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Policy Processes and the Value of Research into Organisational Communication Strategies: An Example of Noise and Air Quality Management Plans at Sydney Airport

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Abstract:

One research function is to provide information for politicians and decision makers on the costs and benefits of alternative policies and programs. Policy processes are classified along the dimensions of who is involved, the relationship amongst those involved, the decision criteria and the communication strategies adopted. Theoretical forms of policy process are politico-rational, bureaucratic legal, techno-rational, semi-judicial and consultative. Communication strategies range from asymmetrical to a two-way, symmetrical communication compatible with the consultative form of policy process. An overlap occurs between the consultative process and communication processes, such as government and community relations, and public relations. Airport managers are confronted with community involvement when proposals are made to expand facilities at existing airports and to acquire and develop sites for new airports. The case study of policy processes chosen to test the theoretical model is the development of noise and air quality management plans at Sydney (Kingsford Smith) Airport following the Federal Government's decision in 1991 to build and operate a third runway. Process failures (1992-1994) are discussed and the need for and advantages of conducting comparative research into airport best practice and communication strategies are outlined.

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Introduction

One of the "founding fathers" of the Australasian Transport Research Forum suggested that the function of research is to provide information for governments and politicians for the purpose of policy formulation and objective decision making (Scrafton 1977). Implicitly, the value of research is an enabling one: the key to determining value may be found both in the technical quality of information and in the means of communicating it. In the formulation of public policy there is the organisational communication and interaction with groups and government, called here "policy processes". Governing consists of choosing a course of action and carrying it out. The paper argues that there is value in undertaking research into corporate communication strategies and public relations especially when applied to major transport projects that have controversial, environmental impacts. Although public participation is an established part of the formulation of public policy, little research effort has been directed to the link with communications and effectiveness of such programs. Public relations may be defined as the "management of communication between an organisation and its publics" (Grunig 1992 p 18) and there is a research need to synthesise practice so as to classify jointly both public policy processes and associated communications strategies.

In the next-section, the proposed classification of typical forms of policy processes are based on *who* is involved, the *relations* between those involved and *judgement* on an acceptable decision (Healey, McNamara, Elson and Doak 1988) together with *communication models* that fit each form of policy process (Grunig and Grunig 1992). Environmental mitigation (noise and air quality) of the third runway at Sydney (Kingsford Smith) Airport provides a case study to test this approach. The mediation of interests promoted by different groups has been determined by the Commonwealth Government in its package of property acquisition and noise insulation. The procedural side of public discourse - who was involved, the relationships of those involved, the decision criteria and communication programs - will be addressed. The final section of the paper suggests the value which may accrue from research into organisational communication strategies and measures of program effectiveness.

Classification of policy processes and communication strategies

Healey (*et al* p 223) suggest three defining criteria on the classification of policy processes: who is *involved* in the process (who controls the process, and who gets access

and on what terms); the *relations* between those involved (what procedure and style of debate) and; *judgement* concerning an acceptable decision (which values govern the decision and in what way should decisions be presented). A fivefold classification of policy processes emerges. Grafted onto this classification are the associated communications strategies and programs based on the work of Grunig and others

Five Policy Process

The criteria of access, discourse and "good" decisions by elected representatives in a *politico - rational* process derive directly from political ideology and practice. Political activity is the effort to reduce the choice of mutually exclusive policies to one - a state of "political rest". Mutually exclusive viewpoints are initially advocated by elected representatives and a cycle of political activity commences. Persuasion, reasoning, diplomacy and a consequent series of policy adjustments result in competing political factions eventually ending up with a scheme that is mutually acceptable. There are few surer ways in conflict of bringing to support one policy rather than another than the application of external pressures: rewards and punishments or propaganda and persuasion. National, state and local governments all have their electorates and procedural styles of parliamentary or council debate. Decisions are usually communicated to the community through press releases, with market research surveys being an important instrument for tracking the acceptability or popularity of decisions and political leaders

Bureaucratical - legal processes are where the determination of actions is made in terms of formal rules defined in law and administrative procedures. Groups must depend on politicians, government officials and defined rules to safeguard their interests - for example, land-use zoning and noise compatibility. Official discretion is limited with the correct application of procedural rules. Bureaucratical - legal processes are controlled by administrative procedures that define legally and administratively the groups who are involved. A correct use of formal procedures defines any procedural debate amongst these involved. The process pre-supposes that the correct use of pre-determined rules will lead to a good decision. Also, the bureaucratic process may also be used to lodge the concerns of one tier of government within the policy processes of another.

