logic that reorientates governmental rationalities and practices in fundamental ways.

In this sense, contemporary political communications can be understood as a kind of governmentality, though in a different register to Michel Foucault's panoptic principle. Thomas Mathieson's discussion of viewer society offers some insight in this regard. In Mathieson's formulation, viewer society is organized around a 'synoptic' principle according to which the extensive system of mass media enables 'the many to see and contemplate the few' in charge or the image portrayed (Mathieson 1997: 219). This generates an imperative to manage internal and external communications in business, public administration and other organizations. Informational professionals provide the necessary expertise and come to play an integral part in the organization's functioning (Mathieson 1997: 227). The communications operations of organizations are hubs or nodes through which internal and external information flows are managed. Communication and management therefore tend elide into each other in this new rationality.

In the realm of governmental action, this new communications rationality permeates all operations and becomes an essential dimension of governance. By contrast to the traditional division of policy into sectors, political communications has no one policy focus or specific target, operating on an inter-sectoral plane as a central referent through which an array of policy sectors can be organized. In this sense, political communication is orientated both internally and externally. It is a means to reorientate social coordination and the connections with and among citizens. Equally it is a strategy that is transforming existing public sector organization and practice. For instance, the increasing use of political consultants and other communications professionals, new information technologies, and external advisors is assimilating new types of knowledge and expertise into the public sector. The generic qualities of this process shape a politics beyond the state (Hansen et al 2001: 167-169).

One of the critical issues for contemporary political communication is citizen disaffection with governmental action. The growing demand for greater transparency and input in government activities is often cast as a process of democratisation understood as the growing input of different interest groups on political decision making, thus improving the quality of public service and increasing responsiveness, and in the process, legitimacy. This interpretation works with an older notion of political communication. It tends to miss the ways that the new informational logic is re-problematizing notions of democracy, accountability and legitimacy. For example greater flows of information do not necessarily mean a more democratic diffusion of power for they also involve greater opportunities for the management of information flows. Similarly, customary distinctions such as public versus private are blurred and/or rendered obsolete by this new informational logic as informational loops are churned and codes are transformed. This is epitomized in the various practices of the new political professionalism. In this frame, societal demands for greater transparency and responsiveness can be seen as intrinsic to political communication as a distinct governmental domain. Information flow is set as the legitimating rationale of governmental action that simultaneously inscribes the regulatory relationship between citizens and government as communication.

This insight parallels Henrik Bang's recent research on the effort to forge new forms of sovereignty to cope with self-reference and complexity in contemporary Western

democracies. Bang calls this effort 'culture governance,' arguing that the notion's scope extends across both the political regime and political community. Culture governance is a response to the current situation of high modern societies, which have 'grown so complex, dynamic and differentiated that no expert system can any longer rule itself solely by exercising hierarchical and bureaucratic control over people' (Bang 2003b: 243-4). According to Bang:

Today there is growing awareness in systems that rule must be flattened out and exercised in a more dialogical and co-operative manner. The recognition is spreading that unless one's decision centres are willing to listen to and learn from members and environments, a system has little chance to acquire the power and knowledge that it needs in order to go on and evolve in the world as a relatively effective and coherent whole. High modern systems, public, private or voluntary, are shifting towards a code of governing in and through the exercise of self- and co-governance (Bang 2003b: 244).

However Bang cautions against confusing the effects of this systems shift with a push for greater democratisation. The impetus to increase dialogue and co-operation is identified as a system imperative to realize some kind of unity under the new conditions of dynamic complexity, conditions which older forms of societal coordination are no longer able to manage. Bang notes that culture governance 'aims at empowering as many people as possible, not primarily for their own sake but to get them to help their organizations to get the minimal wholeness, coherence and effectiveness that they need, but which they can no longer supply by their old steering means (hierarchy, bureaucracy, corporatism, normative consensus, free exchange, solidarity or whatever)' (Bang 2003b: 247).

