

Policy Communicators

Many problems in modern societies are complex, and so are many policy solutions. Members of the public rarely have the time or inclination to develop a deep understanding of policy issues that do not affect them personally. When it is too hard to understand and explain evidence-based policy proposals governments, and the media and commentators reporting on them, can retreat to pursuing policy solutions that are neat, plausible, and wrong.

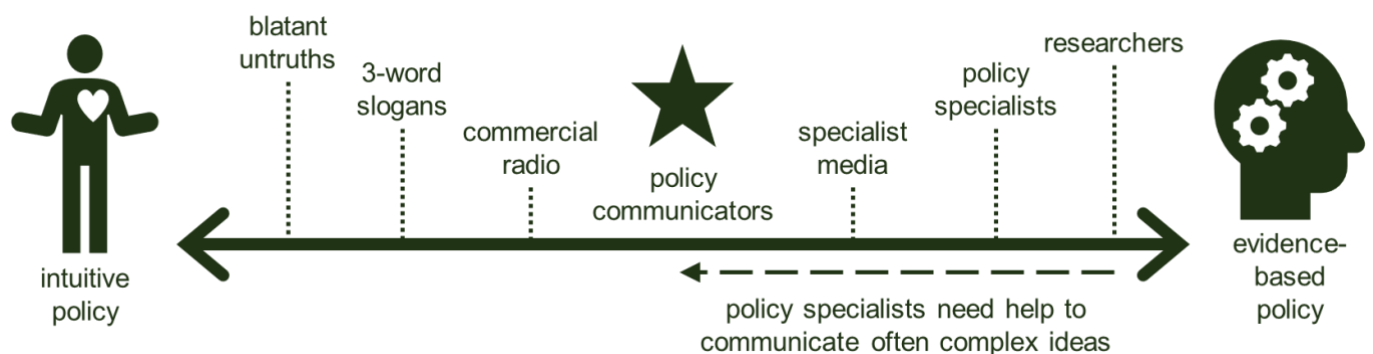
Modern societies are sophisticated, interdependent, and complex. We have made progress on many social ills, but those that remain, particularly in social policy, tend to be especially wicked. Complex issues with incomplete, contradictory, or changing considerations are highly resistant to lasting solutions.

Correspondingly complex solutions with many linkages tend to have unexpected and compounding effects. Apparent and intuitive answers are likely to be, at best, ineffective and, at worst, counterproductive. This can make social policy proposals hard to explain.

To be effective, policy usually needs some public support, which relies on public discussion and debate. Key policy communicators, like politicians and media, tend to prefer crisp soundbites and simple stories that are easy to consume, over ambiguity and complexity.

Communicating policy nuance is difficult in the soundbite era. Otherwise good policy that is hard to explain tends to fare poorly in public debate against simpler, intuitively attractive answers. Interventions that seem intuitively beneficial, like building more roads to reduce traffic congestion, or shrinking class sizes to improve student outcomes, turn out to be much more complex in practice than in theory. It is easy to invest a lot of public funds on strategies that feel right, but are ultimately disappointing.

Moral panics and confected hysteria stifle sensible public discussion of complex issues. Topics that can be interpreted as moral issues are beset by emotion, misinformation, manipulation, and simplistic slogans. Political stories with characters and conflict can attract more attention than complex policy considerations.



The public can have an uneasy relationship with experts. We recognise that expertise is essential in many vocations, from aeronautics to zoology. Social policy expertise, however, tends not to be widely appreciated, and many practitioners too easily lapse into jargon that is alienating for non-experts. To give effective policy a better chance of being accepted, policy experts need better communication skills.

Some other technical fields have great communicators who have become household names, in domains as diverse as cookery, gardening, science, medicine, art, and natural history. These expert communicators use simple language, stories, and relatable analogies. They also play to the strengths of the channels they use. They understand their role as being to make the audience feel smart, rather than the speaker.

The real world is messy, effective policy can be counter-intuitive, and simple solutions that seem obvious are often wrong. Ineffective, inefficient, or even counterproductive policies can find support by communicating better than otherwise superior options.

Evidence can counter intuition, but only if it is heard and understood by the audience. Media-friendly communicators who explain complex ideas in accessible, engaging language can encourage informed public discussions that undermine, or at least balance, more simplistic and emotive appeals.

Informed citizens may still disagree, but they can disagree on the merits of an idea, not just the politics. Effective policy communicators may not make the world more simple, yet they can make answers that are right, but messy, seem more neat and plausible.