

Event

Media analysis has a long history in the communications and other social science fields. It is increasingly being deployed to understand the emergence of policy frames in the public sphere through narrative analysis. Such policy frames in turn function as narrative “hooks” for engaging publics.

Significance

Public engagement occurs in many forms, from the formal participation of “mini-publics” in organized events to informal engagement with issues through public fora including the media. Analyses of media content can track technological trajectories, policy options and public preferences, or can highlight policy lessons.

Analysis

Media representations are nothing more than stories and story-telling. Stories can establish themselves as the dominant narrative or can be challenged with counter-stories. In either case, narrative accounts embodied in particular frames may in turn influence a policy approach. Narratives are more than discourse; they are social acts.¹ Events or characters are related according to some overarching structure, typically an opposition or a struggle. Narrative analysis can be utilized as one heuristic for understanding public engagement.

Social movements deploy cultural toolkits to mobilize thinking about an issue in particular ways. Such toolkits are also useful in aligning new technological forms with issues already in the public consciousness. The use of the term “terminator technology” (in contrast to the original term “gene use restriction technology”) to describe a technological form of patent protection of plant varieties by making seeds sterile after first planting has successfully evoked media attention by its play on popular culture through a well known film character and developing a storyline that pitted big multi-national corporate interests against poor farmers in developing countries and their tradition of saving and sharing seed.

Narratives are designed to “accommodate, favorably frame, and utilize scientific evidence”. Narratives provide structural coherence and can demonstrate the ways different stories frame policy problems. Biotechnology and other emerging strategic technologies lend themselves well to the development and use of policy ‘metanarratives’ which are important for dealing with “situations characterized by a high degree of problem uncertainty, socio-complexity, and political polarization”.²

Such analytical approaches are not without problems. The “trouble with stories”, is that counter evidence may not be as readily available and, despite the emergence of discrete facts, may fail to dislodge a compelling and holistic narrative account.³ At the same time that this limitation is recognized, the power of narratives becomes even more compelling.

Conclusion

Narrative analysis can be one of the analytical tools for understanding how technologies develop in a social context, how a particular issue comes to be defined as a problem, how a policy account might become dominant over another and how narrative strategies might be deployed by competing interest groups. This is in short a public engagement arena writ large.

¹ Tilly (1999). The trouble with stories. R. Aminzade & B. Pescosolido ed., The social worlds of higher education. California: Pine Forge

² Fischer, Frank (2003). Reframing public policy: discursive politics and deliberative practices. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press

³ Tilly, Charles (2002). Stories, identities, and political change. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.