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Toward a More Humane Public Policy: How the Humanities Can, and Should, Inform the Creation and Analysis of Public Policy

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TOWARD A MORE HUMANE PUBLIC POLICY:

HOW THE HUMANITIES CAN, AND SHOULD, INFORM THE CREATION

AND ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC POLICY

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I.   Introduction

The humanities disciplines[1] have been underutilized when it comes to methodologies for writing public policy and writing about public policy. Over the course of the past century, technocratic approaches (that is, rule by elite technical experts) to policy design and policy analysis have been at the forefront of professional writing in these genres. But that was not always the case. Prior to World War II, the humanities played an important role in asking questions related to public policy. Questions about justice, rights, distribution, and the limits of knowledge, among others, have historically been the realm of the humane disciplines. Despite this, there was a turn away from the humanities in policy circles in the mid-twentieth century due to the arms race following World War II. Governments across the world reoriented their resources to support more "scientific" endeavors like building advanced weaponry and defense systems, which pushed technocracy to the fore while simultaneously sidelining the humanities.

This idea that the humanities can and should play a greater role in the development and analysis of public policy is not novel. A lot of writers have looked at the role of the humanities in public policy, but the current conversation fails to recognize that we are currently living through a time wherein the humanities and their methodologies have an opportunity to reassert themselves as a fundamental contributor to good public policy and public discourse. The

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[1] When discussing "the humanities," I am primarily referring to English and languages, philosophy, sociology, cultural studies, economics (in some contexts), anthropology, and history.

COVID-19 pandemic exploded onto the scene in early 2020 and seemed to overwhelm policymakers, policy analysts, and citizens alike when it came to addressing it. Approaches like "two weeks to flatten the curve" (Bendix 2020), shutting down schools, and shuttering offices seemed rational. But, instead of asking questions about how humane some measures were or whether certain approaches were considering the right trade-offs, we saw a handful of public figures moving policy based on "the science." This is not to necessarily denigrate the decisions that were made. It was a difficult time and it is only fair to believe that people were doing the best they could with the information they had. Nonetheless, humanists were not included in these conversations and instead were ignored in favor of more scientific voices. As Matthew Yglesias, writer and owner of the policy Substack *SlowBoring* said to me in an interview, humanists are able to "contextualize contemporary problems in terms of historical circumstances and general features of the human condition.". Yglesias' insight shows that humanists clearly had important tools to apply to an emergency policy situation, and had they been included in the conversation the direction of the policy response might have looked different. Now that we are on the other side of the pandemic, it seems like an excellent opportunity to bring the humanities back into the conversation, if for no other reason than to provide a policy post-mortem in a way that can reorient future disasters toward more humane frameworks.

The humanities have always been fundamental to public policy. The humanities and public policy effectively emerged alongside each other during the Enlightenment period of the eighteenth century. Bartel (2015) points out that "the

humanities are not only connected to public policy; they gave birth to it" (p. 117).

Concepts like human rights, legal rights, justice, and democracy are all products

of humanistic inquiry. It is worth noting that clearly democracy was not created

during the Enlightenment, but has roots in Greek history; nonetheless, it is the

modern sense of governance—with its focus on administration, management,

cosmopolitanism, and internationalism—that we see a connection to the

Enlightenment. Burgeoning liberal democracies as we now know them required

an apparatus for establishing the rules of the game in civilized society (Wagner,

2007). The humanities provided the tools of analysis to do this in the past—but

that did not sustain over time. As some scholars (Hayek, 2010; High, 2017) have

pointed out, the late-eighteenth century saw a change in the relationship between

the social sciences and the humanities and policymakers. Due to the increasing

relevance of the hard sciences, many commentators and scholars engaged in

scientism—that is, the adoption of scientific methods for non-scientific

disciplines. This led to an increase in technocratic approaches to policy-making

that sidelined humanities (Payne, 1984; Herbel, 2018; Hartley, 2020). Thanks to

this, the humanities were seen as less important in an age of scientific progress,

despite the clear role they play in guiding said progress.

     Starting in the mid-twentieth century, though, scholars started questioning

the marginalization of the humanities in the public policy conversation. Gutmann

(1977), Stuber (1977), and Edell (1977) in particular made both normative and

positive arguments for re-establishing the humanities as a core discipline of public

policy. Their work alongside others in the collected volume *Small Comforts for*

Hard Times: Humanists on Public Policy sought to make a robust case for the inseparability of the humanities and public policy. Other scholars have made similar cases, arguing that the humanities transcend the immediacy of typical policy concerns and infuse those concerns with perspective and nuance (Graham, 1981). Still others point to concrete aspects of the discipline like pairing narrative with fact-finding (Gottweis, 2007; Hulme, 2011; Davidson, 2017) or, perhaps more seriously, the success or failure of military endeavors as they relate to the culture and history of foreign nations (Holm et al., 2015). Pushing back against the quantitative, just-the-facts thrust of contemporary public policy has given hope to the idea that the humanities might once again have a spot at the table when it comes to devising and critiquing public policy.

Not only can the humanities put meat on the bones of policy science, but they can do so through its methodological approaches. A fundamentally qualitative[2] family of disciplines, the humanities offer insights other disciplines are unable to tease out thanks to the limitations of qualitative methods. Indeed, the effort to *understand* the meaning of human action underpins much of the methodology of the humanities (Ercan et al., 2017). What's more, interpretive methods (as understood within humane disciplines; more on this later) "acknowledge that human action is located within a particular culture or history" (Quinlan, 2017, p. 1). Qualitative methods—as opposed to quantitative methods—provide writers and scholars with an opportunity to better illustrate the richness of humanities that is otherwise difficult to capture with traditional

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[2] This is not to suggest there cannot be quantitative approaches to the humanities. The Digital Humanities, for instance, have made strides in bringing quantitative methodologies into the humanities in productive ways. See Eijnatten et al. (2013), Liu (2020), and others.

methods. This is not to reduce the methodological concerns of scholars within the humanities to discreetly qualitative approaches. There are valuable conversations in the academy regarding the meaning of humane methodologies and how they do or do not fall within "qualitative" or "quantitative" realms (or some mixed methodologies approach in between). That conversation is beyond the scope of this project, but for more on this debate it is worth revisiting Van Peer et al. (2012), Baur et al. (2014), Pinto et al. (2017).

Bringing the humanities back into the public policy conversation is far from a done deal, though. Although scholars have indeed continued making the case for the reunification, it has not come to fruition in a satisfying way. Nevertheless, recent developments within a specific field of the humanities might provide an opportunity to reintroduce the discipline to the reading public. Professional writing has seen an upheaval of sorts in the past few years as journalists and commentators have migrated away from traditional media and toward subscription-based models. This might seem like a novel development, but it actually harkens back to an original model of journalism that was more exclusive and higher quality, according to some scholars (Socolow, 2020). The return of the newsletter format offers interested readers a clear, concise way to dive deeper into a subject (Shrivastava, 2022), as opposed to the fast-paced environment of social media. Given how recent these changes are, though, there is not a lot of scholarship discussing them in detail. Nonetheless, there is a good deal of commentary on the topic as it emerges as a cultural development (for example, Smith, 2021; Fatemi, 2021; Hsu, 2022).

The question of how humane ideas not only contribute to, but gave birth to, contemporary public policy has been litigated in a variety of disciplines. What's more, the observation that the landscape of professional writing is undergoing a sea change has been highlighted and discussed by practitioners in the field (again, see Smith 2021, Fatemi 2021, Hsu, 2022). One thing that is missing from the conversation, though, is how the humanities can re-assert themselves as disciplines worth engaging with in the public policy sphere. Given that the policy sphere was born of humanistic disciplines and has veered away from them over the past two centuries, an entrepreneurial writer might take this opportunity to right the ship. This project will attempt to show how humane methodologies can and should be reintroduced into the policy discourse, both in devising policy and in analyzing it.

