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Article in *Kybernetes* · May 2011

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An argument
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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to argue that active citizenship and organisational transparency are necessary to increase stakeholders' influence in policy processes. Active citizenship is necessary to involve stakeholders in policy processes and organisational transparency is necessary to improve communications between them and policy makers.

Design/methodology/approach – First, this paper explains a conceptual framework to understand communications in social systems. Second, it illustrates its application with reference to concrete policies in England.

Findings – It is found that for active citizenship it is necessary not only to increase stakeholders' competencies but also make effective those organisational structures relevant to the policy issues of concern. However, and this is a key reason to increase people's competencies, these structures are the outcome of self-organising processes shaped by those who are better organised, with more resources and in positions of power.

Research limitations/implications – Beyond informed and well-grounded dialogues, communications between citizens and policy makers happen through organisation structures that activate some resources at the expense of others and involve some stakeholders at the expense of others. Unless these structures make possible balanced communications between them, citizens will find it difficult to influence policy makers.

Originality/value – The paper sees the policy for active citizenship and community empowerment in England under the lens of a cybernetic framework.

Keywords Cybernetics, England, Organisational structures, Citizenship, Communities, Empowerment

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Though at its core the emphasis of this paper is theoretical, it uses as a referent the English policy for active citizenship and community empowerment. We explain the evolution of this policy and its implementation over the past decade. The theoretical framework recognises strengthening stakeholders' competencies and organisational transparency as necessary to make stronger the influence of stakeholders in policies such as social services, education and nuclear waste management.

The idea of organisation we use here is that of a *closed network* of people in interaction and not that of an institution legally established; an organisation can emerge from institutionally distributed resources sharing focus on the same policy (Beer, 1979; Espejo, 2000). The idea of citizenship we use here is that of a property that emerges



penetrate the “scopic” aspects of nature, amplifying our experiences with the eyes. As such, our construction of the world was dominated by physics and the machines to control it. It was on this platform, among other aspects, that we were able to travel further afield and discover new worlds and were able to see “invisible” worlds that gave us new insights about our relations with other living entities. The laws of physics were the platform for the development of rational mechanics and the design of machines that helped us producing the industrial revolution; the co-evolution of the technologies of the seventeenth century with more powerful models of the physical world gave us the chance to develop new machines and harness nature’s powers in desirable directions.

Similar processes of co-evolution are being responsible for the on-going transformation of our organisations. These experiential learning cycles emerge from perceived challenges in the world. Dealing with threats such as terrorism or global warming or dealing with opportunities such as introducing new services in the market or empowering communities to make their own decisions, requires from us far more than trial and error; they are too complex and time is too short. We need ingenuity, systemic thinking and *resources* to anticipate and avoid undesirable outcomes. These are all problem-solving situations that share a common structure; persons or collectives, limited by their biology and organisation, want to achieve desirable outcomes in a surrounding that poses challenges that are indeed difficult to overcome. For instance, when old civilisations confronted the challenge to move heavy stones from quarries to burial sites they were not stopped by the apparent impossibility of the task; they basically developed means to simplify the task, such as constructing roads and they developed means to enhance their physical strength, such as lifting equipment and transportation vehicles. The first type of response was all about *attenuating* (selecting) the complexity of the task and the second was all about *amplifying* their capacity to do the task. Their performance depended on the balance they achieved between attenuation and amplification. The less good they were in constructing roads the more difficult it was for them to move construction material. Quite naturally they went through long-term learning processes that eventually made them very good at building, say, pyramids.

An explanatory principle of these learning processes is Ashby’s (1964) Law of Requisite Variety; in his words “Only variety absorbs variety”. Or in Espejo’s (1989, p. 80) words “The complexity at the disposal of the regulator has to match the situation’s *residual complexity*”. Residual variety is the complexity that those in the situation itself are unable to absorb by self-regulation and self-organisation but needs to be absorbed to achieve required performance; this is the variety that needs to be absorbed by the regulator.

Early on, when knowledge and practice to build pyramids was small, the architects responsible for their erection might have required several decades to complete them. However, as individual and organisational learning took place most likely workers increased their capacity to respond locally – by themselves – to more and more situational variety. This had the effect of reducing the residual variety relevant to their supervisors, who perhaps used this as an opportunity to improve processes and collectively all had the chance to build up pyramids quicker and better.