## **FROM UNILATERAL TO MULTILATERAL COMMUNICATION**

Two recent reports, one by the OECD on policy consultation and communication and the other prepared for the European Commission on innovation, offer examples that can highlight some key dimensions of the notion of political communication as a distinct governmental domain and its informational logic. The OECD report attempts to confront the problem of citizen disaffection using an older model of political communication, that is, one focused primarily on informing and persuading the public. In the process, it demonstrates the limitations of the exchange logic approach to new informational problems. By contrast the European Commission report is imbued with a recursive informational approach. The European Commission report is instructive on two levels. First, it sets out to transform innovation policy into a general principle of policy innovation according to an informational logic. Second, it casts the governance dimension of this transformation as inherently a communications issue. Though limited in its elaboration it embraces new modes of policy formation according to an informational logic.

### **Consultation in an older register**

The 1997 OECD report, *Consultation and Communications*, is concerned with the integration of multiple interests into policy-making through greater citizen participation as well as with government management of media relations. The report canvasses the typical consultative strategies ranging from old and familiar activities

like town hall meetings, public hearings and inquiries through to the use of focus groups, citizens advisory committees, and e-forums (OECD 1997: 21-27). The overriding theme is that public consultation is crucial for revitalizing citizens' sense of political efficacy, and raising the quality of public debate, all of which is essential to generate consensus on complex and long term matters.

*Consultation and Communications* works with a notion of public communication based on a rational model of deliberation and governance. It assumes that communication is clear and rational unless there is interference and distortion generated by the media, especially in the form of sensationalism and trivialisation. However it does not mention the changing dynamics involved in contemporary policy making. For instance it conveys a sense that if policy makers exert greater efforts to listen to the diverse concerns of the citizenry, and properly explain and clearly articulate policy without media distortion, then the problem of citizen disaffection will begin to be redressed. In other words the solution is a better-informed public who will thus be able to better understand the merits of policy decisions (OECD: 31-4).

In a manner, this is an attempt to revamp an older model of public policy making by simply adding media savvy and more consultation. The older model worked with clearly defined functional roles within a fairly static and hermetic policy chain that followed a number of linear steps from problem identification, through expert advice, research and formulation, to promotion and implementation. Consultation, however limited, was a means to identify and incorporate interest positions into policy in return for adherence to and legitimacy of policy. Communication as input was the registration of interests and communication as output was informing the public about policy. Therefore in this model public communication was understood in terms of an exchange logic in which immutable 'things' – facts, values, interests – are transmitted and processed.

Nonetheless, this is a unilateral system of communication in which policy is seen to emanate ultimately from the decision-maker. The language is monological and privileges the decision-maker who is assumed to have all the pertinent expertise and information at hand, and thus best positioned to formulate policy. An appeal for greater public consultation and sharper media competency does not really come to grips with how this assumption has become less and less viable, politically and sociologically. Moreover, the older model with its immutable exchange logic offers little analytical purchase on the dramatic transformations underway in the relationship between expertise, decision-making and society.

### **Expertise and decision-making under new conditions**

Angela Liberatore (2001) provides some detailed insight into these changing conditions. In particular she outlines three novel components in the contemporary relationship between knowledge and decision-making. First, there is the paradox that science is increasingly called upon to legitimate political decisions while at the same time the legitimacy of exclusive claims to scientific 'truth' is under duress. Second, knowledge production and decision-making has shifted in part at least from the public to the private sector even though societal problems remain public (e.g. health, environment) or have an impact on citizens' private life (e.g. reproductive

choices, privacy). Third, the growing call for greater citizen participation has the potential not only to enrich the relationship between decision-making and scientific knowledge but also to further destabilize what is already a faltering relationship.

Liberatore identifies the growing complexity of contemporary societies and the reorientation of democratic arrangements given citizen disaffection as two of the main contributing factors in the new relationship between knowledge and decision-making. The condition of complexity intensifies uncertainty and thus increases the demand for knowledge in decision-making. Yet at the same time, there is the recognition that complex conditions cannot be brought under unilateral control. Equally, citizen disaffection leads to a quest for new types of accountability often pluralistic in form that open up possibilities in which non-official and competing voices demand the right to be heard in decision-making. The confluence of these two factors – complexity and new forms of accountability – leads to an important outcome: ‘the expansion of the previously relatively closed networks which provided expert advice to decision makers – both public and private – to more open knowledge networks serving as input to public debate and deliberation’ (Liberatore 2001: 118).

