Public Policy Theory as a Framework for Studying Information Policy: The Case of Canada's Coalition for Public Information

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Public policy theories are proving useful in a study of federal policy making for the Canadian 'information highway'. Preliminary analysis of the role of Canada's Coalition for Public Information (CPI) in the policy process indicates that existing theories such as John Kingdon's policy process theory and the work of William Coleman, Grace Skogstad and Paul Pross in policy community and pressure group theories contribute to a greater understanding of the information policy process in Canada. Kingdon provides a means for setting the procedural and temporal elements of the phenomenon; Coleman, Skogstad and Pross describe the composition and relationships of the community of institutions within a defined policy domain that vie to have their interests addressed in public policy. Analysis to-date indicates that the roles of the federal government and the private sector greatly overshadowed that of CPI.

Des theories de politique publique s'avèrent utile pour étudier l'élaboration des politiques fédérales sur l'autoroute de l'information canadienne. L'anaylse préliminaire du rôle de la Coalition Canadienne de l'Information Publique (CPI) dans le processus politique indique que les théories comme la théorie du processus politique de John Kingdon et les travaux de William Coleman, Grace Skogstad et Paul Pross sur les théories de communauté politique et de groupes de pression, contributent à une meilleure compréhension du processus de la politique de l'information au Canada. Kingdon fournit les moyens pour établir les procédures et les éléments temporels du phénomène; Coleman, Skogstad et Pross décrivent la composition et les rapports de la communauté des institutions à l'intérieur d'un domaine politique défini qui tentent de faire reconnaître leurs intérêts dans la politique publique. Jusqu'ic l'analyse indique que le rôle du

gouvernement fédéral et le rôle du secteur privé éclipsent largement celui du CPI.

Introduction

The work of public policy researchers has advanced the understanding of the public policy environment at the institutional level in Canada. This paper describes research in progress investigating a public interest group in the federal policy-making process for the information highway, two public policy theories are proving particularly useful as preliminary conceptual frameworks, and as a means of understanding the series of events observed during the study. Qualitative methods including participant observation, key informant interviews, and grounded theory methodology guide data gathering and analysis. Introducing existing public policy theories into the analysis is providing an initial support from which theoretical ideas may develop to extend the existing theories.

The public interest group under study, Canada's Coalition for Public Information (CPI), was the outcome of more than five years of Ontario Library Association discussions about the future of libraries. CPI was formed in the fall of 1993 by the Ontario Library Association in anticipation of increasing information policy activities related to communications technology. In its attempt to assure that public interests would be an integral part of policy decisions, CPI found itself struggling to enter the federal policy milieu populated by politicians, bureaucrats, private sector corporations and a few other nonprofit organizations. The mood of the time was attuned to government deficit reduction, private sector deregulation, increased competition, and globalization. CPI was an 'outsider' to the world of Ottawa lobbying, in more ways than one: the group had few connections in the federal government, was located in Toronto, had members with comparatively little experience in lobbying the federal government and was dedicated to promoting the public interest.

From the outset of this research, CPI was clearly at a disadvantage in realizing its goals. This observation informed the direction of research questions toward understanding the context in which CPI

:cund itself, as well as CPI's strengths and weaknesses, the strategies
:: adopted, and the impressions CPI made in the community. This
study contributes to public policy research in the areas of the infor-
mation policy process and policy community theories. In practical
terms, the study strives to illuminate the phenomenon of participa-
:ion in the information policy process for nonprofit groups whose
goal is social and cultural provisions in future public policies.

This paper examines two theories in public policy: the policy proc-
ess as defined by John Kingdon (1984) and policy community theory
described by William Coleman and Grace Skogstad (1990), and Paul
Pross (1992). Thereafter it explores the usefulness of these theories
as they relate to the Canadian policy environment and the role of
CPI.

Policy Process Theory

John Kingdon characterizes the tendency toward linear descriptions
of the policy process[1] as Adrastic oversimplification (Kingdon 1984,
3). Kingdon's model diverges from the traditional model of phases
with his identification of streams that explain how an issue goes
from the public agenda to the government agenda and finally to the
government decision agenda. He describes three independent streams
of policy-making activities that must come together at some point
to progress from the public agenda to the government agenda.
Kingdon claims that none of these streams nor their related activities
necessarily follow in a logical fashion.