The Law of Requisite Variety is a relational construct; it is about our relations with relevant and challenging situations. Living in any context, particularly for citizens in an increasingly complex society, poses challenges – it is a learning experience – suggesting that one way or the other we (either as citizens or collectives) are always finding ways to

How is it possible for local people to influence those at the global level? How is it possible for distributed customers to influence the activities of an enterprise? These are neither problems of occasional conversations and dialogues nor problems of making on-line surveys once in a while; these are problems of co-influence that happen through recurrent communications between stakeholders and decision makers. Since direct communications are seldom possible, it is through structures that they must happen. These structures, for significant policies, emerge largely from self-organising processes but are also influenced by purposeful decisions that often produce structural fragmentation and undesirable consequences for current and future stakeholders. Self-organisation is a distributed learning process that depends on trial and error communications to produce a viable organisational system from multiple unrelated parts. However, trial and error may take too long; decisions are necessary to speed up this learning in desirable directions. We can learn from nature which are successful strategies to manage complexity and use them to design viable systems; these are strategies that on the whole rely on self-organisation and self-regulation to reduce the residual variety that is relevant to keep a situation under control. In organisational terms, the challenge for policy makers is working out the relevant organisational system consistent with their purposes and fostering interaction and communication that enhance self-organisation and self-regulation in the benefit of stakeholders in the longer run. If they understand the principles for viability, they only have to nudge communications to create, regulate and produce desirable policies, sensitive to stakeholders' interest, values and norms. Stafford Beer's viable system model clarifies communication requirements for viability and in particular it helps visualising the complexity management strategies entailed by the intricate relations between policy makers and stakeholders. This model clarifies that effective complexity management strategies entail both structural recursion and effective mechanisms for policy formulation and policy implementation (Espejo, 1989).

The traditional and pervasive hierarchical structures that restrict the development of people's talents and force the views of the few in power over the most are superseded by non-hierarchical relations (Beer, 1975). In democratic enterprises, we are more and more aware of the undesirable consequences of hierarchies. Enabling effective self-regulation and self-organisation is desirable and offer a way out of hierarchies through autonomous units' purposeful alignment of their interests with those of the global society. But, even in hierarchical structures autonomy emerges simply because the Law of Requisite Variety asserts itself; if managers do not nurture the large complexity absorption capacity of functional self-regulation and self-organisation they will not have requisite variety to control the situation; the residual variety relevant to them will go beyond their response capacity. But autonomy by happenstance is unlikely to be desirable; dysfunctional autonomy is common when there is no alignment of purposes. Effective complexity management happens when the autonomous systems emerging within autonomous systems produce *the organisation's shared purposes* rather than the self-interests of some groups. The structural implication of this embedding of autonomous systems within autonomous systems within autonomous systems and so forth is *structural recursion*, that is, the same structure for policy making and policy implementation recurs within all autonomous units (Beer, 1979). This is an important issue; explaining how to work out this structural recursion is beyond this paper however, it should not be interpreted as a simple decomposition of organisational activities (see paper by Espejo and Kurapatwa in this issue of *Kybernetes* (Espejo and Kurapatwa, 2011)).

- (1) *Relationship of achievement* between those actors implementing a policy and those stakeholders affected by the organisation's products, services and externalities.
- (2) *Relationship of cohesion* between all the actors constituting the organisation's "inside and now" (e.g. policy makers, experts, administrators, professionals and workers in general); at the extremes, these relationships can be governed by the authoritarian tendencies of those in power or by the mutual respect among all actors that enables autonomy within a cohesive organisation.
- (3) *Relationship of stretching* between those concerned with *the outside and then* in the organisation and agents of all kinds in its problematic environment. At the extremes, this relationship may be controlled by greedy lobbyists, vociferous unrepresentative minorities and conservative bureaucrats or by empowered citizens, enlightened entrepreneurs and innovative bureaucracies. This stretching puts pressure on improving organisational processes to invent new responses.
- (4) *Relationship of policy making* between policy makers and those in the organisation focused on the "outside and then" and the "inside and now". Policy makers need to orchestrate conversations that enhance the structuring of robust policy options.
- (5) *Relationship of ownership and inclusion* between policy makers and the owners of the organisational system. For commercial enterprises, owners are shareholders in the first place but also are all those affected by their externalities. For social enterprises in democratic societies, owners are the people to whom these policy makers are accountable. In particular, these are relationships of inclusion and legitimacy which suggest a relationship of social ownership of the organisational system.
- (6) *Relationship of organisational citizenship* between the organisational actors and those providing normative context to their activities, for example, those in society who are guardians of societal values.

These relationships are responsible for the performance of the organisational system, which is as good as their qualities allows it to be.