This marks the shift away from the older exchange logic to an informational logic. In this new setting, political and public communication is more than simply a consultation and information exercise in the earlier unilateral sense. The circulatory system of open knowledge or informational networks is multilateral communication. It should be noted that recent OECD research appears to be trying to work with this shift though still within the problematic of greater transparency and accountability (see e.g. OECD 2001; compare EC 2001, 2003). The European Commission report on innovation moves beyond this citizen disaffection problematic and takes on the issue of multilateral communication in a more positive register. It promotes the idea of the looping of innovation policy developments into a general principle of policy innovation given the contemporary condition in which information is the key productive resource of society. To this extent, the report provides insight into the recursive and creative aspects of new informational logics and contemporary political communication.

### **Innovation as policy creativity**

Published in 2002, *Innovation Tomorrow* is a report prepared for the European Commission on innovation policy. Its approach to innovation in a knowledge-based economy extends innovation policy well beyond older style discussion of industry policy. Innovation is cast as an all-pervasive principle that needs to be developed across all policy areas. This is described as ‘third generation innovation policy’ in which the imperatives of the knowledge-based economy transform the character of innovation per se. The traditional components for innovation – research, science and technology, enterprise and ingenuity – are all cited as essential. But the report emphasizes that innovation now depends on the integration of new forms of knowledge with intellectual and artistic creativity.

The idea of third-generation innovation policy is cast as the next step in the development of innovation policy more generally. The report identifies first

generation innovation policy with the concept of a linear process of innovation development. This refers to the steps in classical industrial development starting with scientific research and experimentation through successive stages to the point where the new knowledge is transformed into commercial applications that penetrate the economic sphere. Second-generation innovation policy is distinguished from the first in the recognition that innovation chains are complex involving feedback loops in the various stages of the process tracked in the first generation model. Consequently, in second-generation innovation policy there is a strong emphasis on augmenting two-way communication across innovation chains and innovation systems in order to improve decisions on research, technological adoption and implementation, and commercialisation.

Third-generation innovation policy endeavours to radically crank-up this emphasis on two-way communication into the general mode of operation. The coordination of policy is elevated into a recursive system of information flows with innovation as a core principle in and across all policy areas. This new recursive system of policy coordination is seen to require new rationalities and practices. Specifically it requires new forms of collaboration among various types of actors given that no single actor or group can possess the range or depth to integrate all the pieces into coherent whole. In this sense, the new approach is far more than pronouncements from on high on new policy. It demands that key stakeholders be identified and involved in the process, and that interfaces be developed that enable knowledge pooling, learning from experience and evidence, and further coordination of policy initiatives. The process is characterised as essentially interactive with leadership and vision provided by 'high profile and high level innovation "champions" sustaining it' (EC 2002:12).

The report concludes that public knowledge about innovation in general needs to be cultivated, a task that can be facilitated by improved public communication about innovation programs. This is linked to the recommendation for greater involvement of the public in policy and decision-making. Confidence in regulatory agencies cannot be assumed and thus 'must be earned and seen to be earned.' The key message here is the importance of openness and participation, and the need to instigate multiple ways of enabling this to happen (EC 2002: 91).

*Innovation Tomorrow* is driven by the presupposition that innovation working on innovation is an imperative given the complexity of contemporary advanced economies. The guiding principle of innovation is innovation itself rather than some postulate of best practice. In this recursive mode, policy making is cast less as a process of designing blueprints and more as the churning of informational loops, as multilateral communication (cf. Culpepper 2002). Hence the emphasis on two-way communication between policy makers and the governed is not an optional extra or simply about the selling of policy, but inherent to the policy formation process itself.

