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article

Narratives as tools for influencing policy change

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Narrative has been observed to be central to the policy process – constituting public policy instruments, persuading decision makers and the public, and shaping all stages of the policy process. This article distils useful policy advice, which can be employed by scholars and practitioners alike. We call attention to two potential communication pitfalls to which practitioners are likely to fall prey: (1) the knowledge fallacy, and (2) the empathy fallacy. We then focus our discussion on 'intervention points' where narrative can play an important role, drawing attention to recent narrative research, which provides the strongest basis for overcoming communication fallacies. Based on arguments presented here, policy actors can construct better narratives to accomplish their policy goals, while scholars can better understand how narratives are constructed and the intervention points where narratives might be observed and therefore studied.

key words policy narratives • storytelling • policy communication • Narrative Policy Framework

Introduction

There is plenty of science, philosophy and literature pointing to the importance of narrative in human affairs. One way to understand the findings and arguments presented is that people, by nature, are inclined to impose meaning on the world and that when they do, they rely on information shortcuts (heuristics) to develop quick and easy emotional renderings of the world that fit with who they think they are and what they know. People's preferred way of meaning-making is through story (see Jones et al, 2014b). The essence of these interdisciplinary findings is captured by Hardy:

> For we dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticise, construct, gossip, learn, hate and

love by narrative. In order to really live, we make up stories about ourselves and others, about the personal as well as the social past and future. (1968, 5)

If this is true of individuals, it should not be surprising that narrative also matters in public policy. Public policy is navigated by a system of actors who are vying for their preferred policy goals. Within this system, policy actors wield narratives to help achieve their goals, communicate problems and solutions, and citizens use them to communicate their preferences to policy elites, among other uses. However, much of this storytelling is governed by intuition, anecdote, and ad hoc theorising, which is not to malign policy actors – there is little else to go on. Here we try to improve the intuitive ad hoc nature of policy narration by drawing upon extant narrative research in public policy to offer theoretically based and useful storytelling advice. The advice is intended for scholars who may teach or conduct research about policy processes, but who may not be familiar with recent innovations in policy scholarship focused on the role of narrative in policy processes or potential applications of these theoretical innovations for their students. The advice may also be relevant for practitioners who seek to influence policy, and for whom applied lessons from theoretical knowledge can help improve practice.

Our contributions here are twofold: first, we use a recent theoretical innovation in policy scholarship – the Narrative Policy Framework – to build a guide for applied understanding of theory. Second, in service to our general aim, we outline two key pitfalls that can lead to ineffective policy communication. The first, the knowledge fallacy, is likely to be familiar to many readers versed in the science communication literature. The second, which we entitle the empathy fallacy, is, to our understanding, novel and has not before been identified within policy narrative research. Finally, we bridge narrative policy theory with specific intervention points in the policy process, providing illustrations along the way.

Policy narrative pitfalls

A good place to begin grappling with effective narrative communication in public policy is to identify general orthodoxies often associated with policy communication. In this section we detail two common fallacious approaches to policy communication, only the first of which is acknowledged in social science scholarship: (1) the knowledge fallacy and (2) the empathy fallacy. We argue that these approaches to communication all too often fail to meet communicator expectations and should be avoided and should also be incorporated into our scholarly understanding of types of communication failures.

The knowledge fallacy

There can be little doubt that most western democracies are products of the Enlightenment (Rakove, 1997, 18) – a philosophical orientation that built a hopeful, agential, and progressing model of the individual founded upon the ideas that there are inalienable truths and that reason and science light the way to these truths. Behind all of this is a simple idea: there is truth in the world.

A contemporary manifestation of this seventeenth century Enlightenment notion is found in what has been termed the knowledge deficit approach (for example,

Kellstedt et al, 2008). The central ideas of this approach are that policy is complex and ambiguous, people do not understand policy in the way that experts do, and that individuals need to be educated on the relevant facts. Once educated, people will then 'reasonably' accept the position of the expert(s). A host of studies across many policy areas have assessed the knowledge gap between experts and lay people (for example, Sterman, 2008; Qin and Brown, 2006) that the knowledge deficit approach aims to rectify.