> Agendas are not first set and then alternatives gener-
> ated; instead, alternatives must be advocated for a long
> period before a short-run opportunity presents itself
> on an agenda. Events do not necessarily proceed in
> similar order in several different case studies; instead,
> many things happen separately in each case, and be-
> come coupled at critical points (Kingdon 1984, 215).

Kingdon defines the government agenda as "the list of subjects or
problems to which governmental officials, and people outside of
government closely associated with those officials, are paying some
serious attention at any given time" (Kingdon 1984, 3). More specifi-

cally, he differentiates between the government agenda, a list of subjects getting serious attention, and the decision agenda, a list of subjects within the governmental agenda that are up for an active decision. Problems are accompanied by a set of alternatives from which the government can choose (Kingdon 1984, 4).

Issues can come from many sources, inside or outside government. Bureaucrats, politicians, interest groups, and the general public can be sources for agendas and alternatives. Issues and alternatives may originate in ideological changes resulting, for example, from elections, crises, the diffusion of ideas in professional circles, or from policy elites or developments in technology. However, the proximate origin of policy change varies from case to case. According to Kingdon, "the critical factor that explains the prominence of an item on the agenda is not its source, but instead the climate in government or the receptivity to ideas of a given type, regardless of source." Making sense of why an idea took hold is of greater value to understanding policy making than know its source (Kingdon 1984, 76).

For an issue to reach prominence depends upon a "complex *combination* of factors" (Kingdon 1984, p. 78). Kingdon developed his non-linear model to understand this process of "organized anarchy." The three streams of concurrent processes, problems, policies and politics, couple at critical junctures, allowing issues to enter the government agenda. Problem recognition regularly comes about through systematic indicators, that is, routine government or non-government agency monitoring of activities and events. Crises can reinforce a preexisting perception of a problem and help push it on the agenda. Problem definition can have a significant impact on those attempting to influence policy. Stakeholders want problems to be defined to their advantage and to reflect their position and values on the issue. Once a problem is categorized, perceptions of the problem begin to depend upon its category (e.g. access to new technology may be a classified as social issue or a technical issue).

Policy formulation takes place in what Kingdon refers to as the "policy primeval soup" (Kingdon 1984, 122). Proposals come into being through ideas that float around the community, are revised,

: :mbined and refloated. Kingdon refers to proposal advocates in the : :mmunity as policy entrepreneurs. Policy entrepreneurs initiate ⊥scussion of their proposals and promote them in many fora, "sof-:ening up" members of the community and the public through edu-:a:ion and floating trial balloons. Softening up helps condition play-:rs to the ideas and to build acceptance. Proposals that survive meet a number of criteria including political support, technical and budg-:tary feasibility, and compatibility with dominant values and the :urrent national mood. From the original proposals, the commu-:ity produces a pared down list. According to Kingdon, the com-munity is left with a few prominent alternatives for consideration, and consensus has begun to spread throughout the community. Kingdon summarizes the policy formulation process:

> Ideas have been sharpened and changed, combina-tions have emerged that serve the purpose better than the original proposals, people have become accus-tomed to thinking along certain lines, the list of al-ternatives under discussion has narrowed, and a few ideas have emerged as the leading candidates for fur-ther serious consideration (Kingdon 1984, 147).

The political stream is composed of factors such as the public mood, pressure group campaigns, election results, ideological distributions, changes of administration, and government agency turf battles, many of which may have potent effects on agendas (Kingdon 1984, 153). This stream is a significant arbiter of which ideas reach formal agenda status. Policy makers judge whether the balance of forces favours action, as well as whether the general public will tolerate the policy direction coming from the elite level. Decisions are reached through conflict and consensus. If policy makers realize that organizations and interest groups hold the same opinion, that provides them with the impetus to proceed. If conflict arises, leaders try to strike a bal-ance. If the balance becomes less favourable, leaders know they will pay a price for promoting the proposal. Intensity on one or the other side of the issue counts and communication is the intensity indicator.

Perceptions of political resources can tip the balance for groups in the eyes of important people. However, the balance favours the

status quo over change and groups must consider the demand on their resources if they pursue their policy interests. In addition, many interest groups will fight against proposals, using "negative blocking"of initiatives to preserve their prerogatives and benefits (Kingdon 1984, 52).