To do this, I will investigate how humane methodologies can have a practical impact on public policy writing. Thus, the project will take the following path: first, a brief overview of the relationship between the humanities and public policy will be provided. Then, a discussion of the meanings of methods and methodologies will shed light on these terms and the nuanced differences between them. Next, it is helpful to explore the history of public policy and policy analysis in order to get some perspective on why it is important to look at it within a professional writing context. Following a discussion of the history of public policy and policy analysis, I will provide a broad overview of the three methodologies that will be analyzed in this paper (interpretive, critical, and rhetorical). Afterwards, I will analyze case studies of practical applications to

policy writing and policy analysis. Finally, the project will conclude with a summary of the arguments made here, along with their conclusions and implications for public policy writing specifically and professional writing more broadly.[3]

II. A Brief Overview

Following World War II, public policy took a turn toward technocratic methods and methodologies. Instead of utilizing its more humane roots, practitioners of public policy opted for a more "scientific" (read: scientistic, or, the application of scientific tools to non-scientific disciplines) approach to lead. The emergence of measurement and quantification as a method of devising policy as opposed to concerns over rights, ethics, human well-being and other humanistic elements thoroughly ensconced public policy as a discipline that had turned its back on the humanities. Indeed, if one just looks at federal funding of the humanities over the past forty five years one will see a steady decline in congressional appropriation for the National Endowment for the Humanities ("NEH Funding Levels"). There are a variety of reasons that practitioners chose to make the technocratic turn, not least of which is because it increases their own reputation of legitimacy giving policymakers clear, measurable metrics by which to devise policy. Even if there is value in some of the modern tools of public

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[3] It is worth noting that this entire project rests upon the assumption that my observations and recommendations are taking place within the framework of liberal democracy. And, despite the limitations of such a system of governance, it seems to me to be the best system yet devised by humans. It might not have fulfilled all of its promises, but it has the most potential to do so of any system of governance discovered so far.

policy, it still finds itself in an impoverished state thanks to the lack of humanistic disciplines that are involved in the conversation. Even before World War II, the humanities offered the tools to devise richer, more humane policy—and did so to some extent (more on this later). Following World War II, however, the humanities got left behind in the ensuing race to compete in a Cold War environment. The following discussion will investigate the methods and methodologies employed by humanistic disciplines and how they can inform varieties of public policy writing, including policy briefs, newsletters, white papers, and op-eds.

III. Methods and Methodologies

Before jumping into an analysis of how the methods and methodologies of the humanities can inform and enrich public policy analysis, it is important to first discuss terms and perspectives in the field. Even though at first it might seem that "methods" and "methodologies" are interchangeable, this is not always the case. *Method* refers to the strategy of research, or "how one carries out one's research," which comes down to "the kind of research one wants to conduct" (Griffin, p. 95). An example in the humanities would be interviews, case studies, and textual/rhetorical analysis. *Methodology*, on the other hand, refers to "the perspectives one brings to bear on one's research" (p. 95). Some examples of methodologies in the humanities include ethnography, interpretivism, critical theory, and rhetoric ("Methods and Methodology"). The examples provided here are not exhaustive, but are helpful as guideposts in understanding how methods and methodologies manifest in the humanities. Methods and methodologies, then,

refer to two distinct but complementary approaches to research design. One has to do with the choices we make, while the other deals with the perspectives we apply to the research question we are pursuing. The discussion in this section will explore this in greater depth to better understand why the humanities in particular are uniquely positioned to conduct policy analysis in a more realistic fashion.

In addition to clarifying what is meant by methods and methodologies, it is also necessary to identify the meaning of *humanities*. James C. Raymond (1982) provides a helpful breakdown of what is typically considered to fall within the humanities when he points to "languages, literatures, history, philosophy, the arts, the history and comparison of religion and law, linguistics, archeology, ethics" (p. 779) as well as elements of the social sciences that have "humanistic content and employ humanistic methods" (p. 779). Despite the fact that this is not an all-encompassing list of the elements of the humanistic disciplines, it is robust enough for the purposes of this project. These disciplines' primary method for producing knowledge is the word—as opposed to knowledge-producers in mathematics or the hard sciences which rely on "self-contained symbol systems"—and the word serves as the medium of establishing proofs in the humanities. Necessarily, the humanities "speculate about chains of causality involving human motives that are inscrutable in any scientific sense" (p. 780). The upshot of Raymond's insights about the methods and methodologies of the humanities is that they effectively put parameters on what science is actually able to tell us. They engage in inquiry that deals with the subjective and the humane—areas science cannot quantify in any meaningful way. It is here that the

humanities make their greatest contribution by infusing the subjects themselves into their discussions of the world—complex and multifaceted actors in a complex and dynamic world.

The discussion above regarding methods, methodologies, and the humane disciplines sets the groundwork for the meat of this project. After the technocratic turn in public policy during the twentieth century, people were left behind as units of analysis. Often viewed as manipulable variables that could serve as inputs and outputs to a given administrative vision, the people on the ground were the receivers of an impoverished vision of public policy—an unnecessary and unfortunate outcome. Indeed, the tools to avoid this have been available since before the technocratic turn, but were left behind and marginalized in favor of more "scientific" methodologies. Bringing humanistic methods and methodologies back into the public policy conversation will help to reorient the vision of public policy toward the people it is ostensibly designed to serve.

IV. The Emergence of Public Policy and Policy Analysis: A Historical Perspective

It is difficult to pinpoint the exact time in history that public policy emerged as a professional field. There are a variety of interpretations of the meaning of public policy, making it all the more challenging to even agree on where to start talking about it. Nonetheless, scholars typically agree that the first example of public policy dates to the Magna Carta, which "introduced the idea

that there should be checks on government" ("The Evolution of Public Policy"), an idea later built on and refined by Enlightenment thinkers into the modern sense of governance we see in the west today. Other prominent developments in public policy include the U.S. Constitution and the Modern Approach, the latter of which is defined by its focus on the expansion of bureaucracy ("Evolution").

While many forms of public policy have existed for centuries, the discipline of policy analysis has really only been in practice since the mid-twentieth century. Before being referred to as "policy analysis," the practice of studying and advising on policy was known as the "policy sciences," a discipline founded by Harold D. Lasswell in 1951 (Deleon, p. 39). The policy sciences were "explicitly focused on the rigorous application of the sciences . . . to issues affecting governance and government" (p. 39). Over time, the discipline grew into what we know today as the study of public policy.

But, like any other discipline, it was not without its growing pains. Without being too reductionist, the history of public policy can be split into two "camps": the positivists, and the post-positivists. The positivists sought to utilize quantitative tools and methodologies in their work and apply them to complex social phenomena in pursuit of a more elegant public policy. Economics is an excellent example of this: post-World War II, economists saw a role for themselves as tinkerers instead of understanders or explainers. Their positivist methods garnered greater attention at the governmental level because they could provide neat narratives illustrated by models of the world that were useful to policymakers (Hayek 1974). This approach is insufficient for creating good public

policy—life is too messy and people are too complex to be captured in such a limited way. The post-positivists, on the other hand, claim "serious epistemological failures" on the part of the positivists since their methods overlook many of the complex human connections that define civilization. Economist Frane Adam couches post-positivism as a methodology that "transcends and upgrades positivism" by incorporating "falsificationism . . . fallibilism" and "methodological pluralism" and is "more cautious concerning strong one-sided interpretations and restrained regarding the too extensive . . . use of . . . (quantitative) data and methods" (p. 5). The post-positivists open themselves up to a broader and more robust approach to analyzing public policy. Without constraining themselves exclusively to formal models and quantification, post-positivists have managed to carve out an approach that allows for a variety of tools to be used, including the methods of the humanities. Such an approach seems like a more appropriate methodology for addressing social problems in an increasingly pluralistic environment.

