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Dissertation Summary: Policy Communication in the Information Age

The broadest aim of this project is to assess how the Internet and the communication technologies it supports is affecting the ability of groups and organizations to become active, effective participants in policy formation processes. Unlike other studies, this project:

- Analyzes the Internet's impact on both legislative and executive policy processes;
- Views decision processes as social and distributed among both private and public actors; and
- Uses a methodology that accounts for the Internet's impact on participants' material and political resources and the social structures organizations leverage to influence policy.

I am specifically seeking to know whether the Internet: (a) has allowed more groups and organizations to participate in policy deliberations; (b) has changed the frequency and content of communication among groups and organizations who already participate; and (c) has changed the structure of relations between participating groups and organizations.

This study draws its theoretical underpinnings from three sources. First, following the work of Edward Laumann, David Knoke, and others in sociology and political science, I conceptualize the policy deliberation and formation process as occurring between and among organizations that are linked in a "policy network." Second, I model relations within policy networks using concepts drawn from organizational sociology: resource dependence and institutional theory (both "old" and "new"). Finally, I use network analytic measures and methods to assess change within policy networks and to trace the origin of those changes. Policy networks are an emergent phenomenon that take their form and structure from the nature of resource dependencies between organizations *and* the attempt to cope with these dependencies. Over time, interorganizational structures emerge (including interorganizational roles) that help to cope with dependence and that gain institutional embodiment in the form of norms, regulations, and cognitive structures. The Internet (and other forms of information technology) affects policy formation through its transformation of resources and its impact on pre-existing social structures. The Internet may cause policy networks to become more or less open to participation, depending on whether it advantages "incumbents" (especially those in institutionalized roles) or "insurgents." In part, this will depend on how structural power interacts with the Internet's resource transforming effects.

This theoretical framework was tested against two U.S. state-level policy networks—one focused on adult literacy/adult education policy and a second focused on policies that affect the severely mentally ill. State-level policy networks have received little attention from scholars, despite the trend toward devolution of policy from the federal to the state level and the concomitant increase in state-level discretion over social policies. Additionally, state networks appear to share many characteristics of national networks while offering the practical benefit of being smaller and more geographically compact. The cases were selected because they have different levels and types of dependence on state resources by member organizations and because their political structures are quite different. The adult literacy case is very "clean." There are no organized lobbies for adult literacy learners; literacy programs are heavily dependent on the state for resources; the number of agencies and legislators involved is limited; and the amount of state funds at stake is small. The mental health case is far more complex: there are competing lobbies (patients/survivors, families, hospitals, pharmaceutical companies, etc.); decision power is distributed between multiple agencies; larger sums are at stake; organizations are less dependent on state funds; and legislators tend to participate more heavily.

Because no data set exists to address these questions, I developed two case-specific instruments and protocols to collect original data. Both instruments were field tested with 10 informants from a neighboring state's adult literacy and mental health policy networks. For each case, I used a three-step, network member-driven procedure to determine the boundary of the network. Data collection was conducted via on-site interviews. Each informant was guided

through the data collection instrument and was then asked a series of open-ended questions about use of the Internet for policy and political purposes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed as needed. Computer capabilities were assessed via direct observation.

To increase the power of the case findings, I extrapolated seven empirical hypotheses from the theoretical framework and tested each against the data. The purpose is to see how readily the theoretical framework could predict multiple empirical phenomena in the data, with the assumption being that the validity of the framework is supported (but not proven) by its ability to predict the outcome of multiple dependent variables. Network measures were treated as both independent and dependent variables in the analysis, and the level of analysis varied between dyads and the network as a whole, depending on the hypothesis in question. Network position was determined using CONCOR and other positional analysis routines. Least squares and maximum likelihood regression techniques were used to analyze correlations. For some network measures, the statistical significance of differences between electronic and non-electronic communication patterns was assessed using computer simulations designed to replicate the working of random processes on the network. Where appropriate, data visualizations of the networks were used to either find patterns or to illustrate statistical findings.

The first case data (from the adult literacy network) supported four of the seven hypotheses strongly, a fifth hypothesis weakly, disconfirmed the sixth hypothesis, and provided no data on the seventh. (The mental health case is still being analyzed.) In general, the data seemed to suggest that policy networks have not been democratized by the availability of the Internet. No actors entered the network over the past few years, and none have used the Internet to propel themselves from the periphery of the network into the core (i.e., those actors who have the greatest influence over policy decisions). Instead, the core actors in the network tended to communicate more with one another and to use the Internet to communicate with only a select group of the core members—those who were, by general consensus, the most powerful actors in the network before the Internet was widely available. There is some evidence that one actor who was at the edge of the core moved to a more central location through the use of an Internet mailing list that includes national policy figures. However, the data also found that members of the network (as predicted) view the Internet as a powerful policy tool. Influence ratings were strongly correlated with both the possession of Internet technical capabilities and the *reputation* for having such capabilities. It seems that these capabilities may be used to upgrade one's *standing* in the network, not to gain entry. Crucially, most actors said they would not commit the financial or political resources of their organization to a policy position without face-to-face or written communication. Thus, the Internet may be used for "policy entrepreneurship," but only when an actor has an established position.

This study adds to our knowledge of state-level policy processes, the processes by which resources (financial, technical, knowledge-based, etc.) may be translated into policy influence, and the relationship between the Internet and interorganizational networks generally. In other work (see the article submitted to *Administrative Science Quarterly*) I have begun the process of translating these findings to other types of interorganizational networks. From an advocacy perspective, this work suggests that the Internet may be an important tool for shaping policy outcomes, but only if an actor establishes themselves in the policy network the "old-fashioned" way—by getting to know the other players and by being visible and involved. There is evidence that the Internet can raise an actor's profile in the network by allowing it to leverage existing resources more effectively—for instance, by automating and expanding mobilization processes. Yet, without a position in the network, even a highly mobilized player seems to gain little access to decision processes without the support of peers in the network. For public managers, the findings suggest that the political context for their agencies may not be changing as fast as Internet advocates suggest. However, as key players in most policy networks, the Internet offers public managers a new advocacy tool and a temptation—to use the tool (and the agency's budget in the process) to build an unassailable position within the network at the expense of private sector advocates and claimants.