Through the *relationship of ownership and inclusion* local stakeholders can influence the identity of the organisational system as they elect representatives or buy shares that reflect their values and concerns. For a more direct, participative and deliberative influence, stakeholders can directly leverage their power, first, through their moment-to-moment communications with local implementers (*achievement relationship*) and second, through their dialogues and other forms of engagement with policy makers and experts (*stretching relationship*). The first of these direct forms of leverage are communications that transmit the customers' views and concerns about the implementers' achievements to policy makers. The influence of this *local feedback*, that is, its capacity to leverage customers' power on global decision-making processes depends on the quality of communications within the organisational system (*relationship of cohesion*); do managers, experts, professionals and policy makers know the reality of the implementers' activities; have they built responsible trust with implementers? do they have a realistic grasp of these activities? If these communications are weak, and they often are, customers' communications with the organisation will fail to reach global policy makers. The second of these direct forms of leverage is the stakeholders' stretching of global actors, through

their relations (i.e. its structure) in order to conserve identity. As such, an organisation is largely *structure determined* in the sense that everything that happens in it or to it, happens in each moment determined by its structure at that moment. Its behavior is determined by its structure at any moment and not by the inputs coming from its medium. That is, as the components' connectivity gain in strength the organisation's complexity grows making it increasingly difficult to specify from the outside what happens in it; as the organisation is buffeted by disturbances all that an observer sees is accommodations determined by the organisation's structure rather than responses to information (Maturana, 2002, p. 15). The meanings within the organisation of external communications are determined by its structure rather than by the environmental agents' intended meanings.

Recurrent interactions produce relationships between components that produce a structure determined organisation that conserves identity in its medium. In other words, the organisational system is produced by its components' structural couplings and these *couplings or relations* produce the relationships that the organisation conserves in its interactions with agents in a changing medium.

The dynamics of these structural couplings have significant implications for the boundaries of an organisation. Organisations produce meanings as an outcome of structural couplings rather than of people's formal roles. If some of the "actors" are *structurally decoupled* from other organisational actors, this fact affects the organisation's boundaries. This fact may make the boundaries of organisations much more fluid than it is often granted; weakly coupled actors within a "formal organisation" may have less influence in the organisation's operational boundaries than external *agents* strongly coupled to some of the actors. For instance, an actor's structural coupling with agents may transform them into organisational actors, though formally they may still be considered as external agents (cf. final section). This makes apparent that an organisation's boundaries emerge from existing structural couplings whether or not they match the institution's formal boundaries.

We are now, in what follows, ready to use this conceptual framework to work out its relevance in making sense of policy processes. We focus on policy for active citizenship in England.

Policy for active citizenship in England

The above theoretical framework has emphasised the need for effective organisational communications to increase stakeholders' influence in policy processes. Now, we turn our attention to active citizenship as a complementary requirement for this purpose. Strong citizenship has an influence on the achievement, stretching and ownership relationships of the above transparency model.

The evolution of a policy

Democratic deficit is a concern of politicians and social scientists in many democracies. Among varied concerns, politicians want to appreciate the roles of learning and stakeholders' organisation in building citizenship capabilities in communities.

The interest in citizenship is centuries old, but much more recently since the 1990s political philosophers have been paying particular attention to this issue. The debates between liberals and communitarians have made more apparent that the concept of citizenship goes beyond people belonging to a community; it integrates community membership and demands for justice (Kymlicka and Norman, 1994, p. 352). From

published in a National Learning Framework and ALAC was renamed TAKE PART (Take-Part, 2006). The old hubs were reconstituted as regional units of the Take Part National Network, with the commitment of disseminating the learning framework and the ALAC learning lessons.

The new Department for CLG produced a White Paper "Strong and Prosperous Communities" (CLG, 2006) where it recognised the value of the Take Part Learning Framework to increase active citizenship and included it in the "Action Plan for Community Empowerment: Building on Success" to be implemented across the regions (CLG, 2007).

In 2008, after a wide consultation process, the Department for CLG publishes the White Paper 2008 "Communities in Control; real people, real power" (CLG, 2008). This paper maintains the government's commitment on active citizenship learning for adults and building on the Take Part Network successful experiences the CLG agreed to fund 19 Take Part Local Pathfinders and nine Take Part Regional Champions, both supported by a number of national programmes, such as Training for Trainers. *The local pathfinders were set up as partnerships between local authorities and community-based programmes, with the purpose of disseminating the Take Part approach to improve skills, knowledge and confidence of citizens and to improve the structures and processes for community engagement and empowerment.*

Take Part was consolidated as a bottom-up learning approach, where the local learning lessons define the content and approaches for producing regional and national learning resources. These resources are then used locally and their outcomes are transmitted again to the regions and the national level in a continuous process to keep them in touch with the local realities. This is conceived as a continuous process of reflection of that is locally effective for local people to influence decisions that affect them.