The failures of the knowledge deficit approach are most likely derivative of the assumptions it makes about how people think and reason. Kahneman (2011) describes two modes of human cognition: system 1, where people's unconscious thought process is driven by quickly determined emotional assessments of incoming stimuli without much thought; and, system 2, where people think carefully – some might say rationally – through their decisions. Not surprisingly, when communicating science or policy expert information, scientists and experts are communicating using and assuming system 2. People, however, are usually receiving the information emotionally, in system 1. The differences, then, between experts and laypeople may erect barriers if experts are using types of logic and communication aimed at influencing individuals using system 2 thinking.

Kahan (2014) sheds light on the dichotomy of emotion-driven versus logic-driven thinking, arguing that common assumptions about the link between knowledge and evidence-based decisions are simply wrong. He describes what he calls the 'motivated reasoning hypothesis' wherein people make decisions based upon cultural beliefs rather than evidence or knowledge. Knowledge, then, has to be processed by people, who come to that knowledge carrying considerable baggage in terms of how they understand the world, and they are hardwired to protect that baggage.

The empathy fallacy

Suffering from what one might call an 'Enlightenment hangover', the knowledge deficit approach is, in our estimation, the dominant communication model of policy actors. A popular but less pervasive alternative to this approach is probably best articulated by a community of researchers in policy studies loosely characterised as interpretivists (see Yanow, 2007). Interpretivists presume to not believe in any authoritative objective truths; for this community, there are multiple truths, as we all understand the world individually. Narrative is frequently a centrepiece of their approach (for example, Fischer, 2003).

The interpretive approach to narrative in policymaking has had its successes (see for example the success of using personal stories of sex workers in South Africa and marginalised individuals from the LGBTQ community in the US and other countries to elevate marginalised groups on government agendas and, in some cases, policy changes were observable (Open Society, 2016)). When stories are rendered as understood by people affected, context specific policy outcomes are attainable. However, the often-unstated assumption of this approach is that audiences influenced by authentic stories have a common sense of empathy that is emotionally appealed to by an authentic narrative. That is, if the narrator can just project to the audience an emotive human story through narrative, the audience will be persuaded by our universal human empathy. This is a seductive approach because there can be little doubt that generating empathy matters. However, empathy appeals, like knowledge

appeals, are filtered through people's biases and this means that how people respond to the appeals is hardly universal.

The lesson of these two fallacies for policy communicators is found in a common underlying characteristic of both. While the knowledge fallacy relies upon the veracity of 'objective' facts and relationships, and the empathy fallacy relies on 'authentic' emotion to communicate policy consequential information, both approaches share commitments to the assumption that a message can be unassailably true independent of all else. It is this commonality among the two approaches that we label as fallacious because they can produce ineffective communication.

The Narrative Policy Framework

Policy actors need a mechanism by which they can narrate in a way that accounts for their own biases, the audience's biases, and the structure of the story itself. The mechanism to understand good storytelling has most recently been assessed using an approach titled the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF). The goal of the NPF is to examine characteristics of narratives, their influence, and other policy-relevant attributes. In many ways the NPF is derivative of previously described interpretivist approaches (Smith and Larimer, 2016), openly embracing interpretivism within research (for example, Gray and Jones, 2016; Jones and Radaelli, 2015) while simultaneously examining the use of science and evidence in strategically constructed narratives used by policy advocates (for example, Smith-Walter et al, 2016). However, the major difference between the NPF and interpretive narrative approaches is in the NPF's focus on scientific method and empirical observation to unearth generalisable findings. Since people do universally narrate, the NPF begins from the premise that understanding narrative is the best way to understand meaning-making within the policy process.

The NPF begins by dividing narratives into the two categories of content and form. The content of a policy narrative refers to the highly variable ideas and concepts within a narrative, which is specific to a policy area. Climate change narratives are about climate change. Campaign finance narratives are about campaign finance. Form, on the other hand, refers to the structure of narrative and is generalisable across narratives, regardless of content. The NPF identifies four major narrative form elements (Jones et al, 2014a):

1. *Setting* The setting consists of policy consequential features such as geography, laws, evidence and other facets of the policy subsystem. Many parts of the settings appear fixed (such as the US Constitution); others are highly contested (for example, the science on LGBT parenting).
2. *Characters* Characters are typically defined as victims who are harmed or potentially so, villains who are responsible for the harm or threat, and heroes who promise relief for the victim.
3. *Plot* Plots are organising devices that link characters to each other via motive and relationships and situate the story and its occupants in time and space.
4. *Moral of the story* This is the point of the story, usually manifesting as a policy solution or a call to action.