Nonetheless, while post-positivists have managed to get a seat at the table, positivism persists as a preferred method of analysis and conducting policy. Again, going back to World War II, a "period of rethinking, relaunching, and expansion, dominated by a militant scientific spirit induced by behaviorism [and] positivism" (Aligica, et al. 2020, p. 90) saw the infusion of public policy and public administration with less humane and more scientistic values. Indeed, research using positivist methodology has been on the rise at the university level since as recently as 2001 (Whetsell and Shields, 2015). This observation tracks

with what political scientist Jerry Herbel argues is a process that has been underway in universities which has "jettisoned [public administration education's] rich intellectual history and suppressed an academic heritage dedicated to the art of governance" (p. 396). *The art of governance*—the recognition that governing is a complex mix of quantitative and qualitative methods, and thus a balancing act—is a key phrase here. Public policy experts receive an education that is divorced from humanism, resulting in the *art* of governance being lost, thus extending the positivist tradition of scientism in public administration.

The art of governance was cultivated as the demand for public policy grew alongside the development of complex societies. As the population grew, so too did competing interests and the need to mediate them. Klassen et al. (2016), identify this as the driving rationale and justification for the existence of public policy. But public policy alone was not sufficient to nurture the art of governance. Democratic civil society's discursive norms—such as open debate and free speech—helped to facilitate roles for the observer and commentator. Public policy analysis as a professional field has emerged as a way of participating in the ongoing process of democracy (a process that is necessarily open-ended and messy). Policymakers' work "affects the framing of problems and citizens' identities through language, symbols, and discourse." As such, the work of policy analysts "must probe how the elements of design found in policy content impact framing, constructions, implementation, and information/transparency" (Ingram et al., p. 172). That is, policy analysts have a responsibility to critically examine and

discuss public policy as it relates to the promotion of the health of the society in which it is implemented.

There are a variety of ways policy analysis manifests itself in society. The method that will be examined in this paper, though, is that of professional writing. Professional writing, as a subset of the humanities, is one of the more accessible methods for reaching a citizenry in a democracy. Through the use of newsletters, blogs, op-eds, and academic writing, professional writers have a specialized and significant role in participating in the art of governance. The methods they employ and the methodologies that inform their craft are worth exploring in detail to better understand the precise contributions professional writers make to the social discourse in which they operate.

V.   Professional Writing and Public Policy

Professional writers play an important role in the production and analysis of public policy. Either as policymakers writing reports, briefs, or other official documents, or as policy analysts writing content meant for a more popular audience, professional writers are an integral link in the chain connecting policy to people. Professional writing scholars such as Grabill (2000), Sullivan and Porter (1997), and Clark (2009), point to different methods such as "activist research," rhetorical work that focuses on social change," and "action research," the work of arguing and writing about institutional change, as ways professional writers can influence policy. Still others focus more on how writers write about public policy. Musso et al. (2000) look at what writers must do to produce good

policy analysis; this is the actual nuts and bolts of being a professional writer who does policy analysis. Martin and Sanders (1994) argue the importance of understanding the diversity of audience and the ethical imperative of recognizing biases in one's own writing. Affeldt (1996) builds off of Martin and Sanders' insights by positing that writers should focus on and be aware of how writers and audiences are "constructed by larger competing discourses" (p. 217), highlighting the diversity of perspectives that are at play in a professional writing context. As can be seen by the brief discussion above, there is no unanimity among professional writers when it comes to understanding how best to approach policy writing. Each writer brings their own methods and methodologies—and sometimes multiple methods and methodologies—to the task of writing. The following sections of this project, however, will focus on the usefulness of the humane methodologies in writing professionally about public policy both as practitioners and as scholars.

The humanities employ a variety of methods and methodologies both in research and in writing. Research methods in the humanities can be broken out into two categories: extrinsic or contextualist approaches, and intrinsic or isolationist approaches ("Methods in the Humanities," p. 1). The methods and methodologies that populate these two broad categories ultimately boil down to two main observations. For one, an Extrinsic and Contextual approach attempts to place the research subject within a specific historical and cultural context. This approach is helpful because it helps to gather qualitative data that might be missed by traditional quantitative approaches. For example, it might shed light on the

decisions that went into producing a specific text during a specific time. Such an approach sees a connection between the historical moment and the discourse on the page. Intrinsic or Isolationist approaches, on the other hand, "concern themselves solely with the structure and materials that constitute" the artifact at hand ("Methods," p. 4). This approach removes the creator from the artifact and instead looks at how the various elements that make up the artifact interact with each other to create the piece itself.

Within each of these two broad categories, though, a handful of particular methods are worth looking at vis-à-vis the relationship between professional writing and public policy analysis. The methodologies (that is, the overall analysis applied to the research) that will be examined within the context of this project are: (1) interpretive, (2) critical, and (3) rhetorical. Interpretive research "situates meaning-making practices at the center of scientific exploration" (Quinlan, p. 1). Interpretive researchers see the "situation-specific meanings that constitute the general object of investigation" as being "constructed by social actors" (Schwandt. p. 222). The critical approach operates with an eye toward "a contextual and evolving theory of inquiry" and asks researchers themselves to be "critical of their methods" through interrogation of biases and assumptions (Yanchar et al., pp. 35-36). Finally, the rhetorical approach "analyzes single or multiple texts to express an informed preference, to understand how the texts fit into a larger social or political or historical economic framework, to unpack meaning, and to give context to the text" (Young, 2017, p. 1503). Even though there is some potential for overlap between the three methodologies identified

here, they each have unique contributions to make to the relationship among professional writing, the humanities, and public policy. The following sections will investigate each methodology in greater detail, including a discussion of some specific methods within each one that are particularly useful tools in the methodological toolkit.

A.   The Interpretive Approach

Interpretive methodologies are still a relatively young tool for analyzing the world. As a product of push-back against the positivist orthodoxy of the twentieth century, interpretive methods help to reign in the ambitions of quantitative methods. This is not to suggest that they are necessarily in conflict with quantitative methods, but it is important to highlight that there is a distinction given the emergence and trajectory of interpretive methodologies. These methodologies both complement traditional methodologies as well as expand upon their effectiveness. By employing interpretive tools, researchers are better able to understand the world from a human perspective—that is, through the beliefs and subjective evaluations of the people they are studying.

Interpretive research seeks, above all else, to understand. In fact, the term *Verstehen*, or "understanding," is at the center of its very existence (Bhattacharya, p. 464). Although this concept helps to define interpretive methodology, that does not necessarily mean that there is agreement among scholars on what exactly "interpretive methodology" means. As is typical of academic conversations, over time different scholars have worked to refine the concept. Thanks to this

conversation, various schools of thought have emerged under the umbrella of

interpretive research. Hermeneutics, of which the philosopher Hans-George

Gadamer was an early proponent, is "concerned with the nature and scope of

human understanding" (Madison, p. 34) and is concerned with "our entire

understanding of the world and thus . . . all the various forms in which this

understanding manifests itself" (as quoted in Madison, p. 34). Hermeneutics

pushed back against the positivist and objectivist approaches of the human and

social sciences of the twentieth century and instead sought to uproot it in favor of

a subjective and interpretive approach to studying the world.

