

Book Review

How Information Matters: Networks and Public Policy Innovation, Hale. K. (2011). Washington, D. C., Georgetown University Press, pp. 230

Money, people, power, or politics are recognized key factors in policy processes and implementation. Less often recognized are the “information” and “information relationships” important for implementation and improving policy outcomes, although a history of notable exceptions exists. Focusing on information and information relationships goes to the core of government¹ but research that tests its impact on mainline public administration areas or that develop concepts for theory building are far and few between. In part, this has to do with the ubiquitous nature of information, its multifaceted meanings and uses, and the difficulty in operationalizing and collecting data for statistical models.

In *How Information Matters: Networks and Public Policy Innovation*, Kathleen Hale makes information and the information relationships the focal point of innovation, implementation, and policy outcomes. Through an in depth, mixed method study, she makes the case for how “the information relationships between public administrators and nonprofit organizations are a vital dimension of the capacity of government to solve public problems” (p. 4). Her book contributes to the field of public administration by testing the relationship between information and policy outcomes, developing concepts for theory building, and providing examples that can help to improve practice.

In *How Information Matters* Hale tells the story of how a national information network of nonprofit organizations influenced and supported state and local administrators in implementing ‘drug courts’ in the United States. Drug courts are seen as a policy innovation with the goal of reducing drug use and breaking the cycle of addiction thereby reducing criminal activities associated with drug use and drug-seeking behavior. Drug courts were a response to prison overcrowding due to strict sentencing laws for drug-related crimes. Hale follows the policy innovation, which started in the 1980s, using data from 1995 to 2003 and examines the long term development, implementation, and impact.

Hale organizes the story in seven chapters. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the study and establishes its roots in various literatures including intergovernmental, network, and nonprofit studies. Chapter 2 introduces the reader to the concept of drug courts as a policy innovation and presents the organizational actors involved in the information network. The chapter further classifies the information positions of actors which operationalizes the information relationships. Chapter 3 examines the influence of the information network, looking at the relationships over time. The chapter reports the statistical results of Hale’s conceptual framework that tests the relationship between information, implementation, and policy outcomes. Chapter 4 highlights the information tools used in practice, while Chapter 5 examines the processes that created new opportunities for information exchange. Chapter 6 looks at the expansion of the information network, including new actors and new issues. Chapter 7 concludes by discussing the ways that key findings can be generalized to other areas. Her book is an in depth, mixed-method examination of the role that information relationships, tools, and processes played in policy change.

Hale notes that considerable research has established the importance of information in spreading innovative policy ideas and bringing about change, however relatively few statistical inquiries exist. Chapter

¹Bellamy and Taylor (1998), *Governing in the Information Age*. Open University Press.

3 reports on Hale's analyses, which use data collected through a national survey of state administrators, published research, and data from the U.S. Census. Hale developed the conceptual model linking information, implementation and outcomes using a theoretical lens of information diffusion. This line of thinking suggests that greater information will support increased implementation of innovations, which should lead to policy success (p. 67). She first examines the influence of information on implementation, and then the influence of implementation on policy outcomes. It is a targeted attempt at teasing out the influence of information. Her major finding is that the "more extensive engagement with information led to more extensive state and local implementation, which was linked in turn to greater policy success" (p. 65).

The analysis is easy to understand and well-documented and the findings well supported, and while the findings are not all that surprising, it is a starting point. Hale's work has established a baseline for others to agree or disagree. While Hale's analysis is rigorous, "information" – the short-hand concept she uses in the title – is complex. This is important if 'information' is to have a seat at the table. "Information" was defined as "encompass [ing] the intersectoral information connections between state and local administrations and nonprofits..." (p. 69). Information connections were operationalized using proxies such as the number of sources of information used by state administrators, board membership frequency and duration, or frequency of contact between administrators and organizations. Large-scale measures of change, such as reduced crime rates and increased arrests as evidence for positive outcomes, were used as proxies for testing the relationship to policy outcomes. Inadequate evaluation data on drug courts was cited as the reason. I wish there was more connection in the statistical models between the rich descriptions of the information concepts she was observing and the outcomes she was observing in policy that suggested 'information matters.' The case was very well established for implementation. But, considering the complexity of the concept of information, the relationships that influence outcomes and noted problems in testing outcomes, it is hard to not wonder what other mediating influences on outcomes are lurking.

Throughout several chapters the concepts of an information network and information positions are developed and attention to the unique role that nonprofits can and do play in the dissemination and development of policy innovations is addressed. These lines of inquiry are very interesting and useful insight for practitioners is sprinkled throughout. Hale constructs thick descriptions of the information relationships and processes at within the network, informed by interviews, survey, and archival data. At points it is difficult to keep all the players straight and timeframes, particularly if one is not familiar with this policy area or the criminal justice system in the United States. But, the rich, and detailed background information, as well as illustrations, do provide sufficient detail to support fuzzy concepts like 'information' 'information relationships' and 'information networks' in future research.

Hale introduces the concept of an information network as "an arrangement that is both similar to and different from other network arrangements that have been observed" (p. 184). She argues that intersectoral information networks made up of nonprofit and government organizations are different from policy networks or public management networks. Based on the experiences of public administrators, she describes intersectoral information networks as organized informally. In example after example, Hale emphasizes how the organizations in the information network are involved simultaneously in creating, seeking or providing information for action or outreach.

Since nonprofit organizations in the network also vary according to ideologies, missions, and constituencies, according to Hale, they have a unique role in an intersectoral information network. Nonprofits create the information sources, such as best practices, model programs, and program evaluations, that public administrators use to make decisions and design programs. She conceptualizes these information

sources as “synthesized information” that are able to speak to multiple constituencies and reduce administrative costs of seeking information. Hale sees this type of information as valuable “information software”² that enables administrators to interpret policy changes and provide a way forward toward improving practice.

In Chapter 2, Hale introduces the concept of “information position” as a way of considering the motivations of the organizations in the network. Information positions deal with the non-neutral character of information and reflect an information environment of complementary and competing ideas. The variability present, a result of different ways of making sense of the world, works to provide a wide array of voices and ways to frame a problem or program. Within the information network, nonprofit organizations provide information from multiple perspectives, which Hale concludes legitimizes the overall body of knowledge developed about a particular innovation.

In order to analyze the network, she constructs a typology with four positions – champions, challengers, supporters, and bystanders – and classifies organizations accordingly. The information positions reflect the competing interests and multiple goals of the network actors. Hale concludes these information positions can be applied to other policy areas and will likely be present with any policy innovation. The implication of information positions in the network is that administrators receive comprehensive views, allows an iterative learning process to occur, and fosters accurate, responsive, and trustworthy information sources. She describes champion organizations as designers of information tools and facilitators of information exchanges that create these products in light of their preferred solution. Others either support or challenge the implementation of the champions’ preferred ideas. On the other hand, challengers are champion counterparts. Challengers actively advocate against an innovation, acting as a balancing mechanism within the network. Supporter organizations work to reinforce certain preferred ideas, but only if it furthers their main mission. They are organizations that link together various ideas, creating synergies between new ideas and existing programs and practices. Bystander organizations devote little time or energy to either side. They do not promote or defeat a particular point of view and the innovation is not linked to their mission. The typology is useful for practitioners to assess the motivations of the players within their networks. Whether the typology is valid for other situations is another area others can continue to explore.

We often hear the phrase, “A good story should leave the reader wanting more.” *How Information Matters* leaves me wanting to know more about what the author’s is thinking, but also wondering ‘what if’? ‘What if’ scholarship took an interdisciplinary look at the influence of information and utilized the perspectives of other disciplines; disciplines that make ‘information’ and ‘information processes’ a core endeavor. A rich set of literature lies outside of public administration, in other disciplines such as digital government, information science, organizational theory and communication studies, that can further support how we think about the connections between information, information relationships, and the larger body of public administration. Hale’s citations do not draw heavily from areas focused solely on information and it is uncertain if her thinking or approach may have been different. However, the inevitable dilemma, regarding how interdisciplinary does a scholar go, also poses opportunities for other scholars to integrate the work of Hale with findings and thinking in other areas. This can only serve to strengthen the line of research that seeks to understand the influence of information and information relationships within public administration.

²Reference from K. Mossberger and K. Hale, Polydiffusion in intergovernmental programs: Information diffusion in school-to-work programs, *American Review of Public Administration* 32(4) (2002), 398–422.

While information often has the adjective of ‘value-laden’, our ability to accurately reflect the complexity of this multifaceted phenomenon is difficult, particularly when we construct linear ways of thinking and modeling. Hale’s work, which is well researched and written, starts down a path of seeing information networks in a complex light, but then falls securely in the safe zone of looking for the linear connection between information use, relationships, and outcomes. She herself notes often throughout the book the influence of complexity and how information relationships are recursive. What Hale’s work demonstrates, and what it does not, is that studying information will push the limits of our ability to conceptualize and model what we see. But, we have to start somewhere, and *How Information Matters* is an important contribution and should pique the interest of many different types of scholars. It is a timely assessment, particularly in light of recent rhetoric on data-driven government and the possibilities purported by the use of open data, big data, and analytics for government performance.

I would recommend all students of public administration read this book for its insight about the influence of information, particularly in a Web 2.0 world, where government administration continues to be informational in nature. As Bellamy and Taylor write in *Governing in the Information Age*, “Information is the lifeblood of public administration. Perhaps the most revolutionary aspect of these pervasive technologies lies in their revelation of that simple fact” (p. vii).

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