When actions are determined in terms of the judgements of professional planners, engineers and other experts derived from scientific reasoning the process is called a *techno - rational* one. The "rational comprehensive model" shapes transport institutions and decision making. Experts introduce issues, problems and solutions, specify ways of

identifying them, and suggest the evaluation criteria to determine the best course of action. Experts potentially *increase* both the complexity of processes and the criteria used in constructing an agreed decision. Professional expertise is considered as a body of knowledge above, and apart from, the specific context to which it is applied. Thus, the access criteria to the planning process is dominated by experts who define issues and interests and determine explicitly which groups and values are considered

The discourse criteria are "the principles through which the expert community considers it appropriate to validate knowledge" (Healey *et al* 1988 p 229). Decision criteria are also based on principles of the systems approach: survey and data collection; analysis and modelling; forecasting; formulating alternative plans; and evaluating their implications and performance judged against "do nothing" as a yardstick. The ranking of alternatives is often based on the outcomes of social benefit-cost analysis, or on other procedures such as a goals achievement matrix, a planning balance sheet or multi - criteria decision methods.

A *semi-judicial* process is one where actions are determined through a formal hearing or inquiry with the various competing arguments by groups evaluated by an assessor (or panel of assessors). It removes conflict and debate away from inter-organisational relations and local politics into a stylised form of mediation - either a residual mechanism for dealing with disputes which cannot be resolved through other processes or a focal point to challenge the proposal (Healey *et al* 1988 pp 233-234). Decisions are reached on legal precedent, fairness and reasonableness and the coherent reasons are stated. The public inquiry is therefore a formal arena for conflict mediation where access is open to all parties who lodge a submission. Arguments are presented and assessed according to their merits. The discourse criterion is presented to the public as an investigative and open debate.

Consultative processes involve three distinct processes - corporatist, bargaining and pluralist. Healey (*et al* 1988 Table 10.5 p 237) define corporatist and bargaining as negotiating amongst group representatives over a range of issues and over a particular issue respectively. A pluralist consultative policy process is a political debate amongst the groups. Corporatist and bargaining processes entail only occasional relationships amongst parties whereas politically-active groups are continuously given access with pluralist approaches. Corporatist approaches aim to sustain ongoing negotiations and balance interests into a common position; bargaining involves maximising gain for each party; and pluralist approaches, highlights competition amongst parties. Decisions strive

to reach agreement: allowing the maintenance of negotiative relationships with the corporative approach; and resolution by political power in the case of pluralist approaches.

Communication strategies

For each of the five characterisations of the policy process identified in the previous section there are typical communication strategies. A simple starting point is to recognise five commonalities which make all groups alike: (a) they almost always have some authority, which gives them the right to exist and do their work; (b) they almost always have some objective (purpose) for which to work; (c) they almost always have some kind of organisation through which to carry out their work and operate through this organisation to achieve their objectives; (d) they have contacts with other groups in society and work closely with other groups to get things done (or work in opposition to other groups in a defined process to exert pressure on policy-makers); and (e) they are governed by specific principles and standards agreed to by the group membership. Thus there is a necessity for groups to keep up effective relationships with one another.

The process of policy formulation involves the transformation of societal problems, visions and ideas and political pressures into government policy and its administration (the physical procuring of that policy). The process of governing consists of choosing a course of action from a set of mutually exclusive policy alternatives and carrying it out. In reaching this state of "political rest", an acceptable decision implies an enormous amount of communication between those involved in the policy process.

The culture of the dominant group will determine whether an asymmetrical or a symmetrical approach to communications is taken. Asymmetrical communications are more likely to occur under politico-rational, bureaucratic-legal and techno-rational modes of policy process. Organisations are managed as autocracies with power concentrated in the hands of top managers. Leaders know best because they have more knowledge than the public. Group members are "inward looking" and do not see the organisation as outsiders see it; information flows out, not in.

Excellence in public relations is based on symmetrical communications and is achieved when organisations do not separate themselves from the environment. There is a free exchange of information. Symmetrical communications become an integral part of a group's strategic management process and when public relations identifies stakeholder categories and resolves issues early in the development of issues. Top management plays

a determining role in the way an organisation practices its communication business: it determines culture, communication philosophy and public relations approaches, recognises publics, chooses interdependencies and positions the placement of communication functions in the organisation close to senior management.

