

ARGUMENTS FOR AND AGAINST COMMUNICATION OF POLICY INTENTIONS

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ABSTRACT

This article identifies, describes and analyzes arguments for and against more transparent government communication about its policy intentions. In our view the advantages from improved government communication are: (a) the Government can counterbalance misleading and/or incorrect information from the opposition; (b) communication about policy intentions can reduce and/or avoid possible public surprises, misunderstandings, resistance, frustrations and speculations, and increase efficiency; and (c) due to such communication, citizens are informed regarding several points of view, which is an important democratic value. We see the disadvantages of greater transparency as: (a) public money may be used to spread propaganda; (b) there is an increased risk of confusion between policy intentions and actual policy decisions; and (c) the Parliament is not the first body to be informed about the Government's intention.

INTRODUCTION

This article identifies, describes and analyzes the most important arguments for and against more transparent government communication about its policy intentions. In our view the advantages from improved government communication are: (a) the Government can counterbalance misleading and/or incorrect information from the opposition; (b) communication about policy intentions can reduce and/or avoid possible public surprises, misunderstandings, resistance, frustrations and speculations, and increase efficiency; and (c) due to such communication, citizens are informed regarding several points of view, which is an important democratic value. We see the disadvantages of greater transparency as: (a) public money may be used to spread propaganda; (b) there is an increased risk of confusion between policy intentions and actual policy decisions; and (c) the Parliament is not the first body to be informed about the Government's intention.

This introduction explains the goals and boundaries of our research and then explores the relative importance of more transparent public communication about policy intentions, and provides examples of the most disputed format of such communication, i.e. the use of publicly financed publicity (advertisements, leaflets), for communicating policy intentions.

What?

External public sector communication presents different challenges and may require additional effort compared to communication in the private sector, as is indicated by a

recent empirical study by Pandey and Garnett (2006) and Gelders, Bouckaert and Van Ruler (forthcoming). This article analyzes the arguments for and against external public communication about policy intentions or "policy that has been considered or adopted by a minister of a Government but that has not yet been adopted by a higher body such as the Government or the Parliament". Our research is conducted in the West European context of parliamentary governments in which the Executives are composed of teams of Prime Ministers and ministers that emanate from Parliament.

The arguments made during the debate about the admissibility and desirability of communication about policy intentions initially stems from the discourse about the pros and cons of openness vs. closeness of organizations, freedom of information in particular, and from literature regarding interactive policy making (e.g. Page 2001, p. 147-151). Although we specifically distinguish between communication about policy intentions and interactive policy-making (see below), some arguments for and against interactive policy-making are also applicable to communication about policy intentions. This article is based on the literature mentioned above as well as on the arguments mentioned in the recent Dutch debate on the governmental use of paid publicity in the formulation stage of the policy making process.

There is little empirical research available that supports or rejects specific arguments for or against public communication about policy intentions. Exceptions include the Dutch public monitoring and media analyses conducted in the case of the toll roads (see below) and the Belgian research conducted by Gelders (2005a). Gelders studied what citizens know about announced, but not yet adopted policies in some Belgian cases. Based on surveys, he concluded that even highly educated and involved respondents knew little about the most central elements of policy issues and much less than most Belgian citizens generally know about policies (see below). He showed that the huge number of policy announcements as well as poor communication about them caused confusion among citizens regarding what was only an intention and what was already a decision.

Consequently, this article is mainly a theoretical description of the arguments for and against.

Despite a close connection with interactive policy-making that is often present in the formulation stage of the policy-making process (e.g. Weeks 2000; Mayer, Edelenbos, and Monnikhof 2005), we explicitly distinguish communication about policy intentions from interactive policy-making. The former is characterized by unidirectional persuasion and argumentation while the latter is more explicitly characterized by a collective search for an answer to a policy problem (e.g. <http://www.minaz.nl/wallage/content/bijlagen.htm>).