What is left underdeveloped in this report is an elaboration on the meaning and role of intellectual and artistic creativity in the development of innovation as a general principle of policy and as a general mode of practice. It is not completely clear what policy experimentation involves and what the implications may be for the shape and operations of institutional arrangements. While there appears to be some suggestion

that innovation as creativity should become integral to policy making per se, there is no clear delineation of what this would entail. The report notes that: 'Enterprise is at the heart of successful innovation, and not just in the private sector. Entrepreneurial attitudes – even if not precisely identical motivations – underpin much innovation in public sector organizations' (EC 2002: 14). Nonetheless, this comment is taken no further, and there is no sense of what the entrepreneurial attitude means specifically in the informational age nor what constitutes an 'innovation champion.'

### **Transformative effects of informational logics**

These gaps in *Innovation Tomorrow* can be attributed to what appears to be a restricted understanding of how informational logics and recursive systems of knowledge work on themselves and transform themselves. This effect is not limited to knowledge in the narrow sense. Pre-existing procedures, processes and institutional arrangements are also knowledge technologies and thus equally susceptible to this recursive action. It may push these forms to their absolute limit or indeed transform them into something entirely different. The creative moment in innovation is only realized after the fact and cannot be foreseen in a plan or blueprint.

This intimates the distance that separates the industrial model – management by objectives and exchange logic – from contemporary 'communications management.' Actors, agents, citizens and governors are also susceptible to the transformative effects of informational logic. The self-image of the contemporary entrepreneur exemplifies this *in extremis*. The new enterprising persona self-consciously undertakes the creation and recreation of the self. Innovation is not simply a good idea in this persona's lexicon but the oxygen of their existence. Projects and collaborations come and go, and any one particular project is primarily an opportunity to develop one's employability, that is, one's mobility and plasticity (see Boltanski & Chiapello 1999; Melucci 1996b; Sennett 1998; Urry 2000a, 2000b).

This type of contingency is one of the very few absolutes inherent to the informational logics of innovation. Among the various competencies of the new communications specialists is the capacity to 'manage' this contingency for their clients (and themselves). This communications expertise is highly strategic yet it is unencumbered by ongoing objectives. Objectives are values that are created by information flows, which can shift and change extremely rapidly. While this generates a new kind of management problem – the strategic control of information nodes and hubs – it is also a virtue for policy innovation. Contingency opens up the space for creativity by unfettering communication from a necessary goal. Intellectual and artistic creativity can thus engage in policy experimentation. This suggests that political communications as a distinct governmental domain is a strategy that attempts to manage contingency as well as cultivating it. Rosabeth Moss Kanter's work on business and the Internet can help to unpack this seeming paradox.

### **POLICY INNOVATION AS THEATRE SPORTS?**

Kanter's recent research has focused on what makes a company a 'pacesetter' as opposed to a 'laggard' (see Kanter 2001). In her study of how businesses have made

the Internet an integral part of their operations, she contrasts the closed-mindedness and hierarchical laggard company to the pacesetter company, which is open to experimentation, project oriented, highly customer responsive, and involves more of its members creatively in processes of experimentation and innovation. This parallels the contrast between the exchange logic of older forms of political communication and the informational logics drawn above.

Kanter schematises the differences between the two modes of operation using a base metaphor of the performing arts and the theatre in particular. The laggard company is associated with a traditional model of theatre where a play is meticulously pre-written, parts are cast and rehearsed repeatedly until they meet a level of quality and predictability, and only then is the play performed before an audience. A company working within this model aims to assemble the best possible plan, which can then be operationalised into a predetermined course of execution that includes a predictable set of events and a specific final goal. The whole process is tightly scripted and controlled with predictable steps taken and the inevitable unvarying conclusion reached.

This traditional model is contrasted with the action of the pacesetters that do not act to a plan or a script, but *create the plan by acting*. In this situation improvisation generates innovation:

The improvisational model throws out the script, brings in the audience, and trusts the actors to be unpredictable – that is, to innovate. Innovation has an inherently improvisational aspect, and writers have long used the metaphor of improvisation in jazz and rock music to describe the actions of innovators on project teams. The metaphor of improvisational theatre takes this a step further. It shifts attention from the dynamics among members of a project team to the way in which an organization as a whole can become an arena for staging experiments that can transform the overall strategy (Kanter 2002: 76; compare Considine 2002: 29; Eisenberg 1990; Zwerin 1997).

