**The Intersections of Public Policy and Political Communications: Insights from Federal Public Service Elites**

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**INTRODUCTION**

A diverse number of terms have emerged to capture the application of digital technologies to public policy and administration. E-governance, e-democracy, digital democracy are the key terms in usage (Dunleavy, et.al., 2005; Dunleavy, Margetts, Bastow & Tinkler, 2006). What binds these terms is a common foundation concerned with the application of Web 2.0 collaborative technologies, including Twitter, Facebook, blogs, and others, to the policy process (Rainie et. al.; 2012). Any open source technology which enables interoperability between government and regular citizens counts as part of Gov 2.0. It is used to designate the application of these technologies to broadening engagement with citizens. Gov 2.0, according to an Australian government task force, involves “a public policy shift to create a culture of openness and transparency, where government is willing to engage with and listen to its citizens, and to make available the vast national resource of non-sensitive public sector information (PSI). Government 2.0 empowers citizens and public servants alike to directly collaborate in their own governance by harnessing the opportunities presented by technology” (Government of Australia 2009: 1). Government 2.0 adopted the Web 2.0 terminology to propose the possibility of online technologies to transform government into a platform for citizens, including opportunities for open collaboration and two-way participation between citizens and government actors. Similar to Web 2.0, it has been seen as a more dynamic extension of e-government meant not only to serve clients (as in the NPM) but to enable participation through new technologies, data sharing and collaborative governance (Eggers, 2007). Given these developments, the central question for us is how these digital technologies intersect and inform the public policy process, and the work of senior policy advisors in the Government of Canada.

Three specific questions drive this study as extending from our main purpose. First, how has the policy process of the Government of Canada been changed by digital technologies? Second, has the policy advisory role of the senior public service become more responsive to the political arm of government (ministers, ministers’ staff, Prime Minister/Prime Ministers’ Office) as a consequence of the “disruptive” effect of digital technologies? (Marland, 2016: 11). And third, how has the use of digital technologies affected policy work? In other words, the tools, instruments and knowledge employed in the routine work of senior public servants in their role as policy advisors.

Our paper is divided into three main parts. The first attempts to situate our questions in the current literature as these apply to the Canadian federal context. The second part then draws upon the perspectives of Clerks of the Privy Council, current and former deputy and assistant-deputy ministers in five departments, and heads of internal communications functions in those departments with respect to our questions. The last part provides our general conclusions on what we heard and found, including that the literature and these perspective diverge on a number of important points. Eight individual and group semi-structured interviews were carried out to support this study that took place between January and April 2016.

**SITUATING THE DISCUSSION**

Marland argues that we “lack a focused study of how political communications work in Ottawa. We need a theory for why they create a contagion of pulling everything towards ‘the centre’” (2016: 11). Embedded in this statement are important questions respecting the working relationship between the political arm of government and the senior public service, the extent to which information communications technologies, and specifically, Twitter, the internet, various mobile technologies, cable television, and even e-mail serve to fragment and arguably open up the policy process to an unprecedented number of potential and actual policy actors, and how this affects the construction of public policy within the Government of Canada. Government communications “activities can be seen to primarily involve the use of information-based policy tools which function as they do because of the nodal position governments occupy in public policy systems and sub-systems” (Howlett, 2009: 25). In this respect, communications provide a critical role in the political process (Chaffee, 1975: 15). More specifically, the communications function within the Government of Canada is stated, in part, as follows: “As a function of good management, open and proactive communication ensures that the public receives government information, and that the views and concerns of the public are taken into account in the planning, management and evaluation of policies, programs, services and initiatives” (Government of Canada, 2012). It is this policy dialogue dimension, with connotations to policy co-creation, that are of specific interest here. And, particularly, the intersections of Government of Canada application of communications and information technologies, also referred to as digital technologies, and the policy process.

With respect to our first question, the role and effect of digital technologies on the policy process, we turn first to New Public Governance (NPG) theory. Interest in redesigning the policy process with a view to engaging with a wider range of non-government policy actors has informed the emergence of a body of research concerned with what is termed New Public Governance (Osborne, 2010). NPG theorists contend that the policy process has, as a consequence of various pressures, become much more accessible to non-governmental policy actors (Clarke & Margetts, 2014; Dunleavy et.al., 2006). NPG proposes a larger range of policy actors are enabled to access what is viewed as a previously closed policy process, whereas the closed policy process works to “limit experimentation and diversity in policymaking practices” (Noveck, 2015: 140). To what extent digital technologies contribute to advancing the inclusion of a wider range of non-government policy actors is the central question.