There is a nexus between communication strategies, public involvement in the planning and policy process, and the characteristic type of policy process. Communications can be arranged along a continuum from propaganda (the press agency model), journalism (the public information model) through to an asymmetrical one-way model and a two-way symmetric model (Grunig and Grunig 1992 pp 286-290). Organisational culture and the resultant communication strategies adopted may also be arranged along a continuum from propaganda to shared information and decision making. Opportunities for public involvement in practice are derived from the relations between those involved in the process as defined by the particular form of policy process adopted. The consultative form of a policy process should encourage a more symmetric communications model.

A Case Study of Environmental Management Plans

An examination of policy processes and communication strategies associated with Sydney's airport developments in the post-war era would reveal that all five forms of policy process have been relevant at different times. The techno-rational form of policy process has probably been the dominant one. The EIS for Sydney (Kingsford Smith) Airport's third runway was assessed by The Commonwealth Department of the Arts, Sport, the Environment, Tourism and Territories, who made a series of recommendations which were agreed to by the Federal Labor Government Cabinet. Government policy was to construct and operate a parallel runway and to develop noise management and air quality management plans before the runway's scheduled opening (of June 1995) that involved *community involvement* in their preparation. It thereby initiated a consultative policy process, which is now presented as a specific case study: who was involved and their relations (including communication strategies), decision criteria and subsequent policies.

Ministerial recommendations on developing environmental management plans were adopted by the Board of the Federal Airport Corporation (FAC) "to the extent that it was in the power of the Corporation to do so" (Mitchell McCotter 1994 Appendix A). As the FAC was given responsibility for the preparation and administration of the noise and air

quality management plans it chaired a Steering Committee for their development. Other members were the Civil Aviation Authority, the NSW Department of Planning, and the NSW Environmental Protection Agency. Any action required by the Commonwealth Government was handled by the Department of Transport and Communication and they attended Committee meetings. In addition, a representative from the Australian Air Transport Association (AATA) and the convenor of a Community Advisory Committee (CAC) attended meetings in a liaison role. One of the important specific functions of the Steering Committee was to allocate tasks and deadlines to five working groups covering: (a) control of airborne noise; (b) mitigation of noise at point reception; (c) control of airport-generated noise and ground running; (d) air quality; and (e) recovery of costs.

Membership of the CAC was arranged by advertising invitations in the press early in 1992. As of June 1992, 36 nominations were received from individuals and community groups and all were accepted as committee members of whom 30 attended the inaugural meeting at Petersham Town Hall. The Federal Airport Corporation funded a suitably qualified person "acceptable to all parties" (Mitchell McCotter 1994 p A.4) to act as an independent convenor for the CAC. The Committee elected its convenor from a short-list of candidates. Its terms of reference included the election of an Executive to provide high level advisory input to the process, the election of representatives on each of the working groups to provide direct comment, the facilitation of committee comments on draft working papers to receive and disseminate the full range of community views, and commentary on the final draft plans.

The bulk of the technical work on this study were undertaken by consultants. They were retained by the Steering Committee to provide technical assistance to the Steering Committee, the working groups and, a little later in the process, to the CAC Executive. The consultants were chosen after national advertising for expressions of interest and a selection panel recommendation that involved the FAC, two representatives of the CAC, and one representative from the AATA. The principal consultant was Mitchell McCotter and Associates - a team which included experts in noise, air pollution, architecture, property valuation and law.

An integral part of plan preparation was participation by interested or affected parties. In addition to the representations noted above on the Steering Committee and working groups, participation also occurred in a series of advertised workshops open to the public where technical experts made presentations and small syndicate group discussion sessions were conducted on selected issues. The broader community were informed and

encouraged to participate in the process through a newsletter prepared and distributed by the consultants in number of languages through public libraries, council offices, at the workshops, and through direct mailing.

The relations between those involved and communication demands analysis beyond that possible here, which is merely a summary. The plan preparation process, described by the consultants as being "based on participation by all affected parties" (Mitchell McCotter 1994 p 15), contained: a management structure; technical investigations; consideration by the Steering Committee of policy issues; reporting and public exhibition of draft plans; and implementation (enactment of legislation for funding arrangements and plan administration). Perusal of the terms of reference for the various components of this study would initially suggest a consultative policy process with symmetry in the relations amongst those actively involved in preparing the plans.