In order for the problems and policy streams to lead to decisions, the two streams must couple at fortuitous moments with the political stream in what Kingdon refers to as policy windows. While proposals are floating in and around the government looking for problems to which they can attach themselves, conversely in the problem stream people become aware of a problem and look to the policy stream for an alternative that may be a solution. Solutions must have problems and problems must have solutions. According to Kingdon, the coupling of all three streams increases the probability that an issue will advance to the decision agenda level. "Generally, the rise of an item is due to the joint effect of several factors coming together at a given point in time, not to the effect of one or another of them singly" (Kingdon 1984, 188).

Kingdon describes the policy window as "an opportunity for advocates of proposals to push their pet solutions, or to push attention to their special problems." He likens the situation to that of "surfers waiting for the big wave" and trying different waves until they find the right one (Kingdon 1984, 173). Policy entrepreneurs must be ready with proposals to attach to problems because "policy windows open infrequently, and do not stay open long" (Kingdon 1984, 175). Opportunities may appear with the scheduled renewal of programs, change in administration, or in unpredictable ways such as new problems that catch government attention. The window will close when participants feel they have addressed the problem.

Policy entrepreneurs are responsible for engineering the coupling of the streams. The possibility of success comes more readily to those who have some claim to a hearing (e.g. have expertise, are in authoritative decision-making positions), who are known for their political connections or negotiating skills; and who are persistent (e.g. give talks, write position papers, send letters, draft bills, testify, have lunch). Policy entrepreneurs also know how to soften up the sys-

:em by pushing, lying in wait, coupling streams at the window and being ready when the window opens.

Application of the Policy Process Model

Kingdon's model is proving useful in data analysis, providing a means for presenting the procedural and temporal elements of the CPI information highway policy phenomena. The model helps to identify, organize and compare patterns that indicate the types of activities in which most players were involved, thus suggesting the type of activity that CPI should have been considering as well as the general progression of events towards a policy decision. However, his work considers policy phenomena from an American perspective. Canadian researchers must make adjustments to account for differences in the political systems (e.g. more emphasis on decision making at the Cabinet and bureaucratic levels in Canada).

Application of the model is particularly valuable in illuminating the complexity of the policy process. Data analysis shows evidence of three closely-related streams of activities resembling Kingdon's model. However, comparison of the data with Kingdon's model indicate that the activities observed do not fit Kingdon's description of agenda setting. Instead, the data captured activities characteristic of the progression from the government agenda to the government decision agenda. Nevertheless, all three streams continued to be relevant during that period of activity.

Activities in the political stream portrayed a political climate that had been in a state of change for nearly twenty years, moving progressively toward economic policies to enable government deficit reduction, deregulation, national and international competition, and moving progressively away from the welfare state that had been in development since the Second World War. This had an effect on government priorities, for example the government was prioritizing policies to ensure Canadian industry would be viable in a global market. Private sector industries shared the same concerns and were anxious to develop new markets while preserving existing ones. Policy players in the telecommunications and cable sectors had an increasing interest in the commercial potential of the internet and were

presenting proposals to the government related to convergence and competition.

In the policy stream, the private sector continued[2] to bring proposals to the government, now in the form of convergence proposals. The policy window opened after the US announced its National Information Infrastructure (NII) policy proposal, and the federal government felt compelled to create the Information Highway Advisory Council (IHAC)[3], moving the issue from the public agenda to the government agenda. Thus the government had already defined the initial economic 'problem' of information highway competition, although this issue was seen as *a good news story* by politicians and the private sector. This was an opportunity rather than a problem. The nonprofit sector was less organized. CPI was preparing its policy proposal even after IHAC was formed.

In this study, Kingdon's model actually pertains to activities that predate the study, i.e. before the creation of CPI and IHAC. However, the model can be extended to account for activities occurring after the policy window opened and events continue to fit nicely into the three-stream model. The issue entered the government agenda when it officially became the responsibility of IHAC, the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) and the bureaucracy at Industry Canada. The discussion was broadened, problems were further defined and proposals were proffered both inside and outside government. Non-profit groups were most active promoting their definitions of problems and proposals of socially and culturally-oriented alternatives after the economic issues had entered the government agenda and industry proposals were already on the table at IHAC and the (CRTC).