Beginning in the late 1980s, with the expansion of telecommunication technologies, theorists began to identify the possibilities for new communication channels to privilege new voices in political debate, followed closely in the 1990s with the rise of the personal website and the 2000s with the weblog or blog, and present day with online social networking sites. A substantive body of literature has theorized that information technologies have created global shifts of political power between citizens and the state (Meijer and Torenvlied, 2016; H. Margetts and Dunleavy, 2013; Castells, 2011; Hajer, 2009; Crozier, 2007; Habermas, 2006). Among these theories is the idea that information technologies have created a “Coasean collapse” building efficiencies that give a competitive advantage to self-organizing groups over large hierarchical organizations (Eaves, 2010; Shirky, 2008). The basis for this perspective comes from economic transaction cost theory that argues institutions are needed when costs for coordinating social action are high (Shirky, 2011; North, 1990; Williamson, 1979). A Coasean collapse implies the opposite effect: a rapid decline for formal institutions because citizens are better able to coordinate to solve their own problems. Of particular interest to internet theorists is the apparent shift in the role of the organizations (including media) as a gatekeeper of knowledge between the public and state institutions where informal groups such as Anonymous can engage in “creative, aesthetic and artistic expression of dissent and the use of user-generated content sites for communicating to the public and organizing distributed actions” (Fuchs, 2014: 107; Chadwick, 2009; Shirky, 2008, 2011). The broad message is that technology either will or ought to compel government not only to invite the public into collaborative arrangements for policy decision-making.

Taking the possibility of Coasian Collapse seriously, institutions such as the World Bank have enacted policies calling for greater citizen engagement in policy development, including public input in all stages of development and more direct contact between citizens and public servants (Group, 2015). In theory, the benefits of ICTs align with the theory of direct democracy. Instead of relying on elections to provide citizen input on important policy issues, ICTs enable governments to take a “direct democracy” approach by accessing public opinion at all points of policy making (Budge, 1996). Citizens can realize their civic responsibility more easily by sharing news of social problems directly to the sources that can fix them, rather than asking elected representatives to present on their behalf (Budge, 1996; Weale, 2007). Governments could design participation into policy in order to make decisions more democratic and effective due to the collaborative nature of online technologies (Noveck, 2009). Among the tools for these development is the notion of “thin engagement” or the use of Internet-based tools as a support for more “thick” forms of community engagement and consultation activities (Leighninger, 2014). Other theorists have pointed out that the institutional control of these services still remain within organizations, led by technological experts who make routine decisions about what is or is not permissible on their site (Van Dijck, 2013; Hindman, 2007). “Open source” approaches to government have tended to favour a few organizations rather than producing a more egalitarian world (Hindman, 2007). Others have challenged the extent to which digital groups are in fact as representative as has been implied in the theory, pointing out the tendency for important voices to be excluded from policy discussions in online discussions (Deschamps, 2014; Knox, 2013). Critically, much of this literature either ignores the role of technological change on political elites or considers the state as a barrier to realizing this political change. Those who do acknowledge political actors tend to focus on the role of technology in political campaigning or public resistance to state decisions (Yoon and Park, 2014).

Other research in the Canadian context challenges the core claim of NPG in finding that the depth and breadth of government/non-government policy engagement is complex. Survey-based research finds that while there is significant policy engagement by governments with non-government actors, this is highly variable with respect to which point in the process non-government actors are brought into the process and for what purpose (Evans and Sapeha, 2015; Evans and Shields, 2015; Evans and Wellstead, 2013). This is juxtaposed against expressions of interest, and indeed efforts, by governments to reinvent the policy process both in Canada and beyond.

Digital technologies, arguably, provide a means for the expansion of participants in the process and thus contributing to innovation. The usefulness and quality of this input is, of course, uneven. With respect to Twitter, as a case in point, Charlie Angus, Member of Parliament for Timmins-James Bay, argued: “Being on Twitter is like being badgered by a drunk on a 24- hour bus ride,” prompting him to declare: “I’m going back to the world of real people with real names who speak in sentences longer than 140 characters. Does this mean that I’m cutting myself off from the public? Hardly. I can barely keep up to those who contact me by phone, email, Facebook and old fashioned mail” (Angus, 2012). The limits of Twitter are obvious but Angus’ point, that a great deal of what is communicated, is of little or no value in political or policy terms. This conclusion is more generally applicable across the spectrum of digital tools and mediums. The more critical point is that the breaching of the policy process imagined by NPG to allow a more robust multi-actor engagement, requires some reflection. The GoC communications policy statement includes an explicit obligation on the part of government to engage the Canadian public:

Consult the public, listen to and take account of people's interests and concerns when establishing priorities, developing policies, and planning programs and services**.** The government's obligation to reach out and communicate with citizens is concomitant with the right of citizens to address and be heard by their government … The dialogue between citizens and their government must be continuous, open, inclusive, relevant, clear, secure and reliable. Communication is a two-way process (2012).

