

## Interactive Policy-Making: The Principles

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### Introduction

In many countries interactive policy-making is seen as an important way to improve the quality of governmental plans as well as to involve people in the decision-making process, whereby they can learn to understand problems and to perceive solutions. Altogether these processes have to lead to better accepted policy plans and improved relationships between governments and citizens.

Communication professionals, in extension or more general in the field of information and education, are more and more connected to this approach. They can act as facilitators to guide the process of learning and negotiating or at least get a role in it.

In agriculture interactive policy-making is linked to another view on what farmers can do to tune into the expectations of society at large, away from the 'coping position', whereby farmers try to deal with measures of the government as cleverly as they can, towards more pro-active attitudes.

We will look at this process from the angle of governmental agencies and from the position of communication specialists (CS) who work there.

I shall list several of the theoretical considerations. They originate from very different perspectives and yet have something in common, or rather are united. I shall describe them as the antipodes of where we are directed, as persistent modes of thinking from the past from which we have to distance ourselves (re-educate). I shall constantly indicate what should take place instead. Together these orientations – there are five of them- characterise the change in approach to the government-citizen relationship.

We could say it is a 'paradigm-shift', a shift in the global outlook on the subject.

The first orientation concerns the phenomenon of self-referentiality. By this I mean that an organisation often has a very own way of perceiving itself and its environment, without being conscious of it – like a fish that is unaware of swimming in water. However, the CS should be conscious of this. After all, he or she works – at least so it seems – at the edge of the organisation, with one eye turned towards the inside and the other towards the outside. That is a good way to develop a headache but to prevent this from happening the CS has several strategies to choose from. The most usual strategy is to just wrap oneself up in one's own work environment, one's own organisation. Yet other strategies are possible. However, this entails that the CS has to work at the functioning of his or her own organisation.

The second theoretical orientation deals with a rather common line of thought, which I shall call 'instrumental'. Hereby the environment of an organisation is perceived as a unity that can be influenced. In this case one's own organisation is the mover, the people (or groups) outside are those moved, at least, that is the intention. In this way, communication becomes part of social engineering to adjust the thinking and acting of others. I want to explain that real change does not occur in this manner. It is only through interaction that change takes place.

The third orientation specifically concerns the vision on communication. Here again we see an opinion that accords with the dominant practice, but that can still be questioned. I am referring to

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communication as an activity of the sender, consisting of formulating messages which then accomplish something with the receiver. The transport-metaphor is sometimes used for this. Something goes from one to the other, possibly (strongly) deformed, but even so there is transport. Naturally, this idea fits perfectly well with the instrumental thinking mentioned above. However, I want to demonstrate that communication cannot be interpreted in this way. In fact, there is nothing at all going from the sender to the receiver. The term 'receiver' is therefore very unfortunate. The receiver does not receive but constructs.

Then, in the fourth orientation, we look at the entity one wants to change. In many models of influencing, the dominating idea is that of an individual whose behaviour changes after a change of attitude. The individual is hereby understood as an entity with certain dispositions which when recognised can be altered. This idea gives stability and is therefore attractive, as it is indeed so that if the number of people to be influenced is minimized (down to a single individual) the chances of effective change seem to increase. However, I do not consider this to be entirely valid. Social change is not simply enacted in the minds of individuals but initially and principally between individuals through conversation. So the main objective is to analyse what is going on during these talks. We shall discuss the consequences of this radical change in outlook (from static individualistic to dynamic social).

Finally, all of this is connected to a different opinion about how one, in society, talks in the public sphere about public issues, or to put it differently, with views on democracy (the fifth orientation). In present day practice the market approach dominates, whereby a political party struggles for favour of the voters. However, I argue for another vision. What matters to us is not only merely a better registration of the opinions of individual citizens (elections, referenda or televoting) but rather the process of opinion-forming itself, for which, again, dialogue forms the foundation.

These five theoretical perspectives determine my vision on the interactive approach. It is not just an armchair-theory about how the world works or how it should work, rather what I report forms

the legitimation of an existing and growing practice and is also inspired by it.

### **Self-referentiality**

Self-referentiality refers to a characteristic of people and organisations to perceive the environment (and themselves) from their own perspective, from their own concept of relevance, from a completely obvious (to them) idea of what is important or not. Thus one sees certain things, while others remain invisible. One does, literally, not have an eye for it. Important is the fact that it is taken for granted. On the one hand a person has his/her own vision of the surroundings but on the other does not perceive this.

The concept of 'self-referentiality' has some similarity to the psychological concept of 'selective perception'. Everyone filters the information from their environment that is in some way useful. This can be of pragmatic use. For example, someone who wants to buy a coat will pay more attention to the coats people are wearing in his environment. But other considerations can matter as well. It is regularly assumed that the urge of self-maintenance plays a role in selective perception, so no-one wants to be confronted too much with information that is contrary to his/her own opinion. In other words, one tries to avoid tension. This is the point of departure for the cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957). But there are also other approaches. An alternative explanation is that in our heads pieces of knowledge are not unconnected but linked. Together, they form a pattern or structure. In this structure certain information easily gets a place, whereas for other information no such places can be found (Hewstone et al., 1988). This structured memory also influences our perception. We see what we know.