This study is unfolding in accordance with the theoretical statement that policy processes are neither linear nor neatly compartmentalized. The observation in this study that the model of streams may be applied later in the policy process extends Kingdon's theory. Findings resonate with Leslie Pal (1992, 119)'s statement that "policy players are active at every phase to ensure that the issue remains high on the agenda and that their view of the problem is elaborated along the way."

Policy Community Theory

While Kingdon's policy process theory provides insights into the procedural and temporal aspects of the public policy-making phenomenon, institutional theory helps to inform the study's relational dimensions. According to William Coleman and Grace Skogstad, institutions are a major consideration in public policy making in Canada. The structural, i.e. institutional, characteristics of sectoral-level organizations, whether these be state agencies or societal actors, constrain the options available to policymakers and reinforce particular values and beliefs in the policy process" (Coleman and Skogstad 1990, 15). Sectoral institutions are organized into policy communities of state actors and other organized interests and together they shape public policy (Coleman and Skogstad 1990, 312). Stephen Wilks and Maurice Wright (1987, 299) define a policy community as "a group of actors or potential actors... whose community membership is defined by a common policy focus." Policy community members are linked by epistemic concerns and some material interest that encourages regularized contact (Howlett and Ramesh 1995, 129). For instance, the banking, fishing, and poverty sectors each are represented by their own policy communities.[4]

Policy networks arise from within the greater policy community. A policy network is characterized by "the relationships among the particular set of actors that forms around an issue of importance to the policy community" (Coleman and Skogstad 1990, 26). Coleman and Skogstad's topology of policy networks identifies three major categories: pluralist, closed and state-directed, all of which can exist within a government. Of particular interest to this case are pressure pluralist and corporatist (closed) networks. Pressure pluralism exists when the authority of the state is fragmented, i.e. spread amongst departments, and interest groups are not fully developed. Closed corporatist networks exist when the state is strong and acts a mediator between conflicting interest groups (Coleman and Skogstad 1990, 27-29).

Paul Pross is interested in the role of advocacy groups that interact with government institutions within policy networks, and their ability to influence policy making. Pross prefers the term 'pressure groups' which he defines as "organizations whose members act together to influence public policy in order to promote their common interest"

(Pross 1992, 2)[5]. Pressure groups represent a portion of the public that has the potential to mobilize if its interests are not met in public policy. In fact, government has encouraged the creation of pressure groups for its own benefit. Pressure groups are expected to help government as a communication liaison between the community and authorities, to help build public support for government policies and programs, to administer some programs, and to engage in regulatory activities (Pross 1992, 9). For its own purposes, a pressure group's primary goal is to persuade government to accept its policy proposals by presenting logical, well-prepared arguments, by arousing the public, and through other activities that embarrass the government or deprive it of information (Pross 1992, 3).

Determinants of successful advocacy may be measured through a set of group characteristics. Coleman, Skogstad and Pross agree upon a number of these characteristics. A group must be knowledgeable both about the substantive issues and the policy-making process. It must be able to generate information about specific policies as well as to mobilize support for its positions and to maintain internal member cohesion (Coleman and Skogstad 1990, 20). Furthermore, a group must have the capacity to lobby. All of these activities require both financial and human resources. Above all, a group's degree of institutionalization is often critical to its success. Pross states that institutionalization is "a process through which an organization... acquires a system of values and becomes an institution... that is peculiarly competent to do a particular kind of work" (Pross 1992, 95). According to Pross, the policy process is highly bureaucratized and the most successful interest groups know with whom they must communicate, the appropriate moment for actions and how to communicate in a bureaucratic fashion, that is with briefs, working papers, and professional consultations, not demonstrations. Pross states that government officials encourage groups to develop their institutional capacity for the benefit of both parties (Pross 1992, 43).

Pross suggests a topology of institutional characteristics for evaluating the potential efficacy of an interest group. Among these are politically significant characteristics emerging from the internal life of the organization which a group can exploit to bring pressure to bear on

the policy process (group characteristics) and characteristics developed as a result of attempts to influence public policy (policy capacity). Group characteristics include membership, resources, organizational structure and group outputs. Policy capacity consists of three components: strategic, i.e. ability to identify, articulate and agree upon the organization's public policy goals and how to attain them; knowledge of both substantive matters in the policy debate and the government policy process as well as an ability to express that knowledge meaningfully in the policy debate; and the ability to mobilize the group resources to pressure policy makers. Pross includes luck as a final, but not inconsequential, indicator (Pross 1992, 100-102).