This is as unambiguous a statement for public engagement and policy dialogue as can be imagined. What this statement conjures is a process of policy dialogue that is fundamentally different from the vertical and monolithic governmental design we are accustomed to. However, the “polycentric” or pluralized structure NPG posits a new era of policy co-creation. Contemporary governments possess alternative sources of policy input. Government decision-makers, rather than dominating the policy process, now occupy a seat at the centre of a “complex ‘horizontal’ web of policy advisors that includes both ‘traditional’ ... advisors in government as well as active and well-resourced non-governmental actors in NGOs, think tanks and other similar organisations” (Craft & Howlett, 2012: 85). These relationships have been characterized as a “reciprocal bestowing of legitimacy” in that non-state actors are relied upon by the state to deliver services, to provide analysis, and to serve as a vehicle carrying citizen’s voices to the state and by doing so legitimating consequent state policy (Lang, 2013: 17). For many non-state organizations active in policy related work, their very purpose for existing is policy advocacy and engagement with the public policy process (Bryce, 2012: xiii). They stake their legitimacy and credibility on their expertise and knowledge. This applies to the ‘procedural domain’ (Howlett, 2009: 27-8) of government communications activities, one of two such domains, where the purpose of communications is to “effect change in how individuals and groups behave in policy processes. At the front end of the domain, communications are used to affect the behavior of actors in the agenda-setting and formulation stages of the policy process, and in the back end the implementation and evaluation stages” (Glenn, 2014: 6).

New Public Governance, tends to presume that digital technologies will foster a more open, pluralistic style of public management. Most representative of this view is Noveck’s work, and specifically her book *Wiki Government* (2012), which makes an interesting theoretical contribution in proposing digital technologies provide the mechanism for enabling participatory democracy. Technologies facilitate regular, ongoing, perhaps daily participation of citizen-experts. And in so doing, the input of non-state actors into the policy process, particularly that of well-organized interest groups, is diluted.

The second question interrogates how, or if, digital technologies contribute to the politicization of the senior public service as well as implications for greater centralization of control at the ‘centre’ in response to the fragmentation of sources of policy inputs and the corresponding danger of fragmentation of the governmental communications response. In other words, do digital technologies put in motion an overwhelming gravitational force pulling everything and everyone into the centre? Marland suggests, in response to the growing complexity of the communications environment, political elites, both from the political arm of government and the senior public service, work to re-establish a semblance of centralized control to ensure consistent, uncomplicated repetition of core information to specific constituencies (Marland, 2016: 11 and 12). The consensus in the literature is that digital media propel centralization in the political arm of government (Aucoin, 2012). The argument is that in an age of 24/7 digital media, messaging mistakes have the potential to go viral and be pounced on in aggressive communications campaigns from the opposition, so there is greater rationale for controlling decisions in order to avoid negative publicity from the slips ups that could accompany a more decentralized approach. For this argument, you can cite any of the Savoie pieces on centralization and Aucoin’s work on NPG; both take a very sour approach to digital media. Marland’s book, *Brand Command*, provides an elaboration of this argument, which is supported by others who have concluded that ICTs such as, e-government, blogging, media communications and social media contributes to centralization and control at the organizational level (Bovaird, 2003).

The “New Political Governance,” the other NPG, posits a rather different understanding of changes to the state and the policy process. Arguing that New Public Management (NPM) reforms have resulted in a shift in the formal approach toward “a form of politicization that explicitly runs counter to the public service tradition of impartiality in the administration of public services and the non-partisan management of the public service” (Aucoin, 2012: 178). The NPG, Aucoin argues is “sleazy governance” at best and “at worst … a form of political corruption that cannot but undermine impartiality and, thereby, also management performance to the extent that it assumes management based on non-partisan criteria” (Aucoin, 2012: 178).[[1]](#footnote-1) Aucoin used the acronym NPG to describe the trend, possibly to imply that the other NPG, “New Public Governance” – a movement to expand policy to centres of citizen engagement, especially the third sector – was not as politically benign as the name implied (Noordegraaf, 2015; Osborne, 2006).

Aucoin described five factors creating the move to this NPG: 1. Mediatization in the public sphere 2. Transparency and openness 3. Performance Auditing of Government 4. An Explosion of Political Interest Groups and 5. Political Volatility and Polarization. While each element is worthy of a paragraph, a brief overview suggests that the supposed benefits of political transparency imply an erosion of impartiality of the public service. For political communications, NPG implies a disruption of administrative routines such as the exchange of written memos, formal meeting agendas and the distribution of minutes after private meetings for fear that they would be leaked to public channels. This result is the opposite implied by the New Public and “open source” government approaches. Not only do Aucoin’s observations imply a less transparent government, but also a less effective one.

Formally, communication in Westminster-style systems requires that ministers of parliaments be accountable to the House of Commons, in particular to the opposition during Question Period (Aucoin and Jarvis, 2005). Public servants, led by the Deputy Minister, are accountable to the Minister with public interaction limited to the implementation of policy and program evaluations. Communications among public servants are hierarchical in dissemination and impartial in content. As a rule, engagement of the public by the Public Service has not been an institutionalized part of public policy development, although various experiments with consultations and town halls have been conducted over the years (Turnbull and Aucoin, 2006). In fact, a traditional “bargain” between public servants and the political wing discourages interaction with the public by public servants, other than for the provision of services (Savoie, 2003). In contrast to the engaging open source model, public sector communications are routine-oriented, with the intention of producing a continuous set of results from a continuous informing of the public (Crozier, 2007). Far from the dynamic opinions of internet theorists, government communications cover a wide range of activities at various points in the policy process, but tend to involve more mundane objectives such as advertisement of programs, distribution of staff directories, and maintenance of clearly established roles inside the organizations (Glenn, 2014; Howlett, 2009). Further, in federal systems such as Canada, departments are constrained by multiple tiers of government, with the assumption that provincial and municipal operations are “closer to the people” than federal ones (Kessler, 2014). This requires a considerable amount of collaboration across institutions in order to coordinate messaging prior to the eventual launch to the public. Inevitably, this coordination requires frank discussion about policy directions that would otherwise serve to confuse or anger the public.