What goes for individuals, goes for organisations. Organisations can treat their environment selectively in a way that is obvious, at least for themselves. They only see certain aspects of this environment and what they see is then interpreted in a very specific way. Wilke (1992) makes a connection between self-referentiality and the structure of organisations. We could assume that when an organisation is less flexible with regard to its structure, it is also less receptive to changes in its environment. So, whilst external change is making a continuous appeal for internal change,

there is simply no room for it. Thus, when one experiences little potential for change in an organisation, one will prefer to perceive the environment as stable and in accordance with that which is relevant and embedded in the internal structure. One sees what one is. The environment is constructed from the internal identity.

The idea of an active construction clearly resurfaces in Bekkers' description of the line of thought pursued by Weick (Bekkers, 1994, p.162). Weick points to the fact that organisations do not have objective and complete information about issues pertaining to their external environment. Certain developments are, deliberately, left out of perspective. Information is selective and filtered, based on a 'bias', which in turn is determined by specific interests and the positions and frames of reference of those involved. These determine the relevance of the information to be collected and processed. The gathering of information implies a selection process at the same time, in which the environment is constructed once again. As hungry people smell food and someone who wants to buy shoes sees shoes everywhere, so also are organisations directed towards their surroundings according to their needs and interests. Weick calls this process 'enactment'.

When seen in this light, the boundaries of a self-referential system are not closed but selectively open. One does learn from the environment, but according to one's own norms. One could speak of 'blinding insights'. Leeuwis states that it is a matter of a growing insight and a growing ignorance, at the same time (Leeuwis, 1993, p.185). One is simply unaware of what happens in certain parts of the environment and one is unconscious of that unawareness. It is precisely the fact that when it is taken for granted that it is worrying.

Can it be helped? We have to be pessimistic about that; what is not perceived, cannot be taken into account, for it does not exist! It can only change if the environment gives strong enough feedback. Commercial organisations have a great advantage in this respect, because here the market reacts to a bad adjustment. Many enterprises have been able to make a fresh start after their financial returns have declined due to poor sales. But what happens at a ministry if half

of the new legislation encounters implementation problems? In the direct sense this does not happen too often thus upholding the status quo. But eventually the consequences become apparent. An impotent ministry, that repeatedly fails to meet the promises made by parliament, gradually comes under pressure and loses authority, which makes it even harder to realise the plans. There is a threat of losing position. There is a reduction of responsibilities, one is vulnerable in times of cut-backs. There is, therefore, a certain amount of reaction to inadequate functioning but this is somewhat concealed. The idea that the government is attached to society by all sorts of strings and that by this an automatic interaction and tuning takes place must be considered as naive. On the contrary the contact is more of a problematic nature. Generally speaking, the government is suffering from an ailing image. The citizen is no longer acquainted with the governing figures, and there looms a threat of decreasing polling figures which in turn leads to a lower legitimacy, etcetera. Something is certainly wrong and this is becoming increasingly evident even for the government itself.

A feeling of dependency is essential for breaking through self-referentiality. Without the other, one's own objectives cannot be realised. Without at least the minimal commitment of the citizen, for example, no effective legislation is attainable. Knowing the other in the environment is a condition for one's own effectivity. This dependency is, by the way, mutual. Citizens cannot do without a government. What it is about is that the government can place the citizen in their own environment but also the other way around that it can imagine itself in this environment of citizens. In this way one can question one's own identity and there is room to reflect on one's own functioning.

Reflection asks for specific personal qualities, one of which we call 'empathy'. I define empathy as the ability to simulate the affective and cognitive processes of others. I will elaborate on this because it says something about the qualities one needs in an organisation to work more from the outside world. It concerns three aspects:

1. The motivation to get to know the other, based on a personal involvement with his or her life. A governor who takes up a position as the wise authority will rarely be inclined to go deeply into the motives of a group of citizens.

2. The ability to make contacts. It is relatively easy to empathise with people in one's own network. After all, they look suspiciously like oneself! But authorities should be able to get along with categories of people different than those well known. Contact should be made with them. Empathy is not a mythical kind of clairvoyance, but is based on experience and series of interactions, preferably of a more personal nature. One does not get to know the citizen through public meetings only.
3. Insight into human character. Within this old-fashioned concept I mean the ability to perceive and interpret differences between people, in order to make a more balanced judgement about certain reactions and, more importantly, without stereotyping.

These three characteristics are, as can be anticipated, not divided equally in an organisation. A minister, an elected member of a local authority or a porter is assumed to be in possession of more empathy than, for instance, a bookkeeper. We may expect that a CS is the most suitable person to raise the issue of the self-referential character of organisations and to take corrective measures. Unfortunately this does not occur. Usually, the CS are so wrapped up in their own environment that they actually mimic or copy its culture (superiors, colleagues, internal sources of knowledge), consequently they fail to meet up to expectations. This happens in particular if a CS works in the mass media sphere and as a result has no face-to-face contacts with clients.

