

## Event

Discourse analysis is an established social sciences method that is finding new uses in identifying and tracking the linkages between public engagement and public policy development. Whereas it was formerly difficult to demonstrate the uptake and impact of public engagement on policy development, discourse analysis provides an important tool for analysing the outcomes of public engagement.

## Significance

The extent to which public engagement actually influences policy outcomes is difficult to assess. Often, government-sponsored public engagement events are criticized for lack of follow-through, or co-optation by consultation. The latter involves the claim to have broad support for a policy solely by the fact of having consulted the public, without making any commitment to respond to public concerns. If citizens have sufficient grounds to believe their views have been disregarded, government incurs risks to its legitimacy.

## Analysis

Democratic governments increasingly rely upon public engagement as part of policy development in complex or controversial matters. Engagement is used to assess citizens' perspectives, gauge support or resistance for new initiatives, and gather information prior to setting public policy. Where a concrete recommendation is taken up, for example if a public engagement recommends a moratorium on a technology, and government institutes one, it is easy to identify impact. Other impacts on policy are rarely so clearly evident, however, as it often depends on how a policy outcome is defined. Impacts may take the form of rhetorical acknowledgement, policy learning and incremental change over time or procedural impacts. One means of exploring impacts is by systematically tracing the occurrence of themes, patterns, and terminology from sources in the public sphere through to policy outcomes. This can be done through a form of discourse analysis. The application of discourse analysis to policy problems has been used to great effect in studies of organizations,<sup>1</sup> public political discourse,<sup>2</sup> and the political institutionalization of marginal environmental discourses,<sup>3</sup> among others. In relation to public engagement, Hampton<sup>4</sup> argues that reports from, evaluations of, and responses to public engagement activities can be broken down into pieces of a meta-narrative which express public preferences, key points in a controversy, and policy options. Studying these texts and the policies and regulations developed pursuant to these exercises can provide insight into the uptake of network discourses into governance rhetoric – and in some cases, action.

## Conclusion

While discourse analysis will not always allow the researcher to definitively show impact, it enables the identification of phraseology and recurring themes generated through records of public discussion that are subsequently reflected in policy outputs and outcomes. In addition, this approach may provide unique insights into moments where the path taken by an idea or concept, as it migrates from the public sphere to policy outcome, is obstructed or broken and why. This in turn suggests possibilities for determining best practices for productive forms of engagement in different contexts.

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<sup>1</sup> Alvesson, M. & Kärreman, D. (2000) Varieties of discourse: on the study of organisations through discourse analysis, *Human Relations*, 53, 1125–49.

<sup>2</sup> Chadwick, A. (2000). Studying political ideas: a public political discourse approach. *Political Studies*, 48, 283-301.

<sup>3</sup> Eder, K. (1996) The institutionalisation of environmentalism: ecological discourse and the second transformation of the public sphere. In Lash, S., Szerszynski, B. & Wynne, B. (eds) *Risk, Environment and Modernity*, pp. 203–23. London: Sage.

<sup>4</sup> Hampton, G. (2004). Enhancing public participation through narrative analysis. *Policy Sciences*, 27(3/4), 261-276.