The issue of communication about policy intentions has many interfaces with policy sciences, not all of which can be considered in this article. However, as an introduction to the subject, we mention some points that merit attention. Following Howlett and Ramesh (1996, p. 9-15) as well as Van de Graaf and Hoppe (1996), we must put the

distinction between 'not yet adopted policy' and 'adopted policy' in proper perspective. The stages of policy adoption and policy implementation are actually interwoven:¹

- (1) Policy may be formally decided while, in practice, not all decisions are final;
- (2) Policy may not be approved officially but, upon implementation, certain aspects become finalized;
- (3) Policies may be adopted as a whole or in parts.

WHY HAS PUBLIC COMMUNICATION ABOUT POLICY INTENTIONS BECOME SO IMPORTANT?

Communication about policy intentions has become increasingly important yet more delicate during the past decades. Explanations for these changes may be found in developments within politics, public administration, society, and the media.

Developments such as the move of national politics towards other state levels and towards other societal actors (media, multinationals, pressure groups) resulted in less autonomous power for those who govern. Traditional centers of power are being hollowed-out by a new governance in a context in which multiple actors and levels interact (e.g. Lowndes and Skelcher 1998; Bevir, Rhodes, and Weller 2003; Demortain 2004). Executive ministers are challenged to make a difference and to demonstrate their good intentions and efforts, also because citizens expect more efficient public performances or deeds (Brans, Facon, and Hoet 2003, p. 3). Public communication about policy intentions offers executive ministers an attractive way to demonstrate their good intentions.

Developments such as individualization explain why it is not easy for ministers to know what citizens think about policy intentions. Interacting with media and floating trial balloons can help revealing the extent to which people are for or against an idea or whether or not citizens are willing to accept policy changes. Floating trial balloons is a popular instrument used to facilitate in the preparation of legislation (Linsky 1986; Cook 2001). It is also a cheaper and more flexible alternative than interactive policy-making and it facilitates dealing with the shortcomings of the representative democracy (Meyer 2002; Louw 2005). The less pronounced ideological characteristics of present-day political parties has only sharpened the interest of politicians to distinguish themselves from (each) other(s). This is also illustrated in the huge amount of publicly communicated policy intentions during a premature phase of the policy-making process.

¹ The study of public administration shows two opposing views on policy and policy processes: the classical analytical view (policy considered as part of a policy-making process with distinct stages) versus the political view (policy as part of a continuum) (see e.g. Parsons, 1995; Howlett & Ramesh, 1996).

Following current media logics, content, representation and elbow-room given to the actors involved in political media coverage are steered by the preferences and the *modus operandi* of the media themselves rather than by current events (Van Praag 2004). As the overall ability of the media has increased, the reach of individual media and, in particular, that of the news program has decreased (Neijens and Sprenger 2005, p. 263). This competitive situation increased the importance of breaking the story and being the first to report on the policy intention of a minister. Striving for the attention of the viewer/listener/reader, the media does not always clearly mention if the ministerial message only deals with policy intentions or with already made policy decisions. Eye-catching headlines are at times more important than factual information or clarifications on the status of the issue within the policy-making process. The active interpretative role of the media (Patterson 1996), their preference for conflicts and their strategic considerations result in a strong preoccupation with what occurs before policy has officially been adopted (Van Praag 2001).

Paid publicity: most disputed

The developments mentioned above illustrate the importance as well as the controversy of governmental communication regarding policy intentions. The use of paid publicity such as newspaper ads and governmental leaflets to communicate policies that have not yet been adopted by the legislative assembly is a case in point. There is indeed a thin line between neutral public information provisions and political propaganda. The particular position of a minister may cast a shadow over the exact aim of the message: is it propaganda (personal or political) and therefore a misuse of public money, or is it supplying transparent information in a democratic state aimed at informing and involving citizens and societal organizations regarding the formation of a policy?²

The campaign regarding the reform of the United States Post Office raised similar questions (Linsky 1986). Leaflets in the United Kingdom on *Operation Rescue* and *Paying for Local Government: the Need for Change* did the same (Scammell 1999). Other pre-eminent examples include the dissemination of leaflets on the introduction of toll-roads by the Dutch Government (Kranendonk 2003), the dissemination of flyers on drug policies in Belgium (Gelders and Van Mierlo 2004), and governmental newspaper ads on 'Working longer' in Belgium (Gelders 2005a). Let us illustrate some of these a bit further:

² In public communication about policy intentions, several actors such as Members of Parliament, pressure groups, and the media are and/or can be involved. However, we focus on communication coming from a Minister of the Government about non-adopted parliamentary policies. This is the most controversial form of communication. The recent Dutch Advisory Committee on the Future of Government Communication (CTO, 2001), also known as the Wallage Committee, interprets the guidelines regarding informing the public about policy intentions in a more offensive manner. The Wallage Committee states that "the citizen has the right to know the content of the government's intentions and its motives as well. The citizen gets a lot of contrary information via news and paid information by the critics of the government's policy. So, it is absolutely reasonable that the government

a. Example 1: Newspaper ad on toll roads in the Netherlands

In 1999 and 2000, the Dutch Minister of Transport would like to introduce a (proof) toll-road system in the Netherlands (which was politically accepted in the governmental agreement). The powerful automobile lobby group ANWB and the popular national newspaper De Telegraaf were opponents of this idea. They organized a large-scale campaign against it by distributing stickers among drivers and by utilizing negative media coverage on the issue. The Minister argued that press interviews were not powerful enough to respond to such an intensive protest. At the Minister's insistence, the Ministry of Transport published a full-colour one page ad in all Dutch national newspapers and main regional newspapers in October 2000. This initiative was largely criticized because of the costs involved and the fact that the Government communicated about policy intentions that were not yet adopted by Parliament. In addition, the governmental ad did not clearly communicate the status of the policy issue by using affirmative expressions such as "In this advertisement we mention the most important policy measures" (instead of policy intentions).

b. Example 2: Governmental leaflet on drug policy in Belgium

Between 2001 and 2004, communication about the Belgian federal cannabis legislation can be called "poor" due to (among other factors) incomplete, untimely, inconsistent, tendentious and polemical information provisions from the federal ministers. In February 2001, the Government tried to shed some light on both the policy and the status of the legislation by advertising in newspapers. The Federal Minister for Public Health also distributed 600,000 leaflets to explain the new policy. Discussion on the leaflets focused on the use of public funds in support of policy proposals as well as the manner in which the leaflet presented the new law. Critics and even colleagues within the Federal Government objected to what they alleged were omissions and misleading inaccuracies. The leaflet did not mention the fact that the new bill was still to be adopted by Parliament, neither that the Council of State's advice was still required, nor that the law had yet to be examined for compatibility with international treaties. The leaflet strongly anticipated the political process in explicitly stating that the bill would be accepted within a few months. In reality, it took over two years before the bill was enacted.

We now turn to the arguments in favor of public communication about policy intentions.

can also use all the information channels in the formulation stage of policy making." We focus on the use of paid advertisements and leaflets as these are the most disputed communication formats in this context.

ARGUMENTS FOR COMMUNICATION OF POLICY INTENTIONS

Counterbalancing misleading or incorrect information from opponents and the media

An important argument for communication about policy intentions (by paid publicity) from the Government is that other actors such as the opposition, pressure groups and the media communicate one-sidedly or incorrectly about the policy intentions of the Government (Tiemeijer and Rijnja 2001; CTO 2001). If it wants to be heard, the Government needs to communicate via paid publicity. When its communication is restricted to the free press (press interviews, press conferences) only, it would be too hard to apply counter-pressure to the misleading or incorrect communication from other actors such as the media and opponents.

More efficient

Another argument for communicating policy intentions is that it can help the Government to implement and maintain the adopted policy. As a result, public policy becomes more efficient. Many policies within the formulation process are not controversial. In such cases, the Government only needs to communicate about a 'reservation of acceptance'. As a result, citizens and organizations can prepare for a policy that will most likely be adopted. If, for instance, the rate modifications for the subsidies to be used in January the following year are only published "after acceptance by the parliament during the last meeting in December" (translated), Tiemeijer and Rijnja (2001: 190), consider this inefficient for the implementation of public policy.

It is also argued that communication about policy intentions reduces or avoids unintended consequences later on, such as surprises, misunderstandings, resistance, frustrations, and speculation among citizens and organizations. The extent of support and resistance by the public as well as the importance of the counterarguments of citizens become clarified, which thus creates opportunities for fine-tuning the policy or for strengthening the argumentation for the (intended) policy.

More democratic

Seydel, Van Ruler and Scholten (2002) state that the openness and freedom of information has evolved during the last few decades. In the past, openness and freedom of information were crucial conditions for public information provisions in the service of democracy. This idea has now been expanded to include the openness and transparency of the policy-making process itself. Presently, organizations must be good in the traditional sense of the result, but they also have to be good in the current sense of the procedure: they must be accountable to the often complicated working and policy-making procedures providing the basis of their qualitative products or services (Bouckaert 1995). Today, there seems to be a consensus on the use of paid publicity (e.g. campaigns) if the Government aims to stimulate citizens in participating in societal debates and thus seeks to stimulate interaction in the policy-making processes.

The proponents of more proactive communication about policy intentions (communication initiated by the Government itself) stress that voters must continuously be kept informed about the political points of view and about whether they are

controversial. The Government would also more easily gain a realistic understanding of the possible reactions by population segments through publicly communicating policy intentions. Some authors even state that one bypasses the intermediary bodies of deliberative democracy, i.e. the organizations, pressure groups and parties that in the past mediated political issues and brokered consensus. Consequently, there would be more direct democracy (Meyer 2002).

Defenders of public communication about policy intentions also state that this type of communication clarifies what is going on within the political world ("the organized difference in opinion"). Politics would become more exciting and less detached from everyday life and people. As a result, the broad public would become more interested in politics and policies. We now turn to the arguments against public communication about policy intentions.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST COMMUNICATION ABOUT POLICY INTENTIONS

State propaganda

Opponents consider it dangerous when the Government uses public finances to communicate policy intentions unless its communication is explicitly meant to stimulate participation in interactive policy-making processes (Volmer, 2000). The Government would become too powerful in comparison to the opponents of governmental policy. In addition, such ministerial or governmental communication may easily focus on the minister (as an individual politician) rather than on the content of the intended policy.

Less efficient

Some believe that prematurely publishing policy intentions may disturb the formulation or development of policy and eventually also its success. Government may have wasted time and money when the plan is not implemented. Moreover, the internal deliberative processes between politicians and civil servants would come under pressure and thus hamper the civil servants' operations (Van Gisteren and Wassenaar 2003, p. 29-30).

Less democratic

The final important argument against governmental communication about policy intentions deals with the democratic characteristics of the policy-making process. The Parliament is no longer the first body to be informed of the Government's intention. Government over-anticipates parliamentary adoption.

Finally, there is the risk of confusing policy intentions with policy decisions on two accounts: the fact that politicians often communicate about their policy intentions via the media and/or because politicians, media, etc. communicate in an incomplete and inconsistent manner.

Gelders' (2005a) empirical study shows how poor public communication about policy intentions cause confusion in two particular Belgian cases: the abolition of the television and radio license fee in Flanders (the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium) and the federal cannabis policy. A few months before the abolition of the television and radio license fee, the contact center of the Flanders Authority received 1,625 calls a day about the abolition only. Normally this contact center received about 1,700 calls a day regardless of the specific issue (Gelders & Walrave, 2003). Only 12.3% of the highly educated citizens that were interviewed in 2002 provided correct answers to questions about the abolition, such as "Is the television and radio fee abolished". In comparison, 30% of (Belgian) citizens correctly answered questions about policy measures as was demonstrated by Dewachter (1993). In the case of the abolition of the television and radio license fee, this score was much lower even though the respondents were familiar with politics in general.

The results of Gelders' case study of the knowledge of young people on the cannabis legislation were roughly similar. Two surveys - one survey in March 2003 and one in December 2004 - demonstrated that there was great confusion about the status and the content of the legislation. This was confirmed by the large number of calls to the contact center of the Flemish Association of Alcohol and other Drug Problems about cannabis legislation.

COMMUNICATION ABOUT POLICY INTENTIONS IS CONTROVERSIAL

Communication about policy intentions is controversial: (a) several negative features make such communication objectionable and (b) the question of publicly paid publicity (governmental leaflets, newspaper ads) in the policy preparation stage is particularly controversial. In the following, we attempt to offer a balanced appreciation of these controversies.

(a) Communication about policy intentions is characterized by many positive aspects. Such communication is not only positive for the image of a politician, party or Government, but also for the policy a minister would like to realize. As such, image management is not objectionable. A positive image of a minister may also be good for his/her policy and vice versa. Sometimes, it is advisable to communicate policy intentions in an influencing (commercial/canvassing) way as to stimulate citizens' participation in a societal debate. It is also a way in which to open up debates with other politicians and citizens on possible new policies. Thanks to this communication, other politicians may be pushed to publish and argue their point of view or to go along with the ministerial intended policy for which the cooperation of other politicians (ministers, MP's) is necessary. Consequently, policy may be realized more efficiently. To the extent that policies strive for noble goals, there is something to say for publicly communicating policy intentions. But how far can a minister go in this matter? When does the activation end? When does putting pressure on colleagues start?

Some politicians, communication professionals and academics plead for discussing all policy ideas internally before going public, as was illustrated in Gelders' research. Gelders states: "If you act in this way, the policy will not be enacted." (Gelders, 2005a). The question is what happens when all the means (putting coalition partners openly under pressure) become admissible for reaching particular goals (realizing the policy)? In that case, only the soft law of ministerial accountability plays a role. Although there is no real legal sanction, this soft law is not unimportant. If the voter disapproves of such a governmental communication style, he/she can blame the Government or Minister. A Minister who continuously communicates his policy intentions without taking into consideration the other parties risks things blowing up in his own face (getting the same treatment, public disapproval, etc.).

It must be said that in some cases governments do not want to signal their policy intentions in advance. For example, the US Government was very secretive about the recent increase in taxes on US expatriates as part of the Tax Law approved in May 2006 because the proponents did not want lobbyists to have a chance to mobilize support against the proposal.

(b) Influencing communication about policy intentions may help accomplishing noble goals. From a political science and communication science perspective, we argue that governmental communication about policy intentions should principally meet quality

criteria such as a complete, a factual, timely, consistent, and comprehensible information provision.³

These criteria should also be applied to the information provisions occurring in the (free) press as stated by the politicians themselves (and thus not only in paid publicity). Political actions probably become less sexy in such a scenario. Ultimately, however, striving for quality criteria, as mentioned above, is good for the legitimacy of governmental operations.

Based on in-depth interviews of 32 Belgian governmental communication professionals, Gelders (2005a) concluded that they underestimate the societal and financial costs of poor public information provisions about policy intentions. At times there is still too great a focus on the specific forms of such communication (such as the use of paid publicity) and not enough attention for the quality of other forms (such as press interviews, conferences, etc.). The reasoning behind the positive view on press communication seems to be that such communication is cheaper than paid publicity utilizing the mass media (leaflets, newspaper ads, etc.) and that the press knows what is just an intention and what is already a decision according to the interviewees (although they also admit that the press is not always capable and is certainly not always willing to distinguish between policy intentions and policy measures). Above that, several political journalists admit that they do not always know the exact status of policy intentions (see Lahousse 2005). Poor press communication may also be costly as such communication can create confusion leading to setting up government campaigns, staffing contact centers etc. (Gelders 2005b).

This statement is not a matter of pessimism but, in our view, a realistic assessment of the outputs and costs of one aspect of communication about policy intentions that has so far received little attention from the policy-makers and has been scarcely the subject of academic research.

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³ When it is about operational issues implying financial consequences to the general public, it is self-evident that the information must be provided in accordance with the quality standards mentioned above. But should these standards be applied in all cases? For example, take the monetary policy intentions from the Federal Reserve (Fed). "Because it would like to manipulate expectations and pursue a time-inconsistent policy, the Fed cannot reveal its policy objectives precisely and credibly. It can, however, communicate some information about its goals through the 'cheap talk' mechanisms of Crawford and Sobel: making announcements that are imprecise, and only give ranges within which these goals may lie."

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