And third, how have digital technologies influenced policy work? In other words, what is the relationship between such technologies and the senior public servants whose role it is to organize, filter, interpret, and assemble the vast array of policy ideas entering, or attempting to enter, the GoC policy process. The ‘disruptor technologies’ may facilitate a great deal of traffic but this, as a result, places a premium on the ‘buffer’ role of senior public servants. It has been noted that policy elites, both inhabiting the political arm of government and public servants, offer significant resistance to using techniques/methods which broaden citizen engagement in policy work. The reasons for this include: citizen engagement requires that policy elites in positions of authority relinquish or share power; agendas and outcomes are harder to control; stakeholder elites believe that citizens are not adequately informed, and are not sufficiently interested to justify them having input; elites are more willing to share power with important organized interests because they can make deals and negotiate “behind a veil”; and Parliamentarians may feel that direct citizen engagement diminishes their own role as the elected representative (the voice of the people) – thus negating parliamentary democracy (Turnbull and Aucoin, 2006: 31). The buffering role of policy staff, both political and public service, that is to filter the myriad of policy inputs, to separate the useful from the less so, meets the assembler role, that is to manufacture meaning and sense, rational and viable meaning and sense, of policy relevant proposals. Questions of capacity, that is the simple ability to manage and curate the inputs, loom large in the context of technologies which fragment the policy and communications environment.

That the proliferation of digital technologies, arguably, may have opened channels for broader participation for non-government policy actors does not necessarily translate into better quality policy inputs. Various studies of the use of digital technologies in the political and policy processes of a number of countries suggest that digital technologies, if anything, necessitate that public service policy work be much more attuned to the limitations of the Gov 2.0 paradigm, and possess the capacity to manage this environment.

Studies of online activity in the United Kingdom found that, among several significant trends, there was one in particular which observed that there was a tendency for politicians and public servants to use digitally-enabled group targeting to develop micro-targeted policies. The concern this raises is that this could contribute to rising inequities between targeted and non-targeted groups (Margetts, 2009: 10). Who is heard, and which of those voices are responded to potentially fractures the inclusive ideological foundation of New Public Governance. In addition, and possibly depreciating the contribution of an evidence-based approach, was the finding that those using social media tools for political and policy objectives, were more likely to be motivated by partisan and ideological interests (Rainie et. al., 2012). A US study of Twitter activity concluded only 3 per cent of users did so on a regular basis and, again with respect to motivation, found that a large number of tweets, for or against a given issue, could be generated by a small group of advocates (Mitchell and Hitlin, 2013). In essence, the Twitter universe is not representative of perspectives given that the array of communities of interest residing there respond to different events in different ways. But even more dispelling of the purported potential for social media serving as a tool for enhancing citizen engagement in the policy process is the observation that outlets, such as Twitter, are effective primarily, not in enhancing the participation of citizens or non-governmental actors in the policy process, but rather in the one-way flow of information and self-promotion from government to citizens and stakeholders (Kim, Park and Rho, 2015).

**THE PERSPECTIVES OF FEDERAL PUBLIC SERVICE ELITES**

This section provides some critical observations regarding the changes observed regarding digital technologies on the policy process, the responsiveness of public officials to those technologies and the perspectives that are carried by them, and how the policy process has been affected in terms of the tools brought to bear. In particular, we asked senior public officials to test some important assumptions made in the literature around these issues. We have organized this section around the major points raised in the first section.

**The Changes Observed Regarding Digital Technologies on the Policy Process**

Several observations were made by respondents with respect to the changes over time resulting from digital technologies. The first observation relates to the changes brought about by the New Public Governance (NPG). Officials implicitly recognized the Habermasian (1991) assumption that information is a vital component for improved communication, and the democratic construction of public policy. They also implicitly recognize that Habermas is right that democratic revitalization comes from “a re-energized, activist, engaged citizenry, working together to create new small-scale communicative associative institutions that over time merge into larger ones, or at least join forces.” Although technology may not compel outcomes, it certainly can make difficult things easier (Froomkin, 2003: 753). In this respect, the policy process is arguably now available to a much wider array of participants especially at the inputs stages that serves to counteract or disperse power from traditional sources sought after by political parties and bureaucracies. As indicated, Froomkin (2003: 4) regards social media and networks as a technological response to the democratic deficit by enabling communicative action. Although such assumptions certainly resonate with officials, they raise some important clarifications to them expressed here thematically.