The UK Labour Government intensified until the election in May 2010 its policy of generating strategies for public participation and learning citizenship to transform citizens from passive recipients of public services to active members of the communities (Mayo, 2010). Now, the new Coalition Government is building the Big Society Agenda, a cross-government initiative, to promote local participation in services and policy processes. This is a new initiative and still is too early to know whether it will build upon the learning lessons of the last decade.

Whatever the future of the policy for active citizenship may be, it makes apparent governmental efforts to connect with communities and provides them with the strength and skills to influence policies relevant to their daily lives. The ALAC pilot programme led to a significant number of local partnerships and regional champions and a national network committed to its dissemination. Throughout their implementation, the ALAC/Take Part programmes have been developed by community practitioners and researchers, who have taken significant steps in this very complex journey. There is no doubt about the government's commitment to strengthen the achievement, stretching and ownership relations of our transparency model. Yet, still a majority of citizens feel that they cannot influence decisions affecting their local areas (CLG, 2010). This paper makes apparent that increasing local influence on local and national policies is much more complex than increasing citizen's competencies. Indeed, increasing local competencies and skills is important and in that sense the policy for active citizenship in England has been relevant and much

that triggered the decisions. The cost of not designing effective structures can be high as the example of “The tortured life of baby P” tragically demonstrated in the London district of Haringey (*The Economist*, 2008). This case illustrates that local influence in global policies inescapably goes through the complex, and often ineffective, structures of existing governance.

Not long ago headlines of newspapers in the UK were focused on the death of a one and half year old child in the hands of his mother and two others. The child was in the list of the children “at-risk” of social services in the London district of Haringey. In the last six months of his life, the child had been seen not less than 60 times by doctors, social workers and others. In spite of that, the child had a cruel death. An *earlier public inquiry triggered by a similar event in the same locality* had recommended yearly *performance reports* from all social services in the context of an overhaul of social services in the whole country, which was duly carried out. However, sadly, this response was not good enough to avoid the recurrence of a similar event. Not long after baby P’s death, the UK’s children’s protection regulator issued a report. The new tragedy was making apparent the inadequacy of the earlier response; in the future *visits* by the national agency to every children’s protection unit in the country were to take place once a year to assess performance on the ground. This seems fine however, from the perspective of the organisational system for children’s protection in England, the regulators were again off the mark; children’s protection services are part of local authorities and not directly of a national agency, thus in terms of structural recursion it should be expected that the monitoring of their activities is done by their respective local authorities and not by a national body. The reason for this is simple, one must assume that corporate managers in local authorities negotiate with children’s protection services (as with all other service departments) the allocation of resources for their programmes and therefore that they should be the ones assessing their capabilities and monitoring over time, and not once a year, their performance. In the end, it should be the responsibility of each local authority that services’ performances are adequate. Local authorities where this resources bargaining is weak are more likely to experience poor performance. In particular, it should be more difficult for citizens, however empowered they might be, communicate service achievement problems to their own local authorities, let alone to national policy makers. Unfortunately, the recurrence in one authority of such dreadful events points the finger to that authority. Yet, at the time no one was asking publicly for a revision of the Haringey District Council’s processes and organisation structure. Even if the local people experiencing day in and day out the achievements of the children’s protection services were empowered to influence the local authority, it can be argued that this authority had limited influence in children’s protection services since monitoring of these services was carried out by the national level. From a structural perspective, to have a national regulator monitoring the performance of hundreds of local social services suggests a poor complexity management strategy (i.e. micromanagement), but more significantly, it suggests a lack of appreciation of what monitoring should be all about. It should not be a means of hierarchical control, but a means of building up trust and cohesion within the local authority (See cohesion relationship). Trust and cohesion are unlikely to happen with a well-rehearsed annual visit of the national regulator. Here is where we can appreciate more strongly the difference between receiving information and maintaining communications.

Epistemologically, we have reinforced that these processes are the outcome of structural couplings in the operational domain of moment-to-moment interactions and to a lesser degree in the abstractions of however powerful descriptions we might offer of human processes. Furthermore, the self-reference of structure determined, autonomous organisations, such as those delivering public services and those in their environment stretching them increases the difficulties of communications and this is in itself an issue for further studies.

The framework of this paper applies equally to public services, market-oriented enterprises and all kinds of third sector social enterprises. All of them share, at the abstract level of this framework, the same challenge of finding strategies to manage the complexity of their purposeful activities. Aspects of this framework have been used to study nuclear waste management and other industries in Europe (Andersson *et al.*, 2006; Wene and Espejo, 1999).

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An argument
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