A CS usually has a clear mental picture of the people from his or her direct environment among which communication themes are discussed. When at work, day-to-day thinking will be based on a continuation and development of these discussions. As a mental image, the public is often nothing more than a diffuse stereotype, without any clear potential to steer. Because of a lack of regular testing, norms for good and bad communication are developed internally and confirmed and validated time and again. A 'good text' is often one that is seen as adequate according to inside norms, without any consideration for the world of the expected reader. And finally, the reward system is put up by the organisation itself, without external reference. It often occurs that a CS is not controlled to see if he has indeed checked the

communicative level of the message for the target group. Extra efforts on this score are neither seen nor valued enough. In the meantime there is little the public can do. At most it can 'reward' or 'punish' by incidentally answering survey questions of others. This reflects the incapacity of the average citizen perhaps the clearest.

The conclusion is clear: CS's certainly communicate efficiently, but than usually to their own public – within their own work environment. It is for this reason that one can state that communication aimed at the general public is only possible in an organisation which, as a whole, 'thinks from without to within'.

### **Instrumental thinking**

By instrumental thinking I mean an approach whereby an actor, with the confident hope that it is possible, aims to reach a predetermined goal by means of an assigned set of instruments. This actor is in our case as a rule the government. The government itself can think instrumentally, that is, to think that it can drive society with a clever set of instruments, but is often forced to do so by the community. Much responsibility is pushed in its direction under the assumption that in this manner problems can be disposed of. It is therefore, for good reason that the government has been given several means with which something should be achieved. The government can apply force with legislation and can establish all kinds of provisions and services, from museums to sleeping policeman and from schools to recycling bins, and can manoeuvre with money, through subsidies or taxation. And, finally, the government can possibly achieve something by communication (Van Woerkum et al., 1999).

Instrumental thinking is a product of pragmatism, a line of thought which originated at the end of the 'Seventies' as a reaction to the 'Sixties'. In those years the emphasis was put on major changes in structure and culture of our society (another production system, another consumption culture), now it was about really achieving something. After all, according to some the proposed or, necessary, revolution, had not taken place. Instead of discussion, action was needed in order to gain control of the advancing problems, in particular those concerning the environment or energy resources.

Precisely because of such issues, there was a growing awareness that the government had to do something. Since the Middle Ages the environment has been an issue of central concern for governments. According to many citizens something should be done but they hesitate to make the first move themselves (the 'after you effect'). The government can then impose compulsory regulations for everyone and thus divide the burdens more equally as well as coping with the special task of dealing with industrial polluters or with agriculture.

Often a social minority group of activist citizens, usually well-organised and supported by the media, provides the necessary political pressure, leading to authorities developing policy proposals. In a diffuse yet positively disposed climate of public opinion, these proposals are accepted by representative mediums. Science attains an important legitimising role, regarding the objectives (what is needed to get the problems under control?) as well as the means (what is the most effective scenario?).

In this model the subject appears as an individual to be influenced. One cannot assume that he would automatically display the desired behaviour all by himself, the whole problem could not have such magnitude if that would be the case. So, intervention is needed, whereby the government is the mover, the individual the moved. For this, the government has a set of instruments at its disposal, the 'tools of government'. The idea behind this, is that many social problems are not properly solved because these instruments are insufficiently and negligently used. With the help of sophisticated analysis methods the result of government intervention had to be improved. However, in my opinion, the 'effectiveness crisis' with which the government struggles, will not be averted by a more careful input of the means, especially when there is chronic acceptance of the problem. This has several reasons.

An important fact is that by following an instrumental approach the government has placed itself some distance away from that same society it wants to lead. Those who think in terms of intervention withdraw the initiative from the other party. A distinction is made between themselves as responsible actors, competent and only looking at the general interest, and the rest

of society, who do not take problems seriously enough, have insufficient understanding and think only in terms of particular interests. This attitude possibly enforces the self referential character of governments, which will be dealt with in the last paragraphs.

It is true that the other as an object to influence is looked at seriously, yet from an internally constructed pattern of thought. The citizen is not assumed to have interesting opinions on problem definitions or solutions. It is not surprising that the citizen reacts to this attitude with annoyance. The image of the government is given the impression of arrogance and meddling. Even worse is that the contents of policies are badly adjusted to social reality. In an instrumental approach policies are mostly based on scientific data, regarding the seriousness of a problem, the desired interventions, as well as the concrete measures which should be taken. Scientific rationality is not an independent entity, but is rather embedded in the political and governmental framework. Policy-makers initiate certain research and make selective use of existing studies. For example, research on the consequences of nitrogen run-off from agricultural systems polluting the human water supply was taken into account at too late a stage. Social scientific research often views citizens from the frame of reference of the influencing party as well. In this context the term social technocracy is sometimes used. The contact between government and citizens takes place through questionnaires instead of through open public debates or intensive dialogue. It is 'sender directed'. The citizen cannot contribute to the policies but in an approving, manner simply undergo them.