Another way that we see interpretive methods employed is through

ethnography. Geertz (1973) describes ethnography as the interpretation of "the

flow of social discourse" and the "interpreting involved consists in trying to

rescue the 'said' of such discourse from its perishing occasions and fix it in

perusable terms" (p. 22). Summarized, Geertz believes that ethnography captures

the artifacts of communication to be archived as social artifacts. Still others

(Naidoo, 2012; Atkinson, et al., 1994; Denzin, 2011; Gille, 2001) see ethnography

more clearly as "the study of beliefs, social interactions, and behaviors of small

societies, involving participation and observation over a period of time" (Naidoo,

p. 1). The value of ethnography as a tool for understanding the social world

cannot be overstated. Investing oneself in the communities one wishes to study

can pay dividends in a way simply reading second- or third-hand accounts cannot.

Naturally, there are ethical concerns with such an approach, and this has been

addressed at length in the literature (Dingwall, 1980; Atkinson, 2009; Murphy,

2001; Goodwin, 2003). But balancing the interests of the researcher with the well-being of the subjects can provide deep insights about individuals and communities that cannot otherwise be captured with traditional methods.

A third interpretive approach worth discussing is the constructivist-interpretivist approach. This approach focuses on engaging in interpretive case studies, which is particularly useful from a public policy analysis perspective. An important element of this method to note, though, is that the "postpositivist ideas of criteria are replaced by terms such as *credibility, transferability, dependability,* and *confirmability*" and that "the idea that all reality and interpretations are socially constructed is core in this paradigm" (Bhattacharya, p. 466). This is an important point to highlight because it frames how humanists should understand facts in their study of the world. Under the interpretive-constructivist approach, the facts we are studying are the beliefs of the subjects, the things that humans construct within social webs to make sense of their worlds. Indeed, scholars (Caputo, 2018; Thanh & Thanh, 2015; Grayling, 2019) who use the interpretive approach argue that there are no "hard facts," but instead facts are "the product of a series of interpretations of underlying data and assumptions" (van der Walt, p. 61). The interpretive approach is distinctive in that it understands that humans studying humans is unlikely to be objective. The investigators' own beliefs, traditions, frameworks, and expectations will color their interpretations of events in their field of study. Given this, the interpretive approach imposes humility on the investigator and helps to put parameters on the assumptions they inject into their analyses.

Now, how does the interpretive approach work when it comes to analyzing public policy? Applying the observations above, scholars who work in analyzing public policy from an interpretive perspective (e.g., Bevir, 2010; Bevir and Rhodes, 2010; Dryzek, 2010) argue that "all knowledge is social knowledge" (Songklin, et al., p. 4794). According to Songklin et al., interpretive public policy can be divided into three groups: contextual public policy (reading texts to interpret hidden meanings), discursive public policy (policy as discourse with historically specific meanings constituted in the identities of people and objects), and narrative public policy (the context of time and place) (pp. 4798-4799). These three groups of interpretive policy analysis push back against the positivist approach by embracing the social and cultural aspects of the human world; data does not necessarily speak for itself, but instead must be interpreted within a series of nested and overlapping subjective understandings of the world. Later sections of this paper will look at more applications of the interpretive approach to the professional writing of public policy analysis.

B.   The Critical Approach

The critical approach (or critical theory) shares some elements with the interpretive approach, but is still distinct in itself. Like the interpretive approach, the critical approach pushes back against positivism, but takes its position further in specifically pushing against the Enlightenment (Thompson, 2014). "Facts" are not discovered through the scientific process as understood by western ideas, but instead are more subjective in nature. Specifically, a "critical theory of society" is

set with "the task of uncovering the social conditions under which knowledge about itself is articulated, since the way we comprehend the objective world is related to the ways we conceive of ourselves" (Thompson, p. 2). Critical Theory pays closer attention to power dynamics that form the ways knowledge is produced in society.

The critical approach has undergone many changes since its inception in the mid-twentieth century. It is with its most recent iteration that we will deal here. Since the late 1980s, the critical approach has seen itself as having an increasingly close relationship with pragmatism (Ray, 2004). The catalyst for this development was the emergence of the idea of "immanent transcendence," which "means that critical theory shares a particular form of normative critique not simply with the Frankfurt School, but rather with the 'Left-Hegelian tradition as a whole'" (Strydom, p. 1). This development is significant because it assigns a normative responsibility to humanistic researchers. Objective analysis is not only impossible, it is immoral. The persistent injustices facing the world—especially after 1989, according to this view—require that researchers also serve as activists who seek to constantly critique methods. Further, it is necessary to reflexively critique society, especially modern, cosmopolitan society and its ostensible concerns with human rights (Strydom, p. 15, "Immanent").

The actual methodological meat of the critical approach has to do with the concept of reason. Instead of reason being accessible to the individual alone, it is instead viewed as socially constructed. The context in which daily life takes place is the basis of what it means to talk about reason (Strydom, p. 8). This idea opens

the door to different modes of understanding, and most importantly to the ability to critique power structures and the assumptions that underpin those power structures. By removing reason from its pedestal of the individual, it is placed back in the hands of the people. Thus, reason is socially contingent and open to interpretation, given the constraints that the people employing it face at any given time.

Despite the efforts to fundamentally upend western understandings of reason (or perhaps because of them), applying the critical approach to public policy has the potential to be useful. By undertaking an effort to constantly critique approaches to power, it becomes possible to reveal previously unseen structures that uphold historical abuses. This approach came to the fore in 2020 during the United States' summer of racial reckoning, where discourses emerged that sought to understand reason and social organization in different ways (Thomas et al., 2020). Such an approach clearly has implications for public policy analysis as a part of the toolkit: we might be able to better incorporate marginalized voices into the social conversation surrounding the formation of the rules and regulations that govern us all.

C.   The Rhetorical Approach

Overlapping with both interpretive and critical approaches, the rhetorical approach still brings its own contribution to the methodological toolkit. Rhetoric is, of course, one of the oldest methodologies available to humanity, dating at least back to Aristotle in his work *The Art of Rhetoric*. Our unique ability to

engage in discourse as we understand it gave rise to the art of persuasion. But the methodology of rhetoric as it is understood in the academy circa the twentieth century points to a somewhat different and more specified manifestation of the skill. Joining the interpretive and critical approaches in pushing back against that old villain positivism, the rhetorical approach seeks to understand reality and the social world through an understanding of the "*situated* nature of ideas," which is to say "their presence in speech and argument delivered at, and in response to, specific times and places" (Martin, p. 25). This project will use an academic definition of rhetoric, as opposed to a lay understanding. Leaning heavily on Grabill, rhetoric here is defined as "a kind of work that creates things of value in the world," (Blankenship et al.). Rhetoric is the process by which humans create meaning and develop agency as individuals within their given communities. This concept of rhetoric, then, is active and process-oriented and aims to better understand how we arrive at the way we use language as a society.

Rhetoric is generally understood as a means of persuasion. Whether it is in writing or speaking, the act of persuading requires one to make specific decisions with respect to word choice, structure, syntax, and pacing. When using this approach as a methodological tool, it is important to carefully apply it to the decisions that people make when communicating ideas. The specific act in which a rhetorical action takes place is called the rhetorical situation (Mussack and Dsouza, n.d.). The rhetorical situation consists of context, audience, purpose, goal, and writer/speaker. These elements all come together to form a map for

someone engaging in rhetorical activities to make decisions and also for analysts to dig into their subjects more rigorously.