The difficulty of inter-personal communication increases exponentially as the number of those involved in a group expands. The organisational structure adopted by the Steering Committee - of consultants, working groups and a Community Advisory Committee - had the potential to distort the free interchange of information and ideas. Unlike the Community Advisory Committee of the NSW Roads and Traffic Authority, Botany West Transport Study (upon which consultation for this study was styled) those involved did not meet regularly in one place and at one forum. The problems of public involvement in this policy making process include the inevitable increase in disagreement as more groups and different "interests" are involved, delays in meeting planning deadlines and difficulties in defining legitimate representation.

In their written submission to the Senate Select Committee on Aircraft Noise (see below) the CAC (p 70) complained that the mechanism of community consultation was structured as follows: "• Get them on committees and exhaust them; • The CAC would hold an "advisory" position, unable to vote on any decisions made by the Steering Committee; • Define each working group's terms of reference so that any real issues are outside their terms of reference; • Stack working groups to marginalise the community's influence; • Ensure participation is token; • Minimise their access to information and maximise their effort in obtaining information; • Use up as much of the community participant's time as possible, schedule meetings at the most inconvenient times, exhaust them; • Minimise the resources and funds available to the community so as to deny them access to the resources to engage independent technical experts or consultants; and • Use technical experts to

confuse issues, but don't give them [the community] access to raw technical data, they might check it!"

Early in 1994 the Minister of Transport directed an acceleration in the production of the plans and drafts for public comment were released in June. This meant that views of the Australian Air Transport Association and the Community Advisory Committee (Mitchell McCotter 1994 Chapter 11) were both prepared independently and without any opportunity of seeing the draft plan and its supporting technical information. The CAC stridently pointed out that "community views were continually marginalised" and "areas of intense differences between the Community Advisory Committee, the Community and the Steering Committee abound" (p 11.1).

The consultants analysed 1355 responses (including form letters) to the draft noise and air quality plans with the dominant themes being fast-track a second airport; legislate the curfew at Sydney KSA; and insulate properties within the 20 ANEF. It was reported that the state government representatives withdrew from the Steering Committee. The final plan submitted by the Federal Airport Corporation was not released to the public.

The runway commenced commercial operations on 5 November 1994 - eight months ahead of schedule - around the same time that the recommendations in the final plans had been considered by Cabinet. On 1 November the Minister for Transport made a policy announcement that combined aspects of the consultants draft plans and the Steering Committee's final plan into a \$183 million package of property acquisition and voluntary sound insulation measures. The May 1995 Federal Government budget increased this allocation by \$76.5 million "in response to a sustained campaign by affected residents which threatened to affect the ALP vote in the NSW election" (*The Sydney Morning Herald* May 19, 1995). Airline passengers at Sydney airport pay a levy of about \$3.40 on top of their ticket price to help pay for this four-year program.

The opening of the runway sparked a storm of community protest (including blockades of the airport) and considerable media interest, primarily because of the increase in noise in suburbs north and south of the airport brought about by parallel runway operations. In February 1995, given the "anger and distress" caused by the opening of the parallel runway, the Australian Democrats decided to push for a Senate Inquiry into Sydney's aircraft noise problems. The Committee inquired, among other matters, into: the human impact of noise caused by aircraft movements following the opening of the parallel runway; reasons for discrepancies between the predicted and actual noise impacts (and

proposals to prevent any such discrepancies occurring in the future); and the likely effectiveness of the environmental management plans for Sydney (Kingsford Smith) Airport and whether other measures could be implemented.

An analysis of the 437 articles that appeared in the Sydney print media for one year after the opening of the third runway revealed that "political statements" (21.5 per cent), blockades, rallies and strikes (11 per cent) and health and lifestyle impacts (8 per cent) dominated the type of coverage, and aircraft noise continued to attract media attention up to the Federal election of March 1996. The (newly elected) Liberal-Coalition Government promised "to share around the noise burden" - an example of a politico-rational policy response. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, on the day of the election on Saturday, 2 March 1996, summed up what each party had to offer on Sydney (Kingsford Smith) Airport and on Badgerys Creek and pointed to "backflips, retreats and shuffles" of both major parties on the airport debate. In March, the Federal Government launched its plan to re-open the east-west runway (07/25) at Sydney airport in the first week of April. As less traffic would impact on the Liberal strongholds to the north of the airport the plan reversed 'the "politics of noise" imposed by the former Labor Government' (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 March 1996). Air Services Australia produced a long-term plan for flight paths and runway usage within the context of all three runways being available for jet and propeller aircraft and of maximum use being made of flight paths over water and non-residential land uses. Public comment on their plan closed in March 1997 and new operational arrangements commenced in August 1997. The Government confirmed that an environmental impact assessment of these operations was unnecessary.

