

performing governance through networks

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doi:10.1057/palgrave.eps.2210034

Abstract

Governance networks typically function in the absence of clearly defined constitutional rules. Network actors, therefore, have to develop a common understanding of the problem as well as build a basis for mutual trust. We suggest that discourse-analytical and dramaturgical concepts can be helpful instruments to analyse these dynamics of trust building in governance networks.

Keywords governance networks; institutional ambiguity; discourse analysis; dramaturgical analysis

*'All the world is not, of course, a stage,
but the crucial ways in which it isn't
are not easy to specify.'*
(Goffman, 1959: 72)

NETWORK REALITIES: 'WHAT TO DO WITH THE ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES?'

Politics has changed, both in nature and in topography. Even if we would like to continue to regard the state as the sole legitimate locus of political power and authority, we have to acknowledge that the state often lacks the power to solve pressing policy problems on its own. This is what is addressed by the literature on governance networks. Many of our most pressing problems are transnational in nature and require some form

of political collaboration, both with governmental agencies from other states and with NGOs of various kinds. The governance of international financial markets, global environmental change, migration or terrorism, to name just a few major contemporary policy issues, are central tasks for politics that cannot be meaningfully addressed under the comfortable cupola of 'classical-modernist' political institutions (Hajer, 2003).

In the classical modernist conception, political institutions complied with an implicit conceptual 'matrouchka' system. Like Russian dolls, governments were conceived of as fitting inside one another (local fits into regional, fits into national, fits into international). The various administrative units derived their legitimacy from professionalism, the input of scientific expertise and, above all, the democratic authority granted by representative

democratic councils. Governance networks break with that logic. Governance networks are relatively stable sets of interdependent, but operationally autonomous and negotiating actors, focused on joint problem solving. Governance networks characteristically consist of a polycentric, often trans-national and almost by necessity intercultural collaboration of multiple actors.

In terms of political legitimacy, contemporary network governance differs from 'normal politics', or, as we called it above, classical-modernist politics. Those who were on top in the classical-modernist order, the elected representatives, now often occupy a more peripheral role. Indicative is the sigh that can be heard when people operating in such networks have worked out a policy solution that they all regard as fair and intelligent: 'What do we do with the elected representatives?' To suggest that contemporary network realities push the classical-modernist order aside would surely be wrong, yet there most certainly is a discrepancy between the constitutional order and the network realities. At this point, we cannot say whether governance networks are to be seen as an improvement in democratic governance or as a threat to a democracy. That remains essentially an empirical question.

In this contribution, we do not deal with the issue of evaluation (Sørensen, 2005), but focus on understanding the operational dynamics of governance networks. The key question that concerns us is that it remains unclear how network governance functions in the absence of stable, routinised rules and norms.

THE LOSS OF POLITICAL RITUAL

Governance networks often cut across political jurisdictions. In such cases, there is no single shared 'constitution' that specifies where and how a legitimate

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decision is to be taken and what rules are to be followed. Similarly, there is no stipulation or tacit understanding of what rituals amplify the fact that a decision has been reached and that implementation is forthcoming. What is absent, are not rules *per se*, but the consensus about which rules should be applied. Two terms can help to clarify the negotiation that takes place in governance networks: institutional ambiguity and multi-signification. We propose to call these the two 'conditions' of network governance. Network governance is marked by the condition of *institutional ambiguity* as there are no agreed upon norms, procedures, or 'constitution' to predetermine where and how a legitimate decision is to be taken. The condition of *multi-signification* refers to the fact that actors may conceive of the world in different terms, which implies that the very meanings at stake for the participants are often unclear to each other. This is because the problems that lead to the emergence of governance networks almost always transgress political boundaries. Even when actors employ the same terms, we should appreciate that they might understand these concepts in terms of the different systems of signification they bring to the situation.