Although her focus is on the private company, this does not necessary delimit the suggestiveness of Kanter's schema in relation to public policy innovation, especially given the contemporary elision of business management perspectives into thinking on public sector management. In this regard, the crucial point to highlight in this approach is the invocation of a form of symbolic-interpretative action in performance. The theatre metaphor and the improvisational model in particular provide a notion of innovation that emerges out of self-transformation (of strategies *and* actors) and the pushing of set-plays beyond themselves.

Nonetheless, Kanter notes that improvisation without a clear theme is nothing but chaos and messiness – thus a theme, an expression of 'what,' is required to enable creativity. By contrast, too many stage directions cramps the process, and 'actors don't have the freedom to adjust to audience's response' (Kanter 2002: 78). The point is to fire up the imagination, to unleash chance and serendipity, to license the transgression from set paths, for this is seen to be how innovation arises. The improvisational theatre is about the encouragement of action. Any limitation on action – rigid structures, behaviours, and attitudes – needs to be jettisoned.

Improvisers must be prepared to act without all the information they require, and have the 'faith' to let the play begin.

The growing ubiquity of new informational logics in contemporary governance would suggest that this model of the improvisational theatre might not be quite as alien as it first appears. The degree to which policy innovation becomes theatre sports remains an empirical question. Nonetheless, the characterization of innovation in this manner provides some avenues to explore for the conceptualization of knowledge production in the informational era. Some concluding remarks will briefly intimate what this may involve.

## CONCLUSION

Kanter's recourse to the theatre metaphor seems to be casting about for a kind of knowledge production different to that associated with technical-rational expertise. The practice of artistic improvisation grapples with the idea of innovation working on innovation. This certainly echoes the practices and rationalities of the new political professionals, and most notably of political consultants and communications specialists. The political choreography of these professionals is also primarily a symbolic form of knowledge production that takes very seriously the business of politics as theatre. Both Kanter's improvisers and the new political communications experts set actors, sentiment, feeling and focus into motion, into creative interaction.

But in other ways the improviser and the communications specialist are the flip side of each other. Kanter's improviser dispenses with the script and stage management in order to give free flow to imagination, to enable innovation. Meaning is opened up to new and novel inflections in experimentation. By contrast, one of the major tasks of the new political communicator is to cultivate specific meanings in the public's imagination, to create the immediate identity of the stage production of politics with the social reality. Here there is a process of anticipating meaning through research (polling) and experimentation (focus groups) in order to try and manage the flow of shifting associations. Nonetheless, both mobilize an aesthetic of performance that places bodies in action – speech and all the other semiotic systems (compare Meyer 2002: 66; Mayhew 1997: 269).

In one sense there is nothing new here given the long history of the 'theatre' of political action, the exemplary case usually being the agonistics of the Athenian polis and its links to both tragedy and athletics (see Edelman 1964; Euben 1990). But what is significant about the contemporary condition is a type of knowledge production that folds instrumental and strategic logics into symbolic modes of action. This is a marked departure from the earlier Weberian technical-rational model in which there was, in principle at least, a clear demarcation between instrumental and strategic rationality, and symbolic action (see Edelman 1971). The new mode of communicative expertise trades in a form of knowledge production that is simultaneously strategic and symbolic (see Chiapello & Fairclough 2002).

This new expertise is practiced in diverse ways, from the overt manipulation of spin doctoring to highly creative and reflexive forms of management and policy formation. Information flow is crucial here, effected by some form or other of

recursive knowledge formation. On the level of societal coordination, this is contiguous with the push towards multilateral communication in public, private and voluntary sectors in complex democratic systems, as Henrik Bang's research has demonstrated. In network analysis, hubs and nodes in information flows are pivotal to the exercise of power. This would suggest that the new communications expertise – spin doctoring, political consultancy, communications management, policy facilitation, innovation championing – is more than simply an addendum to existing specialisations in contemporary forms of social coordination. A key task for research would be to examine how new types of recursive knowledge formation are transforming specific institutional and organizational arrangements, and what power shifts may be involved. Aside from anything else this would help to clarify the ways in which 'political communication' has moved beyond simply 'propaganda or persuasion' into the central core of contemporary forms of governance.

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