One of the most consistent NPF findings is that whether or not a narrative is congruent with an individual's values or beliefs matters in terms of how the narrative influences the recipient's interpretation of the narrative. What we mean is that if a person is, for example, conservative and they encounter a narrative that has content that they recognise as conservative, it is generally more favourably received. Congruent narratives are found to strengthen policy beliefs (for example, Shanahan et al, 2014), increase the likelihood of accepting new policies (for example, McBeth et al, 2014), favourably structure how people recall policy consequential information (Jones and Song, 2014), and lead to increased empathy (Niederdeppe et al, 2015). While we introduce and discuss other relevant NPF and narrative findings in what follows, congruence is a major theme that runs throughout the remainder of our discussion of good storytelling in public policy.

Good storytelling in public policy: understanding it and constructing it

In the previous sections, we have spelled out two potential policy communication fallacies and summarised relevant findings from a recently developed approach to studying narrative in public policy. Similarly structured to Peterson and Jones' (2016) advice for climate change policy narrators, here we summarise some of the insights from the previous sections as well as conclusions from other relevant literatures into steps policy actors should consider prior to crafting their policy narratives. While we present the following as steps, in practice the process tends to be nonlinear. Policy actors should expect to move back and forth between the steps as they build their narrative. Before building a narrative, the narrator must first establish her goals, her audience, and her purpose for constructing the narrative. Scholars can use these steps to better understand how narratives are constructed, the component parts of such narratives, and the intervention points where narratives might be observed and therefore studied. The construction of narratives is discussed below from the perspective of how a communicator would wisely construct a narrative. It should be stated, however, that communicators include policy actors as well as scholars. Similarly, scholars should understand the process by which a communicator constructs a narrative in order to best analyse those narratives.

Step 1: Tell a story

Foremost is the need for the policy actor to recognise that they are telling a story. It might be a boring fact-filled objectively neutral story devoid of emotion or a hyperbolic emotional polemic that ignores facts and evidence, but it is still a story – just probably a bad one. The goal then for any communicator is to tell a good story.

Step 2: Set the stage

Determine the staging materials

This starts with a deep reading of the academic and advocacy literature available for a policy area, supplemented by talking to people and conducting independent research (circumstances permitting). Without understanding the facts, the emotions, and the

strategies used to influence policy, even the most knowledgeable expert will be at a loss for the tools of effective communication. A primary goal in this step is to identify the motivating beliefs or values of the audience as they relate to the issue. Ideology is often easily observed to play a role in many policy areas, but a literature review may point to more refined beliefs such as cultural types (Thompson et al, 1990) or environmental beliefs (Dunlap et al, 2000), which may do a far better job of getting at what people actually believe. Additionally, it is important for communicators to do a bit of introspection about their own beliefs. Know the boundaries in belief systems held by stakeholders. Know the audience. Since a good story is the goal, it is necessary to select content that is both favourably received by the audience and true to stakeholder values.

Arrange the props on the stage

The next step is to select the most important information– from the vast array collected above – to include in the story. Note what is commonly referenced: evidence, legal parameters, geography, and so on. Examine these props carefully in light of the intended audience's beliefs and values. Some of these props will inspire negative emotions and some will inspire positive emotions. Both types of emotions can help your cause, but the evidence suggests positive emotions are more beneficial (for example, Pidgeon and Fischhoff, 2011). The trick in setting the stage is to faithfully narrate the best assessments of the empirical reality of the policy environment – leveraging science, evidence and best practices – but doing so in a way that inspires people to feel something about the policy narrative, while simultaneously avoiding the pitfalls of knowledge and empathy fallacies.

Step 3: Establish the plot

Public policies always exist because of a problem. Plots include this definition either as a starting point or to help tell the evolution of a problem (for example, Stone, 2011). The problem definition establishes real or potential harm. It sets up the cause of the harm. Establishing the cause necessarily points to what can be done. If poverty is the cause of crime, then reducing or eliminating poverty is the solution; if individually bad choices cause crime, then a solution will focus on the decisions of individuals, perhaps by restructuring incentives. In establishing causality, the plot must also link characters to the setting, noting what elements of the setting are important and the ends to which they are employed. We discuss problem definition in more detail below.