If one starts with the assumption that network governance is a multi-actor, poly-centric and almost by necessity an

intercultural affair, then the first analytical question is of how coherence is possible, how actors from wide-ranging backgrounds and often operating under the briefs linked to different constitutional systems of rules work out a mode of operation that makes 'joint governance' possible in the first place (Shachar, 2001). The lack of constitutional rules immediately raises the question of how actors agree on policy actions, if there is some hidden governing mechanism in the absence of a constitutionally agreed upon set of rules. And the observation that most of these networks are logically multi-cultural in composition¹ adds the question of what systems of signification participants bring to the situation, how understanding across these systems is achieved and how mutual trust in policy implementation and compliance can be secured. In other words: how do these networks work?

Our answer here is blunt and simple: network governance is performed. The essential instability, the absence of shared rules, the need to collaborate across systems of signification: these are the conditions that ensure that the very joint *experience* of collaboration becomes the key reference in securing such essential components of 'good' governance as shared knowledge, trust and a reciprocal understanding of conditions under which the various parties have to operate. This does not bring us back to behaviouralism after a historical spell of structuralism and post-structuralism; performance is a concept that mediates between the individual and the context, or, as we like to call it, between the setting and the act (see below).

It is perfectly OK to suggest that network governance is a process of negotiation (Torfing, 2005) as long as we appreciate that the object of this negotiation comprises much more than the solutions alone. Because of the conditions of institutional ambiguity and multi-signifi-

cation, participants first and foremost have to develop a shared understanding of what the problem 'really' is and what it is they are actually talking about. As no single language or constitution can be imposed, actors also have to work out the rules according to which (legitimate) decisions are to be made as well as secure the mutual trust needed to consolidate policy solutions. This implies that to understand network governance we have to come to grips with the way in which governance now requires *in situ* enactment.

NETWORKS AND DISCOURSE

It is characteristic of governance networks that they only build up their strength over time. Coming from different backgrounds actors initially find themselves in a state of, what we call above, multi-signification and institutional ambiguity. Part of this is that in network governance each participant brings his/her own particular identity as stakeholder or agency representative to the dialogue. Only as the network actors try to negotiate a common understanding of the problem at hand do they also begin to develop shared and complementary identities (Innes and Booher, 2000: 21). Governance networks provide arenas in which actors argue, explain and justify themselves and (re)interpret history, thereby creating frameworks for a continuity of argument and an interpretation of competing identities and loyalties. These institutional frameworks encourage an informed matching of principles to concrete situations: What is appropriate behaviour for me in this situation: What does it mean to be a proper political person? (March and Olsen, 1995).

But how do actors come to share such meanings? We know a great deal about the way in which meaning is conveyed in policy making (Gusfield, 1981; Yanow,

1993; Yanow, 1996). Discourse analysis is by now an established method of making sense of shared meanings. Studying discursive exchanges illuminates the particular language that actors employ within governance networks, and how this provides stability, coherence and productivity. Language has since long been recognised as a system of signification that not only pictures the world but profoundly shapes our view of it in the first place (Fischer and Forester, 1993). Hence by looking at language-in-use we might be able to trace how a disparate group of actors finds ways to address public problems in a way that participants all see as meaningful. Analysing language-in-use we may infer policy discourses, here understood as an ensemble of ideas, concepts and categorisations through which meaning is allocated to social and physical phenomena, and which is produced and reproduced in an identifiable set of practices (Hajer, 1995).

The analysis of governance networks as discourse can illuminate the bonding in networks that, initially, may seem disjoint and unstructured. One well-known way of dealing with the complexity of policy making with a widely differing group of actors is to find a language that all actors can relate to. Productive networks would be characterised by a particular discourse stabilising the interaction over time. Discourse is then not only a policy language, but also includes a shared identification of core problems that need to be resolved, and possibly a shared outlook as to what sort of operational strategies one should be looking for to help resolve the public problems identified. An effective governance network would thus be functioning as a 'discourse coalition' comprised of actors who share a particular way of conceiving the problem at hand. That shared discourse would help one understand how such a network coheres and maintains its salience over time. What is more, such a discourse analysis could

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explain changes in networks and why it is that some networks become more central and others more peripheral over time.