*The Results Expected from e-Technology Are Ambitious*

Respondents maintained that internet tools and social media in its various forms (i.e., blogs, wikis, websites, Twitter, Facebook) encourage active communication, but that a key threshold for effective public policy-making has not yet been achieved: they are not participative enough. This supports Froomkin’s view (2004:15) that not enough has been done “for the direct integration of the popular will into political decision-making processes.” According to some respondents, public service reliance on technology is ambitious, and the capacity does not yet exist to supplement internal debates, and encourage active citizen involvement. In other words, there is a willingness increasingly to engage, especially with a new Liberal government in place, but for senior officials, current technology has facilitated greater inflow of information than outflow. They attribute part of this to the capacity to respond to the sheer volume of perspectives and information, and part to the control frameworks in place. There is also trepidation to engage, as this means that there are higher expectations on governments to open up its processes.

With regard to volume considerations, respondents agree that information is widely available on any policy question, which reduces reliance on public services to generate information. However, the question for many is how to operationalize such divergent views in the form of actual findings and recommendations to ministers. In other words, the problem now is to whom does government listen and give priority given such a wealth of perspectives? And, if government does respond, important considerations such as balancing various interests must be made, which has always been the case. The challenge for public services now according to respondents is that various perspectives must be validated much quicker, or else government runs the risk of losing legitimate control of discussions. Solutions may be arrived at that may be more responsive than proactive, leading potentially to inappropriate policy choices.

With respect to control and accountability, almost all respondents indicated that an argument can be made that e-government, e-technologies, and e-governance and the like have an effect on transforming the policy process, which is in line with many theorists (see: Fisher, 2010). However, they regard such arguments as devoid or oblivious of the control frameworks in place federally, and that technology is not a social good unto itself that legitimates public decisions. They maintain that not all policy problems can be repaired by technology (Mosco, 2004; Noble, 1999). Respondents argued strongly that there are rules governing public action, including privacy, lobbying, information, and the restrictions imposed by the federal Communications Policy that both sets goals for “open communication,” and a control process that upholds legal obligations. In this sense, open communication must be fashioned according to accepted rules of practice, which invariably limits the ability of government to communicate outwardly under conditions that many would describe as “open government.” Government is held ultimately to a higher standard of engagement than imposed by social media. In this respect, several respondents noted that their “conversations” tend to be strategically focused with key actors on a policy question so as to limit “noise” that cannot reasonably be attributed to the questions being examined. Such focused conversations also ensure that those actors with “skin in the game” are actively consulted. In this sense, technology has enabled departments and agencies to be more precise about targeting key policy actors. For them, this is as close as they are able to get to the Habermas vision for participatory democracy.

*The Array of Actors in the Policy Process has Increased*

Respondents generally echoed Noveck’s argument that e-technology has made possible for more actors to become involved in public policy discussions. As an input to policy, e-technologies have fundamentally altered “how business is done in government.” Specifically, governments know that they have a duty to consult on various policy questions, and that a reasonable response is required based on those consultations. In addition, technology has made it possible to consult more broadly or to be more focused (within the rules). Citizens, advocacy groups, lobbyists, pundits, media and social media actors also know that their influence has increased given that with access there is political power to effect pressure on decision-makers. However, several respondents worry about the uneven access of vulnerable populations, or those populations that either elect not to engage, or cannot engage due to technological or other capacity challenges (Bovaird, 2003). This also supports Norris’ worry (2001) that such considerations raise problems of democratic legitimation as some populations are highly engaged, while others are not. When a technological response to a policy issue is placed in high priority, some people will not be heard. Many indicated that although this perspective might be perceptual, in operational terms it is an ongoing concern that an accurate reflection of reality be communicated to ministers. That said, however, respondents made the point that there is no evidence to suggest that with increased access to the policy process by disadvantaged groups that their perspectives are being considered more now than in the past. Internal decision processes take into account many more considerations than access to the conversation regarding policy decisions.

Respondents also noted that many new voices are observed in the policy process at various intervention points, including disadvantaged populations, social media pundits and bloggers, advocacy groups, and lobbyists. However, although these voices are present, they are still proportionate to the traditional players whose influence has not changed. Industry, labour, and business groups have maintained their influence, and in fact are becoming more adept at maintaining it through new lobbying approaches, the use of various media including traditional media, and various public fora. It stands to reason, according to one respondent, that “the more voices there are in the room, the louder one has to be in order to be heard.” For almost all respondents, these traditional voices are still the ones being sought by decision-makers because “they, in effect, still carry much weight in terms of their influence on us,” and because they can bring more resources to bear on being heard. Power, position and money still attract the attention of decision-makers, because that power can be used to support governmental aims or work against them – often more so than the many voices coming through on e-technology platforms.