Step 4: Cast the characters

The literature on policy narratives can offer guidance on casting characters. The problem definition has already established the relationship between the setting and characters. The point now is to illustrate those roles to maximum effect. Victims should be sympathetic and the narrator should portray singular human beings where possible and appropriate, only using abstract statistics as supporting evidence for the plight of the victim (Small et al, 2007). Protagonists have been consistently found to play a driving role in policy narratives. The more a hero is liked, the more agreement with the narrative (Jones, 2014) and emphasising heroic action (for example, the

solution) and ignoring or downplaying the opposition also appears to be a winning strategy (Shanahan et al, 2013). The NPF has identified a complicated role for villains as sometimes their effect is inconsistent (for example, Jones, 2014), other times divisive (McBeth et al, 2017), and their role has been shown to be a moderating one, where they exercise indirect effects on opinions (Zanocco, Song, and Jones, 2017). In any case, there can be little doubt that villains are important as they establish the nature of the blame in a problem definition, even if their potential effects must be understood in a nuanced fashion in terms of the specific context.

Step 5: Clearly specify the moral of the story

While stories with no point might be interesting to avant-garde cinema critics, we counsel against such an approach with policy narratives as they are best kept as straightforward as possible. Whether the policy narrative culminates in a call to action or a specific policy solution, the point of the story should be clear.

Public policy narrative intervention points

Above, we outlined the importance of narratives. With this as our foundation, we can make a number of statements about the importance of narratives to human communication and to policy. Next, we present several lessons that practitioners can employ in their work within policy-relevant organisations and debates and that scholars can employ to analyse strategically constructed narratives used to influence policy debates. We tackle this section through the lenses of the above steps, the type of actor who is constructing the narrative, and the type of narrative intervention they might use to influence the policy process. It is important to note here that using narrative to communicate, and perhaps influence policy outcomes, is not necessarily an act of political advocacy, nor should the use of narrative be seen as an ethical pitfall for experts. Just as a journalist is trained to tell a compelling story so that an audience's attention is captured and held so that facts of a story can be relayed to a reader or viewer (Keller and Hawkins, 2009), so too do scientists or policy experts need to capture attention and communicate both the importance and complexity of issues to their audiences (Krulwich, 2008). A communicator, especially a communicator of complex issues or facts, must make the audience care and pay attention before the audience is primed to accept the more complicated facts that might follow. Narrative can help communicators do these things, but they also, of course, can be strategically deployed by advocates.

Policymakers and policy advocates

Elected officials, public administrators, and professionals who work within the advocacy sector all share goals related to promoting what they believe are 'good' policies to achieve solutions to specific societal problems. Depending on their role and sector, they may use different strategies to achieve their goals, but each of these categories of actors works largely within a set of formal and informal institutions (Birkland, 2014), including legislatures, executive agencies, courts, and the public sphere. The narrative strategy used by these policy actors will differ depending on the audience and their goals. These actors are the focus of most of the attention of policy

scholars who attempt to understand the resources and strategies used to influence policy (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993; Ostrom, 1990; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993), but there are two additional categories of policy actors worth exploring here.

Policy experts

Policy experts include actors such as scientists, policy analysts, economists, and others who work to understand the problems that society faces, potential solutions to those problems, and trade-offs made in the policy decision process. These actors work most often within formal institutions such as legislatures and executive agencies, but may also contribute more on the periphery, such as serving as a consultant or informal adviser to decision makers. Their role is to help understand the problems that society faces, the causes of those problems, and the potential solutions to such problems (Kingdon, 2003). As such, these actors play influential roles shaping public policy and are almost always restrained by having the expectation of adhering to scientific and professional standards. Thus, these actors are likely to shy away from overly rhetorical approaches to communication (see Krulwich, 2008). They are also the policy actors most prone to the knowledge fallacy.