An example of network governance can be found in the interconnected domains of European spatial/transport/environmental politics. Over the 1990s, policy makers across domains and at various levels started to employ a language in which the policy problems and solutions were seen in terms of 'missing links', development through improved 'connectivity' or the importance of 'flows' and 'mobility'. In the sphere of transport proper, the EU promotes the development of a 'Trans-european Network' (TEN) of interconnected transport links. Yet this TENs discourse is much more than simply a sectoral policy. It essentially structures thinking and action about European spatial development in a much wider field (Richardson, 1997; Hajer, 2000). Here the notion of a 'transeuropean transport network' functions in the context of what we call a 'transnational policy discourse' that breaks through various administrative boundaries. Hence, it is the discourse that keeps the governance network together and explains the actions that the various participants see as appropriate.

One can find evidence of TENs discourse at various levels of government; not only in the EU documents but also in the Dutch national planning reports, as well as in the way in which regional provinces and cities repositioned themselves

in a wider European context by drawing on the concepts of the discourse of *Europe of Flows*. More remarkable still, the idea of conceiving of nature as a network of habitats has been taken up by the environmental NGOs that now criticise governments for their lack of determination to close 'missing links'.

Analytically, it makes no sense to see this dissemination as the result of concerted action – it is much more likely to be the influence of a particular way of seeing. It is often the strength of the metaphors that makes actors see a perspective, a promising way to move on. However, these metaphors do not stand alone; they are strongly interlinked with visual images, particularly maps (see, for instance, Richardson and Jensen, 2004). This suggests that in order to understand how networks and discourses gain influence, it might not be enough to look at the cognitive side of the process alone – a realisation that fits into the growing awareness that sustainable persuasion is often *enacted*, social learning contains a component of shared experience (Wenger, 1996; Hajer, 2005) and an often staged process of gradual shift in appreciation. To better understand this, we propose to analyse policy making also in dramaturgical terms.

NETWORK DRAMATURGY

In *How to Do Things with Words*, Austin (1955) points to the performative dimension of language: to say something can be an act. He proposed the term 'performatives' for utterances that imply an action and that, in contrast to constative utterances, bring a certain state of affairs into being. The words, 'Yes, I do' are probably his most famous example. In order for speech acts to go well, they must meet certain criteria – otherwise, the performative utterance will be 'unhappy' (Austin, 1955: 14–15). The central role of convention, permanence and replication in

Austin's conditions may remind many social scientists of the structuralist connotations of the term 'performance'. Indeed, performances typically involve the repetition of gestures, tasks and actions (Szerszynski *et al.*, 2003). This may remind some of the notion of performance that can be found in the work of Kenneth Burke (1969), particularly in *Grammar of Motives*, in which he introduced the concept of 'scene-act ratio'. Arguing that scenes had to be regarded as 'fit containers' for certain acts, Burke in fact implied that acts could not be understood without taking into account the setting within which the acting took place.

Both Burke and Austin conceived of the relationship between form and act as more or less constant. The reader might be puzzled at the relevance of performance for the analysis of governance networks, for which such a continuity typically cannot be assumed. Network participants often would not have a shared repertoire in terms of which to understand an utterance (multi-significance) and they are probably insecure about both their own role and the setting in which they operate (institutional ambiguity). Indeed, we argued that the emergence of governance networks can be seen as a breach of the operational routines of government. Seen in these terms, we might consider the governance network as what Turner called a 'social drama', evolving as a result of a public breach in the normal working of society: 'a process of converting particular values and ends, distributed over a range of actors, into a system (which is always temporary and provisional) of shared or consensual meaning' (Turner, 1982: 75).

The use of 'performance' in the developmental sense of 'bringing to completion' or 'accomplishing' might be further clarified by looking at the historical background of the concept. The notion of performance is indirectly derived from the Old French *parfournir*; *par* (thoroughly)

and *fournir* (to furnish). To perform is thus to bring something about, to 'carry out'. Even though the performance may be 'framed' by rules, something new may be generated while 'carrying out': the performance transforms the event (Turner, 1982: 79, 91).

It is clear that Burke's rather static understanding of the scene-act ratio does not fit well into this notion of performance. The concept 'contexture' (Lynch, 1991), signifying that the setting influences, what is said, what can be said and what can be said with influence, is more in line with our understanding of performance. Whereas, this concept signifies that the setting defines the act to a certain extent, the dramaturgical analysis of politics subsequently draws out the way in which scenes are scripted and staged, as well as how the players subsequently act *within* and *upon* those scripts and stages. *Setting* refers to the physical situation in which the interaction takes place, including the artefacts that are brought to the situation. *Scripting* includes all efforts to create a setting, by determining the characters in the play ('*dramatis personae*') and providing cues for appropriate behaviour. *Staging* refers to the deliberate organisation of an interaction, including the use of existing symbols and the invention of new ones, as well as the distinction between active players and the (presumably) passive audience. For instance, the degree of formality (or, in Goffman's terms, 'tightness') of a particular governance network can be conveyed by markers such as the location of meetings, the spatial arrangement of the physical environment, the demeanour of the principal participants, their physical proximity to the audience within the setting and the degree to which the sequence of acts and the range of activities permitted during a meeting are codified in advance (Futrell, 1999: 503).

The notions of *scripting* and *staging* may seem to emphasise the connotation

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of performance as deceit, as an intentional and strategic effort to control an interaction or to push an interpretation in the direction of preferred outcomes. However, this is not the way in which the term is used here. Although strategic action obviously is a key component of politics, *performance* for us would be the way in which the contextualised interaction itself is seen as producing social realities like understandings of the problem at hand, knowledge and new power relations. Using this perspective, the political process is seen as a sequence of staged performances of conflict and conflict resolution in a particular setting (Hariman, 1995). Our argument would be that the setting and staging of governance networks are key to understanding their dynamics.

Scientific advice provides an interesting example. In his *Science on Stage*, Hilgartner (2001) has unpicked the whole procedure of science-for-policy in dramaturgical terms, concluding that the political effect of scientific advice essentially depends on its staging. In a range of publications Bruno Latour (1999) and others have even shown how the core of scientific practice is to be understood in terms of performance.

In governance networks, scientific advice needs to be performed differently. Under the classical-modernist constitution, policymakers derived their legitimacy partly from their appeal to scientific advice. They relied upon the authority of experts to 'first get the facts right'. Nowadays, scientists have lost their status as independent, objective

providers of absolute knowledge – not least because of the way in which experts were seen to have been involved in institutional crises like the risk of nuclear radiation and the food crises of the 1990s. They participate in networks and have to conquer their role as experts in a situation where others (citizens, NGOs, activists) will bring in knowledge claims on their own. This implies that scientists have to perform their expertise: they can no longer rely on their *a priori* legitimacy but have to be persuasive in the ambiguous context of network governance where authority is to be gained *in situ*.

The analysis of network governance as performance also hints at reasons why it might easily go wrong. The uncertainties that are implied in network governance lead us to appreciate how governance depends on various forms of staged enactment. Governance is much more than cognition, it has a dramaturgical dimension and depends on various forms of staged enactment. However, because of the uncertainties implied in network governance, such stagings and collective rituals have to be invented on the set. Due to its improvised nature, one of the key issues for networks is to find symbolic expressions of permanence. This would

ideally take place through the invention of collective ceremony as this is a proven way of dealing with indeterminacy. The quality of a particular case of network governance can thus be examined as depending on the way it is performed.

CONCLUSIONS

Looking at network governance in terms of performance is based on the observation that actors struggle with indeterminacy and cannot be assumed to share a repertoire in which to understand the various utterances. As a result of this, any particular governance network will first have to develop a shared discourse and 'set the stage', that is, work out a script for resolving conflict and develop its logic of appropriateness. To understand the dynamics of governance networks, consider them a form of improvisation theatre in which participants have to watch each other closely because the rules of the game are made and can change on the spot. We suggest that discourse-analytical and dramaturgical concepts can therefore be a helpful instrument in analysing how governance networks function.

Notes

- 1 Whereby multi-cultural does not refer to ethnicity but is conceived more broadly as referring to the fact that participating actors will bring different cultural codes to the situation.

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