Research into communications strategies

In their Citizen Participation Handbook, the Institute for Participating Management and Planning (1986 p V-6) conclude "it is a simple but sobering fact of life that most experiences with Advisory Committees ...are *bad* experiences both for the agency and for the potentially affected interests." Empirical analysis of public involvement processes is in its earliest stages but questions are beginning to surface about the value and costs of public involvement programs, including process indicators, outcome indicators and direct and indirect cost indicators. These emerging research approaches could be applied readily with a case study of noise and air quality management plans in Sydney using criteria for evaluating participating processes formulated by Sarkissian (1994 pp 14-17).

Equally important as a research agenda is to contrast organisational communication strategies. For example, those developed by the Steering Committee in this case study with those adopted by other airport owners and managers when undergoing major airport developments (terminal expansion, runway extensions or adding major ground access infrastructure). By studying best practice in a range of communication strategies at other airports tailored to specific developmental circumstances much could be learnt as to what is effective, especially when involving key stakeholders and other publics. The appropriate research design derives from organisational benchmarking, which is a continuous, analytical process for understanding and assessing the practices of those airport managements (and non-competitor industries of relevant) identified as representing world-class, best practice.

Information is a resource which can improve the decision-making processes within an organisation. Comparative studies of strengths and weaknesses of communication strategies across a range of transport organisations can be instructive. Benchmarking (Spendolini 1992) can be employed to refine the specific topic of investigation, to identify the resources to conduct the study, to develop a protocol for data collection, to collect and analyse data and to formulate recommendations on organisational change. The value of such research is three-fold. First, to allow organisational comparison and functional learning. Secondly, to help develop consultation process objectives and their associated communication objectives. Thirdly, to suggest realistic communication goals and measures of effectiveness of programs. If the outcomes of a benchmarking study are demonstrated and implemented organisational improvement is possible and industry best practices can be achieved or surpassed.

In the case study of noise and air quality management plans a series of conflicts emerged in communication: structural conflicts (how the situation was set up, time constraints, unequal control of resources and unequal power/authority), interest conflicts, interpersonal relationship conflicts, value conflicts and data conflicts (misinformation, differing views on relevancy, different interpretations, and different social impacts and assessment). Are these conflicts unique to the Sydney experience? or a "sobering fact of life"? Only by obtaining a range of comparative experiences on airport communication strategies can any attempt be made to answer these questions and to establish norms on a series of process indicators. Research into communication strategies that sheds light on more efficient and effective procedures would be valuable in helping establish the basis for co-productive and collaborative policy processes.

Conclusions

Nearly every technological development including the siting of a large-scale facility, or its expansion *in situ*, is surrounded by controversy. Decisions that were once taken on purely technical criteria (techno-rational policy process) are increasingly forced into the political arena by those who are sceptical about the value of technological progress, who perceive a mismatch between human needs and technology, or who mistrust the concentration of authority in government bureaucracies responsible for technological change. Transport planning can inform decision processes provided it is founded on an understanding of the structures and behaviours of the organisations involved in planning, research and decision making. Planning is more diverse than modelling - encompassing conflict resolution, negotiation strategies and communication techniques.

A theoretical framework has been described that allows different forms of policy processes to be classified: politico-rational, bureaucratic-legal, techno-rational, semi-judicial and consultative. Communication strategies associated with these forms range from asymmetrical forms (propaganda at the extreme) to symmetrical, two-way communication with shared information and decisions. The case study of the development of noise and air quality management plans at Sydney (Kingsford Smith) Airport would suggest a consultative policy process - yet one with which all parties were dissatisfied. Comparative studies of airport management communication strategies may prove of value in establishing what can realistically be achieved in the efficiency and effectiveness of public involvement in planning and policy development.

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