If a group is fully institutionalized, it is effective in establishing internal agreement and communicating the wishes of its membership. The group also has developed the strategic capacity to forecast and plan. It can regularly mobilize its membership for routine activities and is in ongoing contact and cooperation with other organizations Pross 1992, 105).

Coleman and Skogstad, and Pross also agree upon a model of the policy community that describes the relative position of policy actors according to their input to policy-makers. Pross describes the policy community as consisting of two segments: the subgovernment which is the policy-making body of government agencies and institutionalized interest groups including the minister in charge, senior officials, representatives from a few interest groups and other affected agencies; and the attentive public, a less clearly defined segment of players who attempt to influence policies but are not regular participants in the process (Pross 1992, 120). This model offers a means for identifying community members and for describing the relative position of policy community institutions to decision makers.

Application of the Policy Community Model

Initial analysis of the data indicates that an information policy community does exist at the federal level. Cabinet, Industry Canada, and the CRTC played major roles in policy making and all indications are that the private sector also played a prominent role. Groups such as CPI remained in the realm of the attentive public and had

comparatively little input in the policy process. Where the major private sector institution in the policy network, the Stentor Alliance[6], operated a sophisticated and resource-rich lobbying organization, CPI was resource-poor, much less experienced, and too new to be considered institutionally stable. Much evidence points to a well established relationship between the telecommunications industry, particularly its major player, Stentor, and politicians and the bureaucracy. Government departments such as Industry Canada base their loyalties in part on those they consider to be their 'client' group. In the case of the information highway, Industry Canada was the lead ministry and the departments involved from the ministry most often identified their client group as the telecommunications industry.

Public interest groups such as CPI do not appear to be considered as part of the sub-government. CPI had to look for its opportunities where it could find them- and often did not know where to look. Unlike the major industry player who had regular access to policy-makers, CPI had little entree and sometimes found other avenues for influencing the outcome such as becoming involved in other information highway-related projects like the Community Access Program (CAP).

The fact that Industry Canada now sees its role as a 'partner' with the private sector and the mediator in industry conflicts suggests that a corporatist network is in operation. This observation is supported further by the government's reliance on IHAC, with its participants primarily from the private sector, and by the use of the CRTC as a regulator and mediator among industry players. At the same time, elements of pressure pluralism seem to be developing as more ministries as well as fledgling non-profit groups claim stakes in information policy development.

Conclusion

This paper explores the applicability of public policy theory to the issues of information policy making for the information highway. Preliminary analysis reveals that policy process and policy community theories can provide useful frameworks. This application of the policy process model suggests that the three-stream model may be

rrended to describe the progression of the issues from the government agenda to the decision agenda. The institutional characteristics identified by Coleman, Skogstad and Pross have begun to appear as analysis proceeds and are expected to be valuable in mining the data.

End Notes

Linear descriptions of the policy process are quite common, although they are often accompanied by disclaimers noting that the model represents a simplification of a series of phases that may occur simultaneously or change in order. These models usually include agenda setting, policy formulation, decision making and policy implementation. For further elaboration see Howlett 1995).

The telecommunications industry has been involved in deregulation and competition policies since the 1980s. The information highway discussion was merely a continuation of this type of policy making.

The twenty-nine members of IHAC were appointed by the federal government. The majority of the members came from the private sector. For a list of members, see Canada. Information Highway Advisory Council (1995). CPI successfully lobbied to have the Chair of its steering committee included on the Council.

4   For accounts of research in these policy community sectors see Coleman (1990).

Pross makes a distinction between 'pressure groups' and 'interest groups.' He believes that interest groups are more likely to be involved in non-political activities, with politics being a minor element of their mandate while pressure groups exist to persuade government to their point of view. For the purposes of this study, the term 'interest group' is used because the groups involved, for the most part, are not limited to lobbying activities. The distinction in Pross's definition appears to be rather fine when compared to CPI and other information policy interest groups. Furthermore, CPI by its own definition is an interest group.

The Stentor Alliance represents the 10 major telecommunications companies in Canada: BC Tel, AGT, SaskTel, Manitoba Telephone System, Bell Canada, NBTel, Maritime Tel & Tel, Island Tel, and Newfoundland Telephone, and associate members Québec-Téléphone and NorthwesTel.

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