Citizens and voters

Citizens are the hardest to pin down in terms of their policy goals. Most are driven by culture, beliefs, or personal experiences that they bring to bear on policy considerations. Citizens can serve as voters in the political process, but also are often viewed by other policy actors as latent resources that can be tapped to pressure policymakers and others through protest, public opinion, or similar pressure tactics (Zaller, 2003: Zaller, 1992). These individuals often possess lower levels of expertise and therefore may be prone to the empathy fallacy.

Public policy intervention points explored

We next specify several policy intervention points where narrative is likely to play a prominent role, drawing from a commonly used teaching framework to integrate narratives with policy practitioner intervention points (Smith, 2005). For each intervention, we describe how a narrator could benefit from the insights offered by the NPF to tell good stories. All of these interventions require the narrator to acknowledge steps 1 and 2 above – recognise that you are telling a story, and to set the stage by understanding the audience's beliefs and your own in order to best navigate any divergence between those sets of beliefs. Beyond these points, each of the interventions below discusses where the intervention fits into the typology introduced above (casting characters, plot, and so on). The rules that govern each intervention are important to consider, as each has different lengths, professional or evidence inclusion norms, and similar constraints. A Twitter post will inherently be different from a policy analysis or witness testimony but perhaps can be a useful policy narrative medium as well (Merry, 2016). Despite these constraints, within the various contexts more or less effective narratives can be constructed by paying attention to the steps outlined above. While the examples below are drawn from a number of different American media, storytelling according to the guidance outlined here is

certainly not constrained by nationality – humans are storytellers and examples will be found in any policy context.

Problem definition

How we understand and label societal problems is central to the policies we select (or fail to select) to solve them. Kingdon (2003), Stone (2011) and other scholars have long focused on the power of defining policy problems as central to policy outcomes. When policy advocates or experts successfully define a problem in a compelling and accurate manner, the problem can take on increased salience and increased policy attention, leading to a higher likelihood of action to solve the problem (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993). Part of defining a problem includes assigning blame or causality for the problem (Stone, 2011). *How* the problem is defined, then, is essential to understanding the policies leveraged to solve it. *Who* is to blame for the problem is a role played by one or more characters cast in the narrative.

Defining a problem in order to persuade policy actors, the public, and others to solve said problem can draw on multiple aspects of what we know from narrative research. If, for example, the problem of climate change is defined primarily according to a national security message associated with refugee populations, then we are likely to see solutions offered that tend more towards military solutions or humanitarian aid abroad as the following example suggests:

> Starting in 2006, Syria suffered its worst drought in 900 years; it ruined farms, forced as many as 1.5 million rural denizens to crowd into cities alongside Iraqi refugees and decimated the country's livestock. Water became scarce and food expensive. The suffering and social chaos caused by the drought were important drivers of the initial unrest. Climate scientists have argued that global warming very likely exacerbated the historic drought, thanks to potentially permanent changes to wind and rainfall patterns.
>
> But climate change will impact more than access to water. The Pentagon recognizes global warming as a significant strategic threat, saying that it could cause 'instability in other countries by impairing access to food and water, damaging infrastructure, spreading disease, uprooting and displacing large numbers of people, compelling mass migration...' the US military fears such disruptions could 'create an avenue for extremist ideologies and conditions that foster terrorism'. (Mansharamani, 2016)

This example uses empathy to create a vivid story, and effectively ties climate change to displaced populations, international instability, and terrorism. It then uses that empathetic narrative to transport the audience, opening them up to receive evidence from scientists and military experts about the consequences of climate change for global security. On the other hand, if we define the problem of climate change as being about potential economic impacts and gains, as US President Obama did in his 2016 State of the Union address, we may see solutions aimed at encouraging renewable energy development and green jobs programmes.

> Look, if anybody still wants to dispute the science around climate change, have at it. You'll be pretty lonely, because you'll be debating our military, most of America's business leaders, the majority of the American people, almost the entire scientific community, and 200 nations around the world who agree it's a problem and intend to solve it. But even if the planet wasn't at stake; even if 2014 wasn't the warmest year on record – until 2015 turned out even hotter – why would we want to pass up the chance for American businesses to produce and sell the energy of the future? Seven years ago, we made the single biggest investment in clean energy in our history. Here are the results. In fields from Iowa to Texas, wind power is now cheaper than dirtier, conventional power. On rooftops from Arizona to New York, solar is saving Americans tens of millions of dollars a year on their energy bills, and employs more Americans than coal – in jobs that pay better than average. (Obama, 2016a)

Both of these definitions of the climate change problem are true in the sense that they are supported by ample scientific evidence. The first narrative of climate change does not include blame for the underlying problem of climate change. We are introduced to victims of climate change, however. The second example narrated by President Obama introduces heroes in his narrative including businesses, politicians, and implicitly his administration. President Obama also implies that climate deniers are the villains of the narrative and that climate change is an opportunity for economic progress. The second narrative is also tied to more specific policy prescriptions while the first is more about consequences of a changing climate.