The single greatest change in the policy process for senior officials is that their influence on policy is no longer sacrosanct. This argument aligns with many scholars (See: Pal, 2009; Doubuziniskis & Howlett, 2007), who maintain that there are several external players and environments with which governments must interact in order to remain current and relevant, especially given the constantly shifting nature of policy discourse, and the need to respond more quickly to events than even 20 years ago (Aucoin, 2012). What this has meant in practical terms is that the Public Service has had to rationalize its relevance in the policy process. It is no longer the sole creator of policy research (if it ever was), and it is no longer always the major player on any given policy question. The challenge, however, is that the Public Service may see itself as “off the hook on governmental decisions, because advice cannot always be attributed to public servants.” Respondents said that the Public Service must its relevance by consolidating evidence, validating positions, and ensuring fairness and due diligence in the process over the long term, especially as policy decisions are increasingly short term oriented and driven by electoral fortunes. For one respondent, “the Public Service is the voice of the long game, and it is a voice that is increasingly difficult to make heard.”

*Internal roles and responsibilities are shifting.*

As highlighted in the observations so far, the approaches used to identify policy issues, and come to advice regarding ways to prioritize and implement them have not changed fundamentally according to respondents. It is assumed that social media, for example, has influenced the policy process (Mosco, 2004), but respondents said that there is little evidence that this is the case. Although decision-makers have become more engaging and responsive to public discourse through social media and other e-technology platforms and this is likely to continue, they said traditional media is still relied upon to bring these issues to the public consciousness. The challenges related to public policy-making are still internally generated for the most part with respect to how issues are addressed once identified.

One respondent explained, which was echoed by others, that “our policy process is still largely secretive, very little is visible, even to ourselves in many cases.” This “fact” has actually been intensified with e-technologies. Respondents said that our siloed institutions still function under the rubric of ministerial responsibility, and that it remains difficult not only to ensure coordination, but to see the effect of the plethora of players in the policy process. To enable coordination requires a multitude of mechanisms at various levels, including the political level. As another respondent put it, “everyone sees themselves in the policy discussion: everyone has a piece of the story, and wants their kick at the can.” Because public servants are not always driving discussions, departmental units are constantly under pressure to demonstrate their relevance especially under times of austerity, despite whether their influence is likely to have a positive or negative effect.

A significant shift for many respondents was the oftentimes unclear role of political staffers. For several respondents, the balance of influence between the public service, ministers and political staff has shifted markedly to staffers, who have routinely intervened in departmental administration and operations with the effect that the Public Service is expected to respond much more quickly than in the past (National Post, 2011; Savoie, 2010: 209). Some attribute this quickened pace not simply to the reality of the 24-hour news cycle (Aucoin, 2012), but because ministers and the prime minister want to be involved in bureaucratic processes, and have given their tacit permission to political staffers to expedite increased responsiveness sometimes with negative effects. One respondent pointed out that the requirement under *Accountable Government: A Guide for Ministers* was removed under the Conservative government that “Ministers are personally responsible for the conduct and operation of their office” was deleted in 2011 (Globe & Mail, 2013) giving such staff greater power to act away from the notice of Ministers on occasion.

***Responsiveness of Public Officials Due to Digital Communications Technologies***

Respondents were asked to provide their thoughts on whether they observed any tangible effects on their responsibilities due to the influence of digital communications technologies as these relate to increasing responsiveness. Issues of control, capacity, and politicization of public services were raised in this family of issues. Overall, respondents commented on the extent to which the disruptive effects of digital technologies could be responsible for some of these changes in the way government carries out its work.

*“The Centralization of Communications is here to Stay”*

Almost all respondents indicated that increased communications control by central agencies begun with the new public management (NPM) are unlikely to change any time soon. For many reasons cited, respondents pointed to the fact that social media and other platforms have put pressure on government to think about issues in a more cross-cutting way, and this has translated into institutional arrangements that encourage centralization at higher levels. Federally, this has meant much more coordination being conducted by the Privy Council Office (PCO) to triage issues coming from line departments, and the Treasury Board to coordinate with respect to the prioritization and distribution of resources. At the same time, they observe increased control in political offices, most notably the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO), as central to this trend. As indicated, political officials want to engage, but they also want to be sure that their messages are equally coordinated (Marland, 2016: 135-64; Savoie, 2010; Bovaird, 2003). Marland points to Conservative government arrangements to coordinate efforts from the PMO, while the Trudeau Liberals have tended to coordinate ministerial press conferences, and remain engaged through social media. Although observed in several Westminster countries (Savoie, 2010; Christensen & Loegreid, 2007: 17-42), the tendency has been to place greater effort on coordinative efforts not simply with respect to branding, but with ensuring that departments work horizontally (Bourgault, 2006).

All respondents indicated that the effect of greater centralization for senior officials is that PCO and other central agencies take time to review issues that arise from e-technologies and other sources, and that departments do not always have the time they need to assess them when they become known. As such, short timelines mean that assessments are not as thorough as needed often, and departmental advice in return may be “sketchy.” In their view, the federal government has become “overly centralized” in order to ensure a “whole of government” approach. This has been evidenced in several areas, including the most recent “deliverology” initiative (Barber, 2010). Public officials express some trepidation at moving toward a centralized performance measurement regime that is driven by PCO, as it espouses a top-down and politically-driven performance strategy that runs the risk of measuring the wrong things quickly. It also means that departments will have to support more central performance arrangements, further over-loading already limited resources. It also means that current audit and evaluation functions may be adversely affected as these functions could fall out of favour, and staff are re-assigned to “deliverology units.” In essence, there are continued efforts to centralize communications and analytical functions, rather than decentralize or even deconcentrate.