What about the communication between government and citizen in an instrumental approach? Much has been written about this (see, among others, Van Woerkum et al., 1999). Clearly, emphasis lies on communication during the implementation phase. Or, in other words: communication can become an important part of the policy plan, by which a social problem should be solved, but the policy plan does not have to be the result of ample communication. The government knows best what is most needed, helped by self-directed interactions through social scientific research, and has at the end of the policy process: a) a clear vision of what

should be done, expressed in a policy proposal; and b) a set of arguments, internally constructed, by which choices made can be legitimised. CS's are put to work according to what is called the Decide-Announce-Defend model. Firstly, one decides on the final plan. After that, this plan is announced and subsequently defended, which is 'ultimately almost always contra-productive', according to Wossink (Wossink, in Van Meegeren, 1995, p.101). Communication has therefore an informative function and a task of coping with acceptance. Besides, communication can have, just as other instruments, a function to realise the required behaviour, for instance, through campaigns.

The problem of a dubious image and a badly adjusted policy is difficult to solve in the implementation phase through communication – however intensive. A desired level of public support is hardly ever formed under an instrumentally thinking and acting government. The central problem here is not so much insufficient public support for what the policy comes up with, but not enough support for what matters to citizens in the world of policy-makers. However, for this the instrumental vision has to be abandoned.

The alternative for an instrumental vision is an approach in which the government leaves its role as regulator and takes up position as a co-actor in a system of responsible parties, with the special task of encouraging dialogue between these parties and, where necessary, of facilitating the process through the set of instruments at its disposal. In a model like this, regulations assume the character of formalised results of negotiations, binding for all the parties involved to which one has obliged himself (eagerly or not). Money is generated to support social initiatives and to induce necessary activities.

Communication moves from the function of attitude and behavioural change to the function of process guide. The CS is (in any case co-)responsible for the planning and implementation of public debates in negotiations between public actors. Quite a drastic difference from the former position. We will have to think about what this means for the CS.

### **Communication as transmission**

McQuail states that the core of the most dominant academic movement in communication studies is based on the idea that communication is about transmission (McQuail, 1994, p.43). We recognise this in the communication model of Shannon and Weaver, who look at the improvement of the technical efficiency of communication channels to transfer information. This model is characterised by a process that has several stages, starting with a source or sender which selects a message, in the form of a signal this is passed on through a channel to a receiver, after which the receiver sends a message which informs the source about the impact of the original message ('feedback'). By avoiding disturbances in the process ('noise') and of course by using feedback the effects of communication can be optimised. This all fits perfectly with the instrumental approach discussed above.

In applied communication science, the idea of transmission is found in many forms. Obviously one was not so naïve as to think that the communication effect would occur at the receiver end automatically. An important reason for this was because of the receiver himself, who could filter the message in several ways, by not paying attention, or by looking at the message in a different way than was intended by the sender (selective attention and selective perception) or by interpreting it differently. The existing opinions of the receivers were to a great extent responsible for this 'disturbed' reception, and in order to be able to communicate more effectively one had to take these opinions into account. The CS had to know the predispositions of the receiver in order to correspondingly adjust the message. If this was done, then there certainly was a chance that the intended communication effect would occur. As a result, failed communication can be blamed on careless preparation of communication activities and on insufficient knowledge about the receiver's predispositions and on an ill-considered adaptation of the message to these predispositions.

Earlier I developed a working plan that is founded on these ideas and that should lead to a product with 'guaranteed utility' (Van Woerkum, 1989, p.30). Through research in the preparation (explorative receiver-research) or in the phase of

the second revision (pre-tests) it was possible to eliminate the most important uncertainties. In doing so, one had to use available theories on how people were capable of paying attention to something, or how understanding or a change of attitude emerged. This was how a scientifically justified communicative intervention could be planned. In the case of the undertaking not being successful this would become clear from evaluation research, and this would allow for improvement as well. At least, that was the idea. Meanwhile we have become sadder and wiser. The idea of the communication process as a regulated system is very attractive, but not adequate. Let me mention some problems.

In the first place it is not a very good idea to talk about communication in terms of transmission. Unlike technical communication, with people nothing goes from one to the other. So the receiver does not receive but creates something, in their encounter with the environment. As a result, communication effects are not a reflection of sent messages, but constructions. When we read a book we imagine ourselves as the protagonist. We allow him on grounds of the text to move about and meet people. Suppose that we find this book very interesting, then there is a chance that we react overjoyed if the book is filmed but when we actually see the film it often turns out to be a disappointing experience. We react by saying: 'the book was better'. But we could also have said: 'Our film was better'. What we do with images and with all kinds of associations determines to a greater extent the receiving process.

With communication it is better to talk about a double process: what the sender does with the receiver and vice versa. There are major differences between the messages that are offered and their 'consumption'. In addition, the usage is often different from what the sender intended. One 'learns' something from entertaining programmes, one 'enjoys' a news programme.

So the term 'receiver' is also a misplaced one. In fact, like car producers, we should call back our ex-students for a proved-necessary mental repair! Because of the demonstrable risks, we should therefore replace the receiver-concept with the concept of user or interpreter. However, the receiver-concept is generally accepted and the mentioned alternatives seem unattractive.

Therefore we have to manage with the concept of 'receivers', recognizing they are at least very active ones.