Public policies

Closely related to – and drawing upon – the problem definition discussed above, the actual wording and codifying of public policies is considered an intervention point where narratives can play an important role. Public policies translate ideas, values, and rules into law. These policies, however, also draw upon emotive stories of problems as well as evidence that indicates a solution is warranted. The audience (Step 2) for public policies is often the general public writ large, but specific constituencies can be appealed to directly through the writing of effective policies in narrative form. By using condensation symbols, lawmakers frequently appeal to lofty values while speaking to specific groups in the rules or laws passed. Public policies always include a plot (problem – Step 3) and a moral or solution (Step 5), but constructing these components effectively can help the policy appeal to specific groups or to broad publics.

For example, the US Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1973 beautifully states a clear problem, cause, and solution:

> The Congress finds and declares that –
>
> (1) various species of fish, wildlife, and plants in the United States have been rendered extinct as a consequence of economic growth and development untempered by adequate concern and conservation;

(2) other species of fish, wildlife, and plants have been so depleted in numbers that they are in danger of or threatened with extinction;

(3) these species of fish, wildlife, and plants are of esthetic, ecological, educational, historical, recreational, and scientific value to the Nation and its people;

(4) the United States has pledged itself as a sovereign state in the international community to conserve to the extent practicable the various species of fish or wildlife and plants facing extinction.[1]

The ESA is a strict command–and–control approach to environmental protection and includes penalties for non-compliance. In this way, the narrative about the importance of environmental protection is a persuasive segue to a stringent moral of the story – the regulatory solution. This example illustrates how public policies themselves are codified narratives that bring values, problems, causes, and morals (solutions) together.

Media outreach and construction

The less formal, but perhaps more widely influential venues such as media or social media are vitally important for constructing narratives, particularly among those constituents considered part of the support base. Policymakers, advocates, and experts often interact with the press, but in differing ways. Policymakers and advocates are likely to view media outreach and communication as a mechanism for advancing their political goals. For experts, on the other hand, the onus is to communicate scientific or technical 'facts' in clear, accurate, and compelling ways so that laypeople understand and care.

Media outreach can take the form of providing interviews to journalists, issuing press releases, holding events to capture press attention, or engaging in social media activity to directly communicate with supporters without mediation of journalists or other gatekeepers. Of particular importance is Step 2 of the NPF typology wherein the narrator seeks to understand the audience, as well as Step 4 which includes assigning blame or causality. This is often aided by casting effective characters (Step 3) as heroes, villains, or victims. Because the characters can be particularly polarising in some political scenarios, knowing the audience and casting appropriate characters who align with what the audience already knows about the characters is important for creating an effective narrative.

In both traditional and social media, the construction of narratives requires clarity, simplicity, and consistency. The two images in Figure 1 were posted on Twitter on 5 May 2017 and reference the American Health Care Act (AHCA) vote in the US House of Representatives that took place on 4 May 2017. Both Twitter users are telling stories that argue against the passage of the AHCA, but using different characters in their social media narratives. The image on the left uses the villain character to depict the House Republicans and President Trump as villains, while the image on the right uses a veteran to depict victims of the AHCA policy. The veteran or soldier in American political discourse is also, of course, a hero, so this combination of hero as victim makes the Twitter narrative potentially powerful.

Figure 1: American Health Care Act Twitter Narratives

These examples illustrate how characters can be used effectively, even in minimalist social media narratives to not only clearly communicate a policy goal, but also elicit emotion from the audience (either anger or sympathy in the images depicted). NPF research indicates that the hero character can be the most effective at persuading audiences to support the policy goals of the narrator. It is conceivable, however, that when the audience is narrow and the narrative is targeted, the villain can be compelling, perhaps most so when the narrative is intended to mobilise supporters.

