

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

Rohan Samarajiva



This work was carried out with the aid of a grant from the International Development Research Centre, Canada and the Department for International Development UK



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 with substantial market power, 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 to have 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

Gates Foundation 2011 Innovation Awardee: Bangladesh's Dr Asm Amjad Hossain

- Raised immunization rates in 2 districts from 67% and 60% in 2009 to 85% and 79% in 2010
- How did he do it?
 - Registered pregnant women (date of delivery, location, and phone number) so vaccinators knew when children were born, where they were, and could contact their mothers
 - Established annual schedules for vaccinations
 - Had vaccinators put phone numbers on immunization cards, so parents with young children could get in touch with a health worker

Could Dr Amjad save lives without . .

- Being able to assume
 - Every pregnant woman could give a phone number (her own or that of a friend/relative?)
 - Signal coverage
 - Affordable handsets
 - Low/no connection/installation charges
 - Reasonable call charges
- A pricing scheme that did not cause government officials to object to receiving or making calls

Communication policy research

- If communication is important, wrong decisions re communication can do more harm
 - Healthcare? Food? War and peace?
- Good evidence for communication policy tends to require multi-disciplinary and multi-method skills
 - Not always easy to come by given entrenched silos in academy
 - Evidence produced by state actors not of highest quality
 - Incentive structures in universities do not yield high-quality research
- Object of study is undergoing very rapid technological and market change
 - Information imperfections more pronounced

AN ILLUSTRATION, NOT PROOF

Canada is a well-governed, well-endowed country, yet . . .

- Telecommunications Policy Review Panel (TPRP) was a three-person committee mandated by Canadian Minister of Industry in 2005 to review Canada's telecommunications framework
- Included in the TPRP's final report was the observation that, in Canada, a "relative paucity of academic work on what has been referred to as the 'regulatory craft'" has led to "heavy reliance on foreign (mostly U.S.-based) experts on economic, technical and even social regulation".

And the recommendation . . .

- It is time, the report suggested, for “more and better policy research and analysis ... to keep Canadian telecommunications and ICT policy and regulation at the forefront of ICT developments”
- So, some policy-oriented scholars investigated

Demand-side or supply-side problem?

- “Only a handful of submissions to the panel relied on research undertaken by Canadians. Not many submissions to the panel were made by researchers as stand-alone participants.”
 - 2 of 109 submissions to TPRP’s first round of submissions, and 2 of 89 submissions to the TPRP’s second round, for a total of 3 of 198, were from “educational institutions”. Adding to these the individual submissions of 4 academics in the first round, and 2 in the second round, suggests that academics were responsible for 4.5 percent of submissions to the study panel.

What communication policy researchers in Canada are interested in studying

- Relative merits of Canadian content
- Universal access to communication networks and technologies
- The CBC's public broadcasting mandate
- Future, development & protection of Canadian screen, music, and other cultural (or "creative") industries.
- Social movements around communication issues
- Intellectual property, especially copyright

Demand in 2011 was said to be for
research on . .

- Network neutrality
- Copyright issues
- Access programs

- No research on
 - Co-regulation/self-regulation & accountability

Did supply match demand?

- Evidence that most people who study communication issues in Canada
 - Are actually in a field called cultural studies that seeks to engage in an “epic struggle for consciousness” rather than “tinkering with practical arrangements”
 - Or, on the critical side of the critical/administrative divide → by definition not likely to dirty their hands with policy
 - Include few/no economists and engineers
 - Make little or no use of quantitative methods, or marshal evidence in a systematic way

Should there be compulsions on the demanders?

- Challenging the “marketplace of ideas” assumption that those with something useful to say will muster the needed time and resources suggestion that there be a legal requirement for government agencies to conduct literature searches, in addition to the current power to order operators to pay costs of certain intervenors
 - Runs counter to the fact that supply of policy-relevant research in Canada does not seem to match demand

Another suggestion, a good one this time . . .

- Raw data needed for policy-relevant research is difficult to get
 - Under the control of policy/regulatory agencies or of operators
- Law should make it obligatory that raw data in usable form be made public
 - Unlike in the old days of paper, all that is required is making available on the web