The significance of the rhetorical approach can be found in the insight that each act of communication is unique (Smith, 2008). In this, we are given the opportunity to better understand the role that context plays in communication. A clear and recent example of the importance of rhetoric is the discourse surrounding COVID-19 and COVID-19 vaccines. The proliferation of conspiracy theories and misinformation surrounding the novel coronavirus speaks to the strength of rhetoric as a tool for communication and the rhetorical approach as a tool for understanding. And this is not just with COVID—conspiracy theories have taken up a larger role in the United States in the past decade (Uscinski et al., 2022). There are myriad factors contributing to this—from the rise of social media, to increasingly niche cable news, to zoning regulation—and rhetoric plays a primary role in all of it. The ways that we talk about ideas and the choices we make in our communication have real world effects. This is especially true for those in leadership positions. Cable news talking heads and politicians are especially attuned to the importance of rhetoric as a tool for manipulating and obfuscating. Given this, analyzing public policy through a rhetorical lens is particularly useful so that we may better understand and defend against demagoguery on as many fronts as possible.

Indeed, the favored tool of the demagogue is rhetoric. The simpler and more debased the rhetoric, the better. George Orwell pointed to this phenomenon in his essay "Politics and the English Language" (1946) when he identified the

link between sloppy speaking, writing, and thinking and impoverished politics. His insight that "prose consists less and less of words chosen for the sake of their meaning, and more and more phrases tacked together like the sections of a prefabricated hen-house" captures the importance of rhetoric in society. Careless and sloppy rhetoric exists in a feedback loop with careless and sloppy thinking; and these modes of communication contribute to an overall degradation of the polity. Orwell is perhaps the most insightful when it comes to the application of rhetorical analysis to public policy. And given the deep historical relationship between the two disciplines, it is incumbent upon us to apply this theoretical lens to the language that is used to persuade us of any solution provided by policymakers.

VI. A Brief Transitional Note

These three approaches — interpretive, critical, and rhetorical — are approaches I have identified as the most relevant and applicable to the analysis of public policy. Their prevalence in qualitative approaches and humanistic disciplines suggest an academic and professional acceptance of their effectiveness as tools of analysis. Thus, the remainder of this project will use these three modes of analysis to analyze concrete examples of policy analysis. To do this, I will analyze three different styles of professional writing through each of the lenses to showcase how they can be used. The breakdown will go as follows:

1. Interpretive - Academic writing (through academic articles)

2. Critical - Policy writing (through policy briefs and white papers)

3. Rhetorical - Popular writing (through newsletters and op-eds)

It might seem that these selections and pairings are random, but there is some reason behind their organization. I was wary of writing about genres about which I knew little, so I opted for genres I have studied and written in myself. Between writing academic papers as a student and working closely with academic researchers in my professional life, I am confident in my ability to write in and discuss this genre. I have spent time during my graduate studies investigating the newsletter genre and the construction of policy briefs. Because I can speak somewhat knowledgeably on these genres, I decided to use them as case studies. Further, instead of using a single genre and applying the three methods to it, I see it as more illuminating to look at a variety of genres and how they function under the weight of their respective methods. This is not to suggest that these genres are necessarily tied to their methods—they can be mixed and matched as appropriate. They are simply meant to serve as helpful snapshots into how these methods can be applied in different written settings. This is an intentional limitation of my analysis aimed at ensuring I can make a specific contribution to the literature. It is my hope that by framing this project in this way that readers will gain a better understanding of what these genres are, what the methods are, and how they can work together to produce better public policy writing.

VII. Applying the Interpretive Approach to Academic Writing

As discussed above, the interpretive approach deals with the beliefs and subjective valuations of the human subjects being studied. While this lens can be applied to a variety of genres of professional writing, it is especially useful in academic writing where one would hope nuanced, and novel, methodologies would be appreciated. Given this, this section will look at the interpretive approach to professional writing by analyzing a handful of academic pieces that deal with public policy through this lens. To do this, I will look at the explicitly interpretive methods the writers employed, as well as their specific writing decisions within the pieces to get a more holistic view of what a piece of professional writing looks like in this context and how we can learn from it as professional writers.

Historically, academic writers who employ the interpretive approach in their writing have done so under the dichotomy of *understanding* versus *explaining*. *Explaining* has been seen as the approach of the natural sciences, whereas *understanding* has been the approach of the humanities which "tries to unravel the personal meaning of the phenomenon involved" (van Peer, p. 2). Academics are especially well-positioned to adopt the interpretive approach given the ostensible intellectual freedoms their positions in society hold. These freedoms allow them to investigate potentially sensitive subjects like "gender, race, class, religion, sexuality, and geography" or "some intersection of these

differences." Further, they are able to take a closer, more nuanced, look at topics like "hierarchy, hegemony, racism, sexism, unequal power relations, identity, or inequities in our society" (Creswell, p. 24). Given that academic writers are more likely than those outside of academia to have the ability and motivation to explore these otherwise potentially sensitive topics and their intersections, it seems most appropriate to look at the interpretive approach as applied to academic writing.

The interpretive approach has been broadening its academic reach in the past couple of decades, but where it is most often seen is in the humanities and social sciences since these are the disciplines that mostly deal with studying humans and their social behavior. Social scientists Durnová and Weible (2020) look at mainstream and interpretive approaches to studying policy, and try to understand the tensions between the two. Their article helps to provide us with a map of just where policy studies can apply an interpretive lens to academic writing. Trading hypotheses for concepts and focusing on intersubjectivity (knowledge that emerges from the interpretations of actions between acting subjects) and interdependence (the way theories in the interpretive tradition layout assumptions about the policy process) allows for greater opportunity for understanding versus explaining (p. 578). Durnová and Weible helpfully lay out the conditions for framing research from an interpretive perspective.

Intercultural communication is one area of the humanities where an interpretive approach can be applied with great practical effect. When looking at a public policy issue such as the Second Iraq War, for instance, it is possible to glean a lot of meaning from academic research and writing regarding the

importance of understanding other cultures when interacting with them (or in this case, occupying them). Widmer (2007) helpfully emphasizes that, in international relations, "material incentives do not speak for themselves, but must instead be interpreted" (p. 780). This insight is significant because it suggests that, without interpretive tools, a researcher is unlikely to develop a useful understanding of their subject. This was certainly true for the US in the Second Iraq War. Preparation for the invasion of Iraq in 2003 consisted of "three weeks" of a course on "Islam for dummies" and a "quick overview of the religion with some pointers on 'Arab' culture" (van Buren, p. 12). As I have argued elsewhere (Celler, 2022, Appendix B), the lack of cultural research on the part of the US was a direct contributor to the failure of the operation. Indeed, the *Soldier's Handbook to Iraq* emphasized pragmatism over all else. Because of this, it left to the wayside other modes of analysis that would have not only been beneficial, but would have likely saved lives. Because of the focus on pragmatism, there was no effort to fully understand the myriad cultures that made up Iraq and therefore communication breakdowns came quickly and catastrophically (Kirner-Ludwig & Alsaedi, 2021).