Policy briefings and statements

Policy narratives get told in numerous venues, some more formal than others. Some of these formal venues are akin to political theatre, as preferences in many macro institutions (such as the US Congress) are relatively fixed (for example, Baumgartner and Jones, 1993) and there simply is not much persuasion going on; but that does not mean that narrative is unimportant. It still can play the role of drawing attention – attention in general or attention to specific facets of a problem, all of which play a role in setting the political agenda (Peterson and Jones, 2016).

Using policy briefings or statements such as testimony before committees, advocates and policymakers work to outline their version of the evidence related to the problem (plot), the source of the problem (villain, blame), and solutions to said problem. These actors can most effectively create such narratives by capturing attention both inside the formal venue as well as outside (often through capturing media attention).

An example of formal congressional narratives involves US Senator James Inhofe. Washington, DC, experienced an unseasonably cold spell during which Senator Inhofe spoke on the Senate floor holding a snowball to attempt to dispute climate science. As reported in the *Washington Post*:

> While 'eggheads' at 'science laboratories' were busy worrying about how the increase in heat-trapping gases in the atmosphere was leading to a long-term upward shift in temperatures and increased atmospheric moisture, Inhofe happened to notice that it was cold outside. Weirdly cold outside. So cold, in fact, that water falling from the sky had frozen solid. So he brought some of this frozen water into the Capitol and onto the Senate floor to show everyone, but mostly to show the eggheads. (Bump, 2015)

Senator Inhofe cast scientists and former Vice President Al Gore – a vocal climate change activist – as villains, while implicitly casting himself as a hero by calling these individuals out for perpetrating the 'greatest hoax' in American history. This 'hoax' and the blame associated with it directed towards scientists and environmental advocates is a consistent narrative that Senator Inhofe employs, which resonates with his audience and frequently captures media attention to heighten his profile and his narrative outside of the formal venues of the Senate.

Policy evaluation

Policy evaluation – the point where a policy is examined to understand if it is 'working' or not – comes in many forms such as the highly technical evaluations of policy experts, economists, and some policy advocates, but it can also be as rudimentary as an opinion piece to a newspaper. Regardless, inherent in any policy evaluation are several underlying constructs (Bardach and Patashnik, 2015): (1) a policy problem, which as outlined above is a fundamental aspect of narratives associated with developing a story's plot; (2) evidence to support the problem as defined and that leads to the associated policy solutions offered; (3) criteria by which the policy or policies will be analysed, such as equity or efficiency (Stone, 2011).

One such example is former President Obama's evaluation of the Affordable Care Act in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in 2016. Obama (2016b) wrote:

> Health care costs affect the economy, the federal budget, and virtually every American family's financial well-being. Health insurance enables children to excel at school, adults to work more productively, and Americans of all ages to live longer, healthier lives. When I took office, health care costs had risen rapidly for decades, and tens of millions of Americans were uninsured. Regardless of the political difficulties, I concluded comprehensive reform was necessary.

In setting the stage, he articulated the urgency and severity of the problem of the prior health care system in the United States. He also casts characters such as families, children, and Americans of all ages as victims. He casts himself as the hero in the final sentence. Later in this paper, he narrates his policy recommendations and warns of the villains lurking to destroy progress. He calls upon policymakers to:

> build on progress made by the Affordable Care Act by continuing to implement the Health Insurance Marketplaces and delivery system reform, increasing federal financial assistance for Marketplace enrollees, introducing a public plan option in areas lacking individual market competition, and

taking actions to reduce prescription drug costs. Although partisanship and special interest opposition remain, experience with the Affordable Care Act demonstrates that positive change is achievable on some of the nation's most complex challenges. (Obama, 2016b)

This example illustrates that policy evaluation can also be a mechanism for effective storytelling.

Expert testimony

Whether before a decision venue such as a legislature, or in a courtroom, experts are essential to communicating to the less knowledgeable the complex and often technical details of a given policy issue or problem. Telling a good story in these situations will no doubt improve knowledge transfer.

In March 2016 as the drinking water contamination crisis in Flint, MI, gained national attention in the US, the US Congress held hearings to determine what happened and who was to blame. One expert witness used the formal congressional venue and audience as an opportunity to point blame at high profile individuals and agencies.

> Virginia Tech Prof Marc Edwards said in his opening statement that he was dumbfounded by top EPA officials' inability to take responsibility for the lead contamination of Flint's drinking water supply. (Dolan and Spangler, 2016)

By capturing attention through the use of narrative tools such as casting villainous characters, clearly laying blame on those characters, and arguing that their actions were at least negligent if not criminal, Professor Edwards captured external media attention and wrestled part of the narrative away from the political actors who dominated the series of hearings.

Public comment

In democracies, citizens who are not generally players in public policy will often find themselves attempting to translate their preferences into policy outcomes. To translate those preferences, citizens have several mechanisms by which they can tell their stories to policymakers, experts, and advocates who might take up the fight on their behalf. Telling stories is important for citizens to participate, otherwise the expertise and jargon of experts can marginalise citizen voices (Schneider and Ingram, 1997).

Citizens may possess the most compelling stories to tell about policy effects, societal problems that must be solved, and the impacts of political decisions on their everyday lives. In the policy narrative about the AHCA discussed above, citizens told their compelling stories to evoke empathy and attempt to persuade public opinion and congressional policymakers. Comedian Jimmy Kimmel told the story of his newborn son's congenital heart defect on his late-night show on Monday, 1 May 2017, prior to the House vote. Other citizens began a social media campaign organised around the #IAmAPreexistingCondition hashtag. These types of citizen narratives can effectively evoke emotion from the audience and provide evidence from the lives of policy beneficiaries.

Figure 2: #IAMAPreexistingCondition

Good Faith Actor Assessments

Organisations must often wrestle with questions about whether they accurately represent their mission and values to the public. Particularly for mission-oriented organisations such as those in the non-profit and public sectors, this is an essential component of ensuring buy-in from constituents including funders, members or citizens, staff, and external supporters. By periodically conducting Good Faith Actor Assessments using the NPF, organisations can understand if their external messages map onto their internal goals, mission, and values. For example, a Cambridge, MA, non-profit organisation viewed itself as a passionate 'advocate for democracy' but was unsure whether their internal and external messages were consistent. With limited resources, the organisation sought to (1) assess the narratives it portrayed to the public relative to its defined mission; (2) determine where its mission fit relative to other organisations, especially those with greater resources; and (3) locate potential ally organisations. Using the NPF's elements they compared internal and external narrative sources and found them consistent, concluding that they were in fact operating in good faith. What is important is that their analyses also identified the need to refine and target external messaging. Additionally, this organisation was able to identify 39 organisations focusing on narrower democratic advocacy issues and identified a 'value-added' role for itself in terms of facilitating cooperation among these groups.

Conclusion

Storytelling through narrative is how we humans naturally construct our lives. This instinct to tell stories illustrates why the Knowledge Fallacy is likely to fail most policy actors' goals of persuasion. When sharing our stories, we do not list facts. Rather, we use plot, characters, and morals to communicate. These narratives tend to be edited based on our audience – a very different narrative for our partner than for our 4-year-old child. At the same time, humans are not *only* storytellers, which is why the Empathy Fallacy is also likely to fail for most policy-oriented purposes. Humans not only tell stories to evoke emotion, but we also make arguments based on evidence to support our viewpoints. Through this same narrative construction process, policy actors build stories which they use to inform, influence, and evaluate policies. All policy narratives presumably have some goal of influencing policy outcomes or decisions. In essence, we want our policy narratives to matter in some meaningful outcome-oriented way.

Here we have bridged the NPF literature, providing a clear and applied discussion of the framework so that scholars can effectively understand and apply the framework to their own research and teaching. In so doing, we have also articulated two fallacies – one drawn from the literature and one unique to our discussion. We have also endeavoured to provide useful guidance to practitioners who engage in the various policy interventions discussed herein. The template we present here and the examples of intervention points outlined above are intended to provide practitioners with mechanisms for translating the literature and theory on policy narratives into actionable guidelines to use in their own practices. Our hope is that both scholars and practitioners can use the knowledge and guidance provided to improve upon their work, whether that work is aimed at influencing policy processes or understanding them.

Note
[1] The entire Act can be found at www.fws.gov/endangered/esa-library/pdf/ESAall.pdf

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