*eGovernment is forcing public institutions to be nimble and flexible, but there are challenges.*

From the public service vantage point, informing policy must be based in evidence, and that means validating sources and rationalizing arguments. In other words, the challenge is to balance what is perceived as populism with democratic action and advice to ministers. In the current Canadian environment federally, ministers *want* to be informed by evidence, and prevailing public arguments (Delacourt, 2016). One senior official spoke to this point regarding the limits of social media arguing, “Twitter is an echo chamber,” meaning that such “conversations” often occur in isolation or on various topics with no sense of rationale other than to respond to opinion that may or may not be representative or informed. For another official, “Twitter and other social media provide perspectives to test, but it is often difficult to validate what is being talked about, and whether the context is understood.” For this official, “some forms of social media are better than others for engaging citizen points of view: one has to be very cautious about what to use, and what not to use.” Relying on social media is not regarded as evidence for public servants, who are held to account for the advice they give. Equally important, although there is a recognition on the part of respondents with respect to inequality of voices engaging in such public discussions, their greater concern is how to exercise due diligence in reflecting (for their part) an accurate picture of reality on any question given the volume of information and perspectives now available. Ministers have greater latitude to use what they wish to inform policy choices, but the Public Service is bound by internal processes that value validation above experimentation. As a result, it was suggested by all respondents that the Public Service has to be far less risk averse than it has been, and that is a difficult mindset to achieve according to respondents.

*Responsiveness has manifested in controversial effects.*

A controversial area of discussion for respondents has been the effects of increased responsiveness on the Public Service. As indicated, some manifestations have been identifiable and observed, including increased responsibilities for political staffers, expectations for shorter response times on matters of central agency concern, and increased importance associated with the communications function in government. Some respondents indicated that with more pressure points in the policy process from both internal and external actors, and a greater desire on the part of elected officials to become involved, it stands to reason that there will be many more points of contact between elected and bureaucratic officials. Such contact points may have implications on hierarchical chains of command and control, implying that public servants may feel compelled to respond to inquiries and directives when political staff insert themselves in routine areas of work. As uncertain and malleable as the relationship between public servants and political masters may be under these conditions, it is conceivable that “lines can be crossed”, at least in the most egregious cases such as the Sponsorship Scandal. Less obvious cases involve incursions such as that made by Pierre Poillievre in 2015, then Minister of Employment and Social Development, who was featured in videos following him around his riding, and advertising goodies emanating from the Budget Implementation bill, despite not having been passed by Parliament. What was objectionable to some observers, and to a few respondents, was that public employees were paid overtime for weekend work on production of these videos. Such videos were regarded at the time as “a new low for a government that has a penchant producing partisan advertising on the public dime” (The Star, 2015). Although regarded as an extreme case, respondents said that there may be “perverse pressures” on staff to respond in ways that compromise the values of a non-partisan and professional public service. As Bovaird (2003: 39-40) suggests, such responsiveness pressures come from political impatience with the pace of reforms, and a desire on their part to respond quickly to public concerns that might affect electoral objectives. Respondents indicated that lines are becoming much blurrier between what is regarded as appropriate within the boundaries of their service.

***The Effects of Digital Communications Technologies on the Policy Process***

Respondents were asked whether there were any tangible effects of digital technologies on the policy process. As indicated, sharing of power has produced some effects such as adding to the layers of coordination within the federal system at various levels to improve responsiveness and comprehensiveness of the issues. However, as Bovaird (2003) suggests there are institutional changes that have to be made at the operational level that also respond to pressures for accelerated decision-making. In addition to those changes, new needs have to be addressed that allow such changes to take shape.

*Communications plays a larger role in the policy process.*

All respondents recognized the increased role that the internal communications function has played in policy and operational decision-making. One official pointed out that there are currently 5,000 federal public servants working in and around communications with a budget of approximately $165M annually. Although this is an internal estimate, the resources are significant in that every department, large and small, supports communications. For another official, communications officers resemble policy analysts in many respects to the point that “it is difficult to separate these activities any longer.” Communications officers are asked to sift through a lot of data from various media platforms, and assess its significance on major policy questions. They also provide advice on how to convey information to minister’s offices, and play a key role in public messaging (Marland, 2016).

All respondents said that communications is now an integral function, and that “the policy process map must be re-drawn.” In that vein, we have summarized respondent observations regarding the roles of communications on the policy process as follows:

**Figure 1: The Policy Process: A Communications View**



The figure shows the traditional stages of policy development (See Pal, 2009) with pressure points where internal communications plays a key role. It does not negate the important role of policy, strategy, oversight, risk and other units that support the assessment and development of policy, but simply indicates where communications appears to provide value as an input. Most notably, communications officers indicated that they are adept and sensitive to the external environment as they are asked frequently to engage with various internal and external actors in the media (social and traditional), federal departments, other jurisdictions, nonprofits, advocacy groups, labour organizations, and citizens. They said that given the shifts to “enhanced responsiveness” has meant their input in policy discussions is critical because they are able to quickly gauge the reception of ideas and messages.

Much of the critical work of communications is to monitor social media and other discussions on matters that affect their departments, and to assess them against critical internal conversations. They are also asked frequently at the problem definition stage to respond to outside discussions where possible (i.e., reactionary role). The function is also asked to contribute to conversations proactively on discussions that may be taking place internally, such as soliciting ideas with selected target audiences or policy beneficiaries. In this respect, communications is regarded as an important contributor to policy inputs, including floating or relaying ideas for policy alternatives.

At the decision stage (3), communications and other officials will respond to requests for additional information from ministers and parliamentarians as debates ensue. However, these respondents said they are critically important in the framing of memoranda to Cabinet and other decision documents that move up the line. Once policy choices are made, Communications at various levels contribute to the “branding” and messaging process (Marland, 2016). The “announcement” is orchestrated carefully ensuring maximum public impact using multiple media platforms. Communications then monitors feedback on these announcements, and adjusts the messages accordingly. It will also monitor program implementation alternatives, and forward any feedback to program managers. To close the process, Communications is often asked to solicit or consolidate feedback on how programs are performing in order to inform new policy decisions. Although this is a simplified summary, it shows the critical role played by the function throughout the policy process. Several communications respondents further elaborated on this process by giving examples of communications outputs, such as briefing notes, web pages development, media advisories, summaries reports of focused social and other media discussions, and many briefings meetings with senior officials on stories of the day, to name a few. They also noted that increasingly Communications functions are using different tools such as “crowdsourcing” technologies to solicit policy solutions. These functions are not simply reactive, but are regarded as active resources in the policy process.

*New or enhanced tools are needed to support effective policy-making.*

All respondents explained that they are under much greater pressure from ministers to respond to policy decisions. Increasingly, ministers are demanding action on the part of the Public Service, and as noted, there are several decision processes that must be observed in order to satisfy those demands. The challenge for senior officials, however, is that increasingly they are unable to “push back” on ideas that they believe may be inappropriate, unfeasible, or ineffective. They said that many cuts were made to the research and data functions in departments since 1993, and that often there is little actual data other social media data that drives minister’s directives.

In addition to pressures on decision-making, and the lack of data, all respondents indicated that some decision-making approaches at the bureaucratic level are posing challenges for policy-makers that are out of step with a shift to greater responsiveness. One official used the example of the regulatory process that demands multiple stages of validation and approval before regulations are implemented. Such steps obstruct efforts to address problems quickly, and “oftentimes, the regulations are out-of-date before they come into force.” The same is true of other processes, such as program implementation that involve more than one department. These efforts are further complicated by inter-jurisdictional arrangements. In this regard, greater streamlining is needed that allows for quicker response.

Lack of good data, and the push for greater responsiveness have implications on other support functions, including the responsibilities of risk management, audit, evaluation, and policy units. Respondents indicated that although there have been major cuts in these areas, they play a vital role in generating evidence that is now demanded under the new government. Further complicating these processes are increased demands for information and support from the Public Service in generating sound evidence. The challenge for many respondents as well, is that these support areas such as program evaluation focus on what they consider to be “the wrong questions” or priorities (Shepherd, 2010), and the evidence is often received late in the decision process. In essence, respondents said that much reform is needed to “get to the kind of responsiveness expected of ministers.” More importantly, if the Public Service is going to be relevant, then much investment will be needed to re-orient and support these functions.

**Conclusions**

Our paper has attempted to address the question how digital technologies and communications intersect the policy-making process. Overall, we found that the literature is reasonably accurate on identifying the looming democratic challenges faced by decision-makers, but that in many ways it is silent or incomplete on operational issues, and matters of organizational culture. Most notable was the observation that there is significant divergence between the promises of new public governance for open government, and the internal policy process that still values federal leadership and confidentiality in discussions. There are good reasons for closed discussions, including the ability to deliberate and rationalize before engaging other actors. However, respondents pointed to capacity issues, such as the lack of reliable data and IT or technical support to properly assess information. The pressures on the Public Service to respond to policy direction from elected officials have placed public institutions at the federal level at a crossroads: to decide the appropriate balance between responsiveness and values such as fairness, equity and due diligence. For those interviewed, digital technology has accelerated the pace of public decision-making, which is a key driver of institutional reform. More importantly, the larger issue federally is deciding what the appropriate role of the Public Service is given these changes. Digital technology may not be the most critical driver of this change, but it is certainly an important one.

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1. Unfortunately, Peter Aucoin passed away before a request for significant revisions was completed to the paper quoted. The article was published posthumously without the revisions and thus may not reflect Aucoin’s opinion after seeing the scrutiny. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)