In the second place, it is not only what the sender produces consciously that counts, the unintended signals, like non-verbal signals, count as much (Van Woerkum, 1995, p.75-87). At least, from the point of view of the user these non-conscious, unintended signals are as important as the conscious and intended. They often reflect what the sender 'really' means or feels and we, therefore, regularly use them as a check on what is suggested by a message. Clearly, the sender knows this and tries, as far as possible, to get a grip on the signals he or she sends, especially on those signals which are usually seen as authentic, facial expressions, for example. In turn, the user if familiar with the possibility of manipulation and if he or she is looking for genuine authentic signals, to which the sender, et cetera. It is this kind of phenomena that often make communication so problematic and that can explain misunderstandings and incomprehension, or why certain contacts blossom (there is a 'connection') and others do not. Often in the latter situation, not enough credibility has emerged, which is an important basis for good contact.

Thirdly, the transition model suffers from what Rogers and Kincaid (1981) call a 'psychological bias'. I will elaborate on this in the next paragraph. Here, I want to state that in the challenged model an illusion of a 'tête-à-tête' is created: of an isolated event between sender and receiver, through a medium with a message. In reality all communication is to a great extent contextual, a part of a much broader communication pattern in which the user comes across the same type of message in all kinds of confrontations with the mass media – and, what is more important, with people in their own environment. On the one hand these confrontations determine how this one message is perceived and on the other hand what is then done with it. A farmer who hears how he pollutes the environment with his manure, also hears, even from scientific sources, how much this is (certainly in part) disputed.

What does all this mean for the CS? For him or her the old model was often attractive because it suggests effectiveness. Communication equals

influence. Those who manage 'good' communication would certainly influence as well. Much 'good' communication was equal to much effect.

Disposing of this idea puts the CS in a difficult position, one cannot count on anything anymore? Indeed, communication effects are highly unpredictable. Yet communication can be very effective, but, however, can only be approached in terms of probability; and even then we have to accept much uncertainty. In any case the communication should be seen from the perspective of the whole range of signals a sender like the government radiates, also the signals which are not intended as being communicative. For example, a policy paper on nature which applies to the agricultural environment can unintentionally suggest that: 'you did not do well with the landscape. We are taking over the responsibility for it. From now on the government will decide how it is going to look here'. Not a signal that will lead to warm feelings of solidarity and to co-operation on the part of the farmers. There should also be more thought given to cultural factors that can lead to certain interpretations, such as the images the farming community have of nature versus other images of nature. Finally, one has to have an eye for the whole communicative context in which a message appears. What does one hear from whom? How does one talk about it?

An approach like this is at odds with a practice that feels strongly about 'accountability'. If you first have to demonstrate what you can achieve with communication, in order to get the money for it, then you will be inclined to use a transmission model that suggests at the achievement and you do not talk easily about the room for construction for the receiver or about all these contextual variables. Our approach conflicts equally with the idea of distribution of information. In communication sending is just one of the possibilities. An active receiver can try to get information (via the telephone, via Internet) that can be made available by a source. Perhaps you have to put information at one's disposal more than you have to spread it.

### **The individual as target**

Much government communication targets the individual. The individual should drive more

carefully, stop smoking, recycle paper. Farmers must care for their pigs and chickens and must not spoil the environment with pesticides. Many social problems, so it is thought, cannot be solved without people changing their behaviour. In turn behaviour is determined by attitude, and communication can lead to a change of attitude. This then is the motive behind many communication campaigns.

This way of thinking about influencing the attitude of the individual is crucial. We must, therefore, see for ourselves how interesting this concept is. Potter and Wetherell (1987) placed some question marks by the scientific presumptions regarding 'attitude'. For example, an attitude assumes a relatively constant and sustainable inclination to react in the same way to an object. In reality people often show, even within one conversation, different 'attitudes' depending on the context in which an expression occurs. For example, I could talk understandingly about the illegal practices of travellers, from the context of unfortunate government interventions which have undermined the economic base of these people. However, in another context, in which equal rights and duties of citizens are discussed, I may often approve of strong intervention by the police.

Besides, we have the problem that an 'object' about which people have an attitude does not exist in an unequivocal way, like our solar system in the cosmos. 'Traveller' is not an empirical 'clean' concept. Whilst talking about travellers we create an image of them, together with our evaluative statements. In my milder statements I consider them as eternal wheeler-dealers, who always find a way out in hard times, creative when necessary, without taking too much notice of the formal regulations we have created for them. In more spiteful statements I consider them as opportunistic profiteers, who claim the rights society offers to them but neglect the duties. The image then becomes more severe. Even though I consider them in different ways I am still talking about the same travellers. The definition of the object and the evaluation of it go hand in hand.

Should we depart from attitudes, in the practice of communication, we can be guided by innumerable models on attitude which offer frames of reference for communicative interventions, through which we ultimately could



move the citizen towards a different type of (better) behaviour (O'Keefe, 1990). A change of attitude leads to a change of behaviour, at least, that is the idea. However, the general tendency in literature is that the relation between attitude and behaviour is anything but clear. Wilke states that 'only in special cases are attitudes good predictors of behaviour' (Wilke, 1991, p.455).

Finally, in many attitude models it is insufficiently recognised how people form an attitude. In the model of Fishbein and Ajzen the creators differentiate between the 'individual' attitude and the subjective norm, the expectations from one's environment combined with the motivation to meet these expectations. But attitudes are based on information, which in turn is definitely derived in part from the social environment, mixed with the norms of desirable behaviour. Opinions of individuals are 'socially constructed'. They also strongly determine the identity of their own group. In looking at our own environment we are not unconnected from our group members (see Leeuwis, 1993, p.63 and further).

In view of these problems, I would like to introduce another approach which possibly offers interesting perspectives for CS's. I do not want to suggest by this that attitude on the whole is inefficient. However, there are sufficient arguments to look at changing processes from a different point of view, that is less individualistic and also less static.

I think that I have found this approach in the conversation analysis. This analysis does not concentrate on individuals but on what happens between individuals. It is a strongly empirically-coloured research tradition (conversations can be directly observed, attitudes sometimes as well – through observation of behaviour – but here the interview dominates as the instrument).

Whilst the accent on interaction can be seen as a reaction to behavioural research, it is as much a logical consequence of the old diffusion theory, which departs from informal conversations between people as the motor of social change. The influence of 'external communication', for example, messages from the mass media, should not be overestimated. Roper writes in the foreword of Katz and Lazarsfeld's classic 'Personal Influence': 'I have come to the

tentative conclusion that ideas often penetrate the public as a whole slowly and – even more importantly – frequently by interaction of neighbour to neighbour without any apparent influence from the mass media' (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1995, p.XV). It is certainly the case that the newer developments in the diffusion theory have stressed the formal side of interactions, which means that they look especially at who has contacts with whom, what network exist (Weenig & Midden, 1991). I, however, do not make this choice. With research on conversation I focus on the internal side of interactions. Since this is a less well-known area I will discuss it a bit further on.

It is about three questions:

- a. In what way do people give a certain subject a theme?
  - b. In what way do they label this? From whom is the subject coming and how do they feel about it?
  - c. In which terms do they talk about a subject?
- I will discuss these three questions shortly.

#### *a. Thematizing*

It is stated above that people cannot be compared concerning their attitudes towards an 'object' since the object itself is interpreted differently all the time. The primary goal of conversation analysis, the way I imagine it, is to study how people approach a subject. So it is not about finding out what people do or do not know about important political issues, and certainly it is not about whether they have a good understanding of the 'official' version but rather the citizen is considered to be a subject who simply takes an active part in conversation. Quoting Crigler and Jensen I want to state that: 'we point to the active role of political subjects in reconstructing and making sense of political information' (Crigler and Jensen, 1991, p.17).

For example, the drugs problem can be interpreted as a problem of social order (purses and car radios being robbed), as a medical problem, as a psychological problem (escapism), or as a problem of ethnic minorities. Depending on the choice for one or more of these versions the conversation will differ. Of course, this choice is not made without reason. From the several available models of conversation people choose for a selection that enables them to ventilate certain opinions or to justify certain behaviour. One who approaches the drugs problem as a social order problem will quickly

accuse the government of insufficient police control. The government fails in the area of public safety. Those who treat it as a psychological problem can show compassion and understanding for the victims (addicts).

***b. The vocabulary***

A subject is discussed in certain terms. The words used are the raw material for the thinking about a certain subject and are thus interesting for closer study. In doing so we should take the so-called connotative meanings of words into account, that which one non-literally expresses with words, or with much used metaphors. A person who talks about 'the refugees problem' immediately sets the discussion in a certain light. Usually the idea is namely not the problem of the refugees, but our problem with the refugees. When farmers talk about 'how green the trees are around their intensive pig farms' it can be interpreted as a literal comment or as a metaphor for their nature-friendliness. After all, from their point of view they plant trees which flourish in places which others see as a source of environmental damage.

***c. Labelling***

And also the following must be considered. Particular themes and a certain type of terminology belong to specific social groups. Every version of a subject is, so to speak, labelled according to where it comes from. By supporting or undermining a certain version we express our alliance to a particular culture and group. Whilst speaking we identify ourselves. We confirm our own versions of the 'we-group' whilst at the same time distantiate ourselves from the version of the 'they-group' which we ridicule or consciously reject. These are two sides of the same coin. With each 'we-feeling' there is also a 'they-feeling' (Turner, 1991: 28). This is an active and dynamic process. It means that by labelling we continuously ascertain that which does and does not belong to us and either keep or discard one version.

Construction workers derive their identity partly from the sturdy nature of the work they do. Talking about the safety aspects of the job is not their style. By making all labour regulations on ergonomics and safety sound ridiculous they verify their own identity and set up barriers between themselves and the softies who view the world from behind their desks.

What does all this mean for government communication? There can be important differences between the themes we find in policy papers and official presentations and the themes a subject is given in every day discourse. I know a mayor who rejects his citizens feelings of lack of safety by pointing to local statistics. Here a formal opinion, based on officially reported incidents clashes with an informal, 'perceived' version of the same phenomenon. The same mayor wants his communication specialist to challenge the latter version with arguments from 'his' version. It remains to be seen whether this makes much difference and if it would not be better to investigate the manner by which one talks about this perceived lack of safety.

Furthermore, jargon can really obstruct effective communication. For example, the communication specialists on information-extension about nutrition are almost glued to terms such as 'carbohydrates' and 'polyunsaturated fatty acids'! These are not words that come up often in our everyday conversation about food. Which is why these terms, like many other medical concepts, are not suitable for making a change in the way people (can) talk about food. And so it possibly reduces the potential for developing a different eating culture. Generally speaking, one cannot explain social change without the interaction between people.

Labelling can be disastrous as well. Much government communication is labelled after the group that is seen as the instigator of a certain policy. For example, it is possible that lorry drivers would perceive the speed limit as an initiative of environmental groups, who, having no understanding of the economy, in their leisure time, obstruct the hard working people. Thus a 'we-group' (realistic, industrious) and a 'they-group' (utopian, taking it easy) are constructed. If people talk in this manner and is worth studying this, the willingness to act within the law will be limited.

If you consider conversations as the motor for social change you will be more readily prepared to facilitate or stimulate such conversation. Meetings form the core of every methodology in interactive policy-making. To make such a methodology effective it makes sense to investigate how factual a discussion is in a certain group at a certain time (see, for instance,

Te Molder, 1995) and to see how this can be done differently. The individual, static approach must then be abandoned.

### Views on democracy

Lastly, our view on policies and communication is associated with how we think about democracy. On this point Edwards distinguishes three philosophical traditions: the collectivist, the liberal and the republican (Edwards, 1994). I follow his basis.

In the collectivist vision the central ideas are the sovereignty of the people and their political equality, the roots of which lie in the French Revolution. What the state does should be a reflection of what the people want. This works (unfortunately, but inevitably) indirectly; the paradigm of this model is, according to Edwards, hierarchy, from the electorate, through the parliament to the government. Politics has the character of a collective will – and power forming, with the citizens as carriers of ‘positive freedom right’, through which they can shape their lives and participate in politics.

In the liberal vision parties try to collect power. When they have gained this through elections, it gives them significant freedom to implement their program. Among the parties there is competition regarding the favours of the electorate, as within the market, which is the paradigm of this vision. The decision-making at the top of the political tree is autonomous, but restricted since voters can replace the ruling authorities at regular intervals. Citizens have ‘negative freedom rights’, so that the state, or other citizens, cannot break too far into this private sphere. However, the controlled access to the democratic process allows on the one hand the state and on the other the parliament, to come to feasible compromises through a process of pushing and pulling, without too much interference from voters.

The republican vision is process oriented. Citizens talk amongst each other about what can best be done regarding the public interest. The paradigm is the conversation. The quality of opinion-forming is most important, more so than the ideal reflection, as in the collectivist vision, or the choice for the best party on the market, which offers what the citizen-client wants for his

or her individual needs. Citizens, therefore, have to participate in public discussions. The ‘public sphere’ is something that should be promoted actively by the government and the results should count in the political process.

In literature we find a renewed interest in the republican vision. Van Gunsteren talks about ‘neo-republican citizenship’. His remark that the citizen, in this vision, has a double role is of interest: he is both the ruler and the ruled (Van Gunsteren, 1994, p.46). We could say that every citizen has a piece of government in his mind, a faculty to recognise, to define and to think about solutions with regard to problems that go beyond the private territory. This is what citizens do in their daily lives, in their many conversations, in the sphere of the family but also among strangers, in canteens, at parties, in sport clubs, in pubs; people talk about public affairs and a kind of democratic decision-making comes into being. A government should promote these kinds of conversations, among others by means of creating ‘public spaces’; because, according to Habermas: ‘the institutions of constitutional freedom are only worth as much as a population makes of them’ (Habermas, 1994, p.27).

At the moment, the collectivist tradition is under debate because of the failing representative democracy. The bond the politician has with his grassroot supporters is highly problematic. It is certainly not the case that ‘the will of the people’ is formed by the work of the political parties and is passed on automatically through the political representatives. The liberal tradition over-emphasises the self-interested, financial-mind set of the individual citizen, which, at the very least, allows collectively irresponsible behaviour. The ‘calculating citizen’ is an outgrowth of this development. The (neo-)republican vision offers a perspective for a better quality of individual opinion-forming and a more collective rational outcome.

A republican vision can in part be positioned opposite the instrumental approach that was discussed earlier. ‘Planning of civil society is today even less possible than it was in the past. From the point of view of those steering it, society becomes less and less recognisable’ (Van Gunsteren, 1994, p.44). If a government cannot manage society then it could possibly delegate or give back part of its responsibility to the citizens,

who through free interaction can perhaps come to more effective and acceptable solutions.

The fact that many societal problems have a value-loaded content plays a role here. For pure technological problems a government, with the help of science, can possibly construct an ideal solution, against which not many objections are possible, for example, protection against flood-water. However, it is often not possible to tackle problems from a technical-rational perspective and there can only be an intersubjective consensus formed about what should be done. We can recognise this clearly with typical ethical discussions, for instance, about abortion or euthanasia, but also with issues such as the application of biotechnology or the development of certain kinds of plans for nature. How the 'Green Heart' of Holland should be planned cannot be determined by science. Citizens should talk about this together.

Yet we should not be so naïve as to think that the outcome of this discussion will be unequivocal. Dryzek talks about 'consensus based on reasoned disagreement, by striving to understand the cultural tradition and/or conceptual framework of the other partners. This disagreement would ideally concern only different conceptions of the public interest rather than competing private interests the key to conflict resolution in participatory democracy is the transformation of private interests into publicly defensible values in unrestricted debate' (Dryzek, 1994, p.42).

In many situations in the past, groups of organised citizens have put politicians under pressure in order to arrange things of public interest (the environment, nature, public health, etcetera). In a favourable but positive public climate this could then be converted into policies and applied to groups of citizens who had not, or hardly (often only through their representatives) been involved in the whole policy process. It is clear that a process like this, with the government as the 'key player', causes little acceptance from these same subjects. They literally feel victims of the policies and moreover have to suffer because of them, thanks to a lack of discussion, the policies are badly suited to their actual needs. Based on the republican vision, discussions should be initiated between parties that ask for a policy and those that can bear responsibility for problem solution. Thus, a sense of dependency can be built up in the first instance. An example

of this is to be found in agriculture. Farmers cannot work properly in conditions where their activities are constantly under fire: for the environment, animal welfare, nature, etcetera. A 'social contract' should be made, to allow for an acceptable and viable agriculture. This dependency of others is felt increasingly strongly by farmers. In return, environmental groups learn from their contact with farmers about what it is like to be farming nowadays. Respect for each other's motives and a certain care for each other's objectives comes into being. This way solutions can be initiated that satisfy broad groups and have more potential for change than regulations via a compelling government.

What does this mean for a CS? He or she will have to try to create a public sphere that enables similar discussions. 'The modern public sphere seemingly recalls the representative publicness of the middle ages, where elites displayed themselves to the masses while at the same time using the forum to communicate amongst themselves' according to Dahlgren and Sparks (Dahlgren & Sparks, 1991, p.10). Perhaps this observation is not entirely correct. Outside the circle of the privileged there is (informal) discussion as well, as I stated earlier. But there is a wide gap between the official platform and the thousands of country-wide discussions. As a policy-maker, the citizen is not really taken seriously while he is, certainly with regard to value-loaded decisions, a very relevant partner. Also, concerning the more sophisticated analysis of problems and solutions, he often has ideas that policies lack. The arguments that are developed on the official platform often have little meaning outside of it (Wagemans, 1990).

How does a CS do this? How is a 'citizen made from a civilian', active and involved. This is partly a methodological question, interactive situations have to be shaped. One of the most intriguing possibilities seems to be the Internet, which is like a village square or, if you like, an 18th century Parisian salon with Internet time and location problems that surround participation are overcome. With it, the CS is the moderator who organises, stimulates and guides similar discussions and who makes connections with policies, either by involving policy-makers directly in the discussion or by intensive reporting of the results of the discussion. However, more can be achieved through classical

means, from major public debates to sitting-room meetings.

Another part of the function of the CS will be the promotion of a specific kind of communicative thinking within his or her own organisation. This trend, which is directed at the output of information has to be restructured towards interaction among (groups of) citizens themselves and between them and the policies. In fact, for every policy that has to be made one should think about how citizens will be involved in it. 'The task of reproducing citizens is implied in every governmental action. Every governmental action can and may be examined in terms of its effect on (the reproduction of) citizenship, just as we now judge nearly all governmental action in terms of its effect on the financial deficit' (Van Gunsteren, 1994, p. 46).

### Conclusion

We have seen how five theoretical approaches symbolise the turn-around in the thinking about communication and policies. They are closely related, but each one in itself represents a certain perspective on the issue, with a specific literature. Together they form the basis for a very different communication strategy. The main idea behind this strategy is to free people (e.g. farmers) from their coping behaviour

with existing policy plans made for them, and to give them a place in the process of making such plans (whether or not official, governmental plans). The function of this active involvement is, firstly, to make better, more effective plans and secondly, to enhance learning processes by which people understand problems and solutions, how and why they think about these, and also how and why other people think about these, (social learning processes) by which people understand problems and solutions, as a base for a constructive societal dialogue.

Especially in the adaptation of agriculture to new requirements (on the environment, animal welfare, food security, nature, the cultural value of landscapes, etcetera) this new approach is desirable and needed. Many farmers still defensively try to undermine claims from the outside world, instead of being active in the construction of sustainable relationships with the society in which they live. Others make the best of it, by accepting criticism from other groups as a social fact, stupid but unavoidable, and by negotiating fiercely on every inch to get what they can get. Fortunately, there is a growing group of farmers who take the initiative for another style of bargaining, with respect for the ideas of others and a willingness to deal with their motives and backgrounds. For these farmers this new approach can create fresh possibilities.

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