Scholarship that focuses on intercultural understanding from an interpretive perspective is much better suited to minimize friction between cultures, even in a scenario as extreme as the Iraq War. Frost (2020) argues that the "decision by the government of a state to go to war is always a decision based on an interpretation of a given state of affairs" (p. 254). Further, his discussion of the rules on the ground is especially helpful. His insights help us to understand that there are "rules which spell out possible actions available to participants and

for punishing those who transgress the rules" (p. 255). This sentence captures a lot of why interpretive methods are valuable. It is not enough to simply explain—as if reporting—in a linear way the observations of the researcher. It is far more important to develop an understanding of the social conditions that gave rise to those rules. Frost applies this to the wars in the Middle East by analyzing the nature of asymmetrical warfare. Indeed, it was the case that the US was a far superior power in the Iraq War, but they still fell short in many of their objectives. The failure to account for the dynamic social conditions of the country meant the US was unable to thread itself into the lives of the Iraqis in a way that was not fundamentally given to misunderstandings.

The Iraq War is an excellent case study of how an academic interpretive approach to public policy can inform practical affairs. Intercultural communication is a crucial (if underappreciated) element of good public policy, especially international public policy. The Iraq War serves as a robust case study of the role that intercultural communication can play in a wartime scenario thanks to the vastly different culture(s) the US was dealing with in the region. It was also an important case study to look at because, while there is a lot of scholarship on the subject, there is not a lot of scholarship from an interpretive perspective. This is fascinating to me precisely because of the important role that culture played in the conflict. It is not possible to understand the debacle that was the Iraq War without first understanding the social conditions that contributed to the misunderstandings at every step of the way.

Interpreting individuals and how their cultures inform their worldviews, choices, and actions is a key methodological strategy for formulating public policy. As George Mason University economist Virgil Storr noted in an interview with me, "individuals are embedded in webs of significance that they use to make sense of the world" and "in an interpretive exercise, we can come to understand the things that make the world make sense to" people (this quote comes from an interview I conducted with Virgil Storr, the full transcript for which is located in the appendix). And while Storr is primarily a social scientist, his work overlaps significantly with the humanities, which gives him a unique and informed view of the value of the humanities to public policy writing, especially from an academic perspective. He correctly points to the fact that "we are all in the human sciences and trying to make sense of human action and human thought." The upshot of his argument is that "it is impossible to approach any questions of public policy without the humanities."

Humans are socially complex creatures. Employing an interpretive approach to understanding them is not only useful for public policy but imperative. Without proper historical and cultural context, policymakers and policy analysts are functionally spitballing when it comes to devising policy. Humans make sense of their world in specific ways that are not unbounded from their specific cultural situations. To ignore this fact dooms attempts to organize society effectively. A humanistic-interpretive approach to public policy writing and analysis can help in this regard by giving policymakers the tools to take a

more nuanced, informed view of the very people their decisions will impact the most.

VIII. Applying the Critical Approach to Policy Writing

Writing about public policy from a critical perspective is a fairly common practice in the academy, but it is seen less in the actual writing of public policy. In the late 1980s, scholars started looking more closely at the potential contributions critical theory could make to political organization (Dryzek, 1987; Bohman, 1990; Murphy, 1995). Nevertheless, despite the efforts of scholars to make practical connections between critical theory and practical public policy, we have not seen it manifested in policy writing as such. Indeed, this seems like a question that might answer itself: why would the people benefitting from the prevailing power structure wish to engage in a critical discourse of that power structure? Historically, the goal of state actors (and anyone else in a position of power) is to increase the scope of their power, not diminish it. There are some notable exceptions to this, but theories of power typically point to this as a fact of political organization. It is for this reason that this section is dedicated to looking at actual public policy writing from a critical perspective; it is a worthwhile practice to be reflexively critical of prevailing power structures, and one way to do this is by looking at the connection between written policy and prevailing power structures.

Although critical theory is still applied predominately in academic writing, there are examples of it being used to inform practical policy writing. In their policy brief, Holzman et al. (2021), for example, look at the problem of race and income gaps and how these factors contribute to overall educational attainment among marginalized groups. Despite the fact that their methodology is one that is typically academic in nature, they effectively adapt it to an easily digestible document. The significance of this adaptation lies in the fact that they are communicating with policymakers and interested lay people in a way that interrogates power structures. In plain, non-academic language, they manage to lay out their methodology, the problem they are identifying, and their solution to the problem. What makes their policy brief critical in nature is their emphasis on the structures that contribute to educational inequality. Their ultimate observation and recommendation that "reducing racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic stratification in higher education access requires that policymakers pay attention to early steps in the pathway to college" (p. 2), suggests a reflexively critical approach to education policy-making.

In another example of the critical lens being applied to professional policy writing, Umamaheswar (2020) takes on the policy problem of the transition between incarceration and adulthood for women. As Umamaheswar states, "Incarcerated women constitute a particularly vulnerable population" (p. 1), making them an excellent case study to which a critical lens can be applied. Again, like Holzman et al., Umamaheswar focuses her eye on a marginalized group that could ostensibly be claimed as a victim of structural oppression. But

Umamaheswar's piece is so interesting because of her ability to take a specialized topic, look at it through a niche lens, and write it in such a way that it is accessible to policymakers. Vivid and familiar language is helpful in communicating the urgency of the problem she is identifying. By highlighting "incarcerated women's early experiences with abuse and victimhood" and focusing on the "women's narratives," (p. 1), Umamaheswar is utilizing a qualitative, critical approach to communicating a real policy problem without losing the reader in specialized language and foreign concepts. Grounding her language in concepts we are all familiar with—abuse, victimization, vulnerability, rights—helps to couch her argument in a way that is digestible to policymakers who might not otherwise be able to conceptualize a critical framework.

Still, there are ways to apply the critical lens to policy writing without necessarily focusing on marginalized groups. In addition to trying to understand the plight of marginalized people, critical approaches also emphasize social experimentation and less-rigid political organization (Dryzek, 1987). I have taken an approach to this when looking at the problem of disinformation and free speech in the United States (Celler, 2022). Although my own approach is not done through an entirely critical lens, there are critical elements to it. For example, when looking at the problem of disinformation in democratic society, I try to emphasize the importance of political and social experimentation. The fundamental question of this approach is how we come to define and understand what is true. While the western world typically takes an Enlightenment approach to such questions—testability, objectivity, falsification—the modern approach

falls short in addressing questions of power. In this case, I look at power at the state level and attempts by political actors to delineate what is considered as acceptable "truth." By attempting to limit the scope of democratic discourse, politicians underestimate how "the production of information in a society is necessarily an imperfect process" (Celler, p. 1). This imperfection cannot be legislated away—doing so attempts to strip the social aspect of knowledge from the production of information and consolidate it in the hands of a few powerful people. Applying a critical lens to the question of disinformation and free speech can quickly shed light on the impact this would have on all people, but especially those considered marginalized. Further, it helps to show that, when addressing a complex policy problem, the social, tacit aspects of political organization cannot be overlooked.

When discussing the methods that frame a policy brief, it is important to also supplement that understanding with a breakdown of some of the writing techniques that go into producing one. Professional writing often spans the spectrum between prescriptive (dictating the rules of grammar) and descriptive (analyzing how language is actually used) methods. Writing policy briefs is no different. As a genre, it lends itself to a few different interpretations from rigid styling meant for maximum efficiency to an artful approach that allows for more persuasive rhetoric and lengthier arguments. The audience, purpose, and topic will determine what structure and form the piece takes. Other factors, such as length and discriminatory decisions of what to include and exclude are all dependent upon the goal of the writer.

There are certain elements of policy writing that are typically included in a publication. As a professional piece of writing typically meant for decision-makers with limited time, it is important to structure the piece as clearly and logically as possible. This includes ensuring there is an executive summary and introduction at the top to let the reader know what they are engaging with. The executive summary should summarize your argument so that the reader can know the upshot of the piece without having to read the entire thing. If they choose to continue reading, it is important that the following section—the introduction—pulls them further into the piece. As the front door into the overall structure of the policy brief the introduction helps to outline the exact path the argument is going to take, helping to guide the reader on a persuasive journey.

These rules for policy briefs might seem to fly in the face of a critical approach to policy writing, and perhaps they do, so it is worth noting that these rules are subject to the critical lens through which one is writing. In the end, the rules serve as guideposts for navigating the construction of a policy brief, but are not the ultimate arbiters of the decisions the writer should make given the lens they are using. Writing policy briefs is an interesting mix of science and art. The formal rules dictating structure, style, and purpose are important guidelines and helpful in getting a piece written in a way that falls in line with professional expectations. But the process allows for some flexibility for the writer to have some rhetorical discretion in service of their argument. Keeping the audience in mind is crucially important when determining length—make the argument and get out. Don't linger; the reader doesn't have time for it.

While different methodological frames can be applied to policy brief writing, using the critical lens as an example here is useful in showing that professional writing aimed at policymakers can be diplomatic as well as critical. Effecting change through professional writing is possible by providing a narrative that spotlights the marginalized without adopting a confrontational posture. Communicating with decision-makers in one's community through writing is an opportunity to craft an argument from a particular perspective that will resonate in ways that are unexpected. Applying the critical lens to policy brief writing in this instance highlights this possibility and shows that a variety of frameworks can be applied in different professional writing contexts.

IX. Applying the Rhetorical Approach to Newsletters

Rhetoric as a methodological framework might be the most familiar device discussed in this project. It is a concept many writers understand, at least to some extent. Nevertheless, there are still novel ways to look at rhetoric. One that stands out in particular is Grabill's (2014) understanding of rhetoric as a process—a method that is "needed to facilitate the work of those who need to communicate, advocate, or otherwise engage in the public work of articulating a vision for what is possible and desirable" (p. 247). He views "rhetorical methodology" as a tool that "facilitates the practice of rhetoric" which, in his mind, ultimately lands as "the knowledge work of citizenship" (pps. 249). Tying

the production of social knowledge to citizenship and then refracting it through a rhetorical lens is remarkably useful for an examination of how professional writers can engage in policy writing in the op-ed and newsletter genres from this perspective. The following section will explore this genre of writing through an adapted view of Grabill's rhetorical methodology; it will also contain a discussion of the practical work of writing in this genre.

Newsletters have seen a resurgence in recent years thanks to readers' frustrations with the endless scroll format of social media (Carr, 2014). The trend accelerated in 2020 when journalists started moving to Substack. Writers like Matt Yglesias of Vox, Jonah Goldberg of the American Enterprise Institute and Fox News, and freelance writer Jesse Singal have built meaningful followings on Substack that have grown their reach and impact in the policy-writing world (Allyn, 2020). But these are just a few examples of journalists and pop-policy writers migrating to the newsletter format in recent years. The format itself allows for greater flexibility for the writer. Sure, it gives writers an opportunity to "be their own boss," but it also gives them an opportunity to be a freer voice in the social production of knowledge: they are a more direct input into Grabill's rhetorical process within their specific cultural community. It is for this reason that the rhetorical lens will be applied to the newsletter genre in this paper. Looking at more informal, but still professional, writing within a rhetorical methodology framework will help give us better insight into the role it plays in professional pop-policy writing.

Newsletters are a particularly good case to look at when trying to understand how they contribute to policy writing through the prism of rhetoric. Their greatest significance in this process is their contribution to the social construction of knowledge. Rhetorically, the social construction of knowledge "posits that knowledge, facts, etc. are linguistically created versions of reality rather than truth per se" and are "the artifacts of the social groups in which they originate" (p. 145). We see this in the latest iteration of the newsletter format with the myriad outlets that have proliferated in the past few years. The contestation of ideas that takes place in the newsletter realm is like watching the social production of knowledge in real-time. Writers like Matt Yglesias and Jonah Goldberg are a microcosm of this idea of truth being a linguistic construct rather than a hard-and-fast discoverable fact. But what does an approach that couches truth in terms of social and linguistic constructs have to say about policy analysis? Perhaps a lot, and it is reflected in the writing that we see on the platform.

The best way to examine these questions is by looking at brief case studies of popular newsletters. Yglesias' *Slow Boring* is a policy analysis newsletter that looks at public policy from a "left-of-center" perspective. But more importantly, it is a good example of what it means to use a methodologically rhetorical framework in newsletter writing.[4] Yglesias' newsletter engages in different rhetorical moves that give him a unique voice in the field. He is informal, but persuasive; his use of data is intentional and not overwhelming for a "non-wonky" reader; most importantly, he leans on plain language and simple rhetorical moves

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[4] I am not claiming that Yglesias is actively using this methodology in his work, but I do think his work is a useful tool for better understanding this methodology.

to make his writing effective. For example, his newsletter on "Housing policy lessons from the microchip shortage" (2022) draws an analogy between the scarcity of new housing supply and the scarcity of microchips (and consequently new cars) to illustrate the bad economic policy of the current housing regime is a useful rhetorical trick. By sliding into these two case studies and showing that they operate by the same logic, he is able to create an argument for economic growth generally that applies to far more than just houses and cars. This is an important rhetorical strategy because it gives the reader the opportunity to follow a logical argument in a simple way.

Yglesias' use of analogy is helpful in illuminating his argument, but his piece also does a good job of highlighting the value of Grabill's theory of rhetoric. Grabill's rhetorical theory "focuses on people and problems" (p. 256). He goes on to argue that there are "practical activities and infrastructural characteristics that must be assembled in order to participate" in the "rhetorical process." Rhetoric "makes things," he says, and is a theory that can "help us make change" (p. 256). It is unclear to me whether Yglesias is familiar with Grabill's work, but to some extent it does not matter. Newsletter writing as a means of affecting public policy is clearly an input into Grabill's rhetorical process. The methodology he envisions seeks to identify the practical conditions for how rhetoric can provide agency to individuals. This agency—powered by rhetoric—then allows people to assert their own rights and interests in a democratic society.

Another example of a popular newsletter that can help us understand rhetorical methodology is the G-File by Jonah Goldberg. The G-File is a

newsletter aimed at "right-of-center" readers who care about public policy. In one particular piece titled "Rites about Rights" (2022), Goldberg lays out a case against President Biden's Freedom to Vote Act act that was under consideration in early 2020. Goldberg's rhetorical method for this piece was interesting because it leaned on *ideas* as opposed to data or any other typical analysis one would expect to see in a policy analysis piece. He argued his position from a particular perspective of philosophy and history. Such a rhetorical decision makes for more compelling reading for people who might care about public policy but whose interest in the topic might come from a more qualitative background. Further, his piece is also a good tool for better understanding the rhetorical moves that politicians make in their own writing and speeches. Goldberg points to several claims in the speech he is referring to, but he takes particular aim at President Biden's claim that "the fundamental right to vote is the right from which all other rights flow." As Haeffele and Storr (2021) have noted, politicians "not only want their preferred policy positions to prevail, but, as a second-best outcome, want policy positions that do not differ significantly from their preferred positions"; one of the rhetorical methods they use to ensure this is using phrases like "reasonable" and "consistent with our values" to describe their positions (p. 2). The newsletter format allows writers like Goldberg to be more flexible with their rhetorical decisions. The methodologies they employ make their writing more accessible to the interested lay-reader.

In addition to the rhetorical methods employed by newsletter writers, there is also the practical matter of actually writing a newsletter. The two things play

well off of each other in this genre thanks to the flexibility it allows to be as formal or informal as the writer wishes. Newsletters are an effective medium because they allow a writer's personality to come through clearly. They lend themselves to a more casual and conversational tone that invites the reader to investigate a topic with the author. The platform itself allows for sufficient flexibility that writers can make diverse stylistic choices. Whereas some genres have general rules guiding writing styles (like the formality of academia, brevity of journalism, professionalism in public policy writing), newsletters allow the author to speak clearly with their own voice if they choose. Furthermore, newsletters offer a chance to write long-form content to an audience that is interested in reading it; indeed, "the ability to go long on niche subjects is one of the real strengths of the internet," according to Matt Yglesias. As mentioned before, the two newsletters that were included in this project are examples of talented writers writing on similar topics making different stylistic choices. Goldberg relies on qualitative arguments, leaning on history, philosophy, politics, and pop culture, whereas Yglesias has qualitative elements but effectively mixes in quantitative "wonkier" elements. All of these elements come together to form a rhetorical situation in which the newsletter writer is engaged in the process of rhetoric as a democratic tool. As an input into the process of social organization, the newsletter writer's voice helps to form the overall rhetorical situation of the culture in which they are writing.

Newsletters have re-emerged as a popular and effective format for conducting policy analysis through professional writing. Moreover, looking at

them within the context of rhetorical methods provides further insight into why this particular platform pairs well with these methods. As Grabill notes, people, in their everyday lives, engage in "knowledge work—as analytical and discursive activity requiring problem-solving, abstract reasoning, and material things like information technologies" that he summarizes as "the knowledge work of citizenship" (p. 249). According to this view, rhetoric is not simply what is said or written, but is the discursive process we all undergo in our everyday lives—the inputs into the process of rhetoric that ultimately allow us to function as citizens and express ourselves. Newsletters are an excellent example of an input into this process. They are a platform that is fairly democratic in nature—that is, the costs for entry are low. Now, more than ever, it is possible to build an audience based on quality writing. Rhetorical methodologies contribute to the overall success of this genre thanks to the maneuverability they allow. It is possible to write from a variety of perspectives with a similar set of tools. What's more, having an understanding of how these tools serve the writer better helps the reader to consume not just what is said, but what is unsaid as well. Rhetorical methodologies help us understand the choices we make as writers, and that includes the things we do not include. This goes for political rhetoric too—it is important to get a sense of the rhetorical choices political leaders make. Rhetoric is a process of choices that go into communication that ultimately contribute to the production of social knowledge in a society.

X.   A Summative Note on the Three Methodologies

Treatment of the methodologies and their applications to the genres discussed in this project should not be taken as the final word on this topic. Indeed, given the limited scope, it was necessary to be discriminating in the selection of methodologies and their corresponding genres. The methodologies discussed herein are applicable to a wide variety of genres and should be mixed and matched accordingly. Limiting oneself to the pairings found here is neither useful nor acceptable as a method of scholarship or professional writing more broadly. There are natural convergences among the methodologies as well as the genres, and they are worth exploring for the sake of clarifying their flexibility and applicability. Moreover, tying the robustness of this approach to the topic of the project—how humane methodologies can contribute to and inform policy writing in a variety of genres—will help to further the case for its usefulness and overall purpose.

First, it is important to discuss the benefits of the approach laid out here. By purposefully limiting my analysis to three methodologies and three corresponding genres, I am able to cut through the noise and manage the unwieldiness of juggling more complex combinations of methods and genres. Alternative approaches to this project might attempt to design an analysis along more traditional "scientific" lines; that is, by employing a "control" against some variable. For example, it would be reasonable to design it in such a way that a

single methodology would be discussed within the context of different genres

(say, for example, the interpretive method as it is manifested in academic, policy,

and newsletter writing). Such an approach would give the reader an opportunity to

see how robust a single genre is against the various uses in which it could be

employed. The merits of this type of design are obvious: it provides greater clarity

in the discourse on methodologies and contributes to the overall scientific

understanding of their use in different settings. The design of this project, though,

is simply an effort to illustrate specific instances of humane methodologies being

applied to policy writing in specific genres. The purpose of such a design is to

give the reader case studies upon which they can extrapolate a greater

appreciation for the role of the humanities in genres where it is not typically

appreciated. Moreover, this approach highlights the importance of "softer"

methods as tools for capturing what purely quantitative or "scientific" methods

might otherwise miss. By injecting more of the human element into the research

design, it becomes possible to make space for the nuance and subtle complexity of

dealing with fundamentally human (and humane) writing spaces.

Despite the differences in the methods discussed here, there are bound to

be some convergences among them once applied in a professional writing context.

Mixing methodologies is not an uncommon practice in professional writing,

whether it be academic or otherwise; and while it typically refers to the binary of

"qualitative vs. quantitative," it can also be understood more broadly as "a

purposeful mixing of methods in data collection, data analysis and interpretation

of the evidence" (Shorten & Smith, p. 74). This clarification is helpful here as this

project primarily looks at qualitative methods and their applications to policy

writing, a genre that typically leans somewhat toward quantitative methods. But

convergence between the methodology used here and the hypothetical alternative

proposed earlier is still possible. For example, the humane methods discussed and

applied in this project can certainly complement and enrich the more traditional

research design approach. The simplicity of a control-variable design is appealing

for the clarity it provides. But it also has the potential to miss out on the

inarticulable "stuff" that comes along with studying humans. This is where the

"softer" methodologies come in. The interpretive method can reinforce findings

of the traditional approach by providing a better understanding of non-quantitative

data—the language people use, the norms they abide by, or the behaviors they

engage in. Understanding these things can only help to buttress findings within a

more traditional paradigm. Likewise, the critical approach can apply more diverse

perspectives to a traditional research design. A scientific investigation is

necessarily biased—it is designed and implemented by a person or people with

unique limitations and blindspots they are likely not aware of. The critical

approach can help with this by introducing other—perhaps

marginalized—perspectives to the discourse that at the very least provide an

opportunity for the research to be more robust against unanticipated biases.

Finally, the rhetorical approach, much like the interpretive and critical

approaches, can be applied to the research design itself. How are questions

phrased? Is the proposal written in such a way to clarify, obscure, or otherwise

bias the reader or writer somehow? Rhetoric plays an important role in every

aspect of life, including the scientific process. Ignoring its contribution there only limits the scope and effectiveness of scientific work.

The benefit of designing a research project as a case study approach of humane methodologies comes in its ability to engage with the "squishier" aspects of investigating serious topics. In this case, it comes in the form of analyzing policy writing through the lenses of various methodologies and corresponding genres. The convergences we see between a more traditional approach and the approach used here are clear in their ability to complement each other. The "quantitative-qualitative" dichotomy is not mutually exclusive, but can in fact co-exist—and arguably should. Limiting oneself to a single approach would seem to cut a research project off at the knees. Of course, scarcity is real and researchers are limited in their time and resources, but aiming for a mixed approach is worth striving for as a professional writer. More importantly, though, one should not lose sight of the value of the qualitative approach for its own sake. Doing so will strip the rewarding richness that comes with researching humans, human behavior, and human social organization.

XI. Conclusion

This research project sought to answer the question of whether methodologies employed by the humane disciplines could be applied to professional public policy writing, and, if so, how. Given the evidence and analysis provided throughout this paper, the answer is that the humanities can and should play a bigger role in writing about and informing public policy. Through

analyzing the interpretive, critical, and rhetorical approaches to humanities research and how they can apply to specific cases of public policy writing and analysis, it has been shown that not only should the humanities have a seat at the policy table, but that they have the potential to play a more prominent role in the public policy discourse by once again guiding policymakