What is policy research? What is special about communication policy research?

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What is research?

• “The outcome of any serious research can only be to make two questions grow where only one grew before.”

  Veblen, Thorstein (1908). “The Evolution of the Scientific Point of View,” *University of California Chronicle*
What is policy?

• Decisions that have widespread effect
  – Normally understood as decisions taken by government (outside the market/private sphere)
  – Some decisions by private entities, especially those which have significant externalities (positive or negative), should be included
What is policy research?

- Because policy has large (and sometimes difficult to reverse) effects, there is an expectation that decision makers would carefully assess the pros and cons of their actions
  - State actors make decisions with the most impact with “other people’s money” based on vague mandates, so even stronger duty of care
  - Private actors who are risking their own money also engage in “private” policy research (e.g., due diligence)
- In essence, careful consideration of evidence in taking decisions about the future (inherently risky because of imperfect information)
- Cannot be endless and open-ended as suggested by Veblen
In an ideal world . . .

• High-quality policy research would be undertaken on routine basis within the state, and

• We citizens would be able to live our lives confident that our “agents” in the state are doing their job and the representatives we elect to oversee their work are exercising satisfactory oversight
But we live in a world dominated by Principal-Agent Problem

• The principal–agent problem occurs when one person or entity (the "agent") is able to make decisions on behalf of, or that impact, another person or entity: the “principal.” The problem arises where the two parties have different interests and asymmetric information (the agent having more information), such that the principal cannot directly ensure that the agent is always acting in his/her best interest
We also live in a world of imperfect information & less-than-perfect knowledge

• Even if agents want to do what the principals want
  – Difficult to figure what principals actually want
  – Decisions are taken under time pressure, and the evidence is thus inherently incomplete

• In the real world, policy research has to be supplemented by consultation with, and learning from, stakeholders, including the public

• Given the broad effects of policy decisions, it is better to have a good policy with broad buy-in than perfect policy with no buy-in by significant stakeholders
Policy research is thus . . .

- Too important to be left solely to those within the state
- Too important to be left solely to those whose economic interests are directly affected

Those representing “the public interest” and the marginalized must also engage in policy research
  - They could simply assert their claims (emotion-based/pathos), as they often do, OR
  - They could supplement the pathos-based claims with logos-based or research-based claims
Of course, there are problems

• Is it really in the public interest, or is it private interest, dressed up in public-interest clothing?
• Private stakeholders have focused, specific interests and resources to apply to engage in policy research and communicate the results, while those among the public have diffuse interests and limited resources (Olson)
  – If tax-payer money is given without controls, harm may result

• Nothing is perfect ➔ find a workable balance and muddle through
WHAT IS SPECIAL ABOUT COMMUNICATION POLICY RESEARCH?
There’s something about communication . . .

• Think about the subject area of UN specialized agencies
  • First Generation (1.0)
    – Oldest is the International Telecommunication Union, based on 1865 International Telegraph Convention
    – Second oldest is Universal Postal Union, based on Treaty of Berne (1874)
    – International Civil Aviation Organization (1903)
  • Second Generation
    – 2.1
      • IMF & World Bank
      • GATT
      • WHO
    – 2.2
      • UNESCO
  • 3.0
    – UN Women
    – UN Global Pulse
Communication

• Standards
  – Inherent necessity of common standards
    • Language is a standard
  – To establish a common standard requires a meeting of minds
    • Many languages exist (multiple standards)
    • Postal communication requires less coordination than electronic

• Power of communication, especially in political sphere
  – Destructive, as well as constructive

• Centrality to present-day economy = attention economy

• Implicated in everything
  – Everything we do involves making of meaning; now increasingly
    ICT is in everything
Frameworks to hang thinking on

Chaotic reality ➔ abstraction ➔ ordered reality

THEORY
Print (newspapers) engaged one sense
    Many could retrieve information (limited) that few published
Transactions could occur “offline” based on advertising and discovery

... What can you do with the Internet?

INTERNET IS A META MEDIUM
Does everyone use print technology in the same way?
  Some don’t read (directly)
  Some read purely for entertainment (directly)

LEARNING FROM PRINT
Reduce the frictions of time and space (Innis)

Are control technologies (Beniger)

Reduce transaction costs (Coase)

ICTS
How do hitherto separate markets get integrated? (Jensen)

Virtual communities?
   At the cost of face-to-face?

SPACE
To understand platforms
Why platforms, why now?

TRANSACTION COSTS
Bookshop versus postal service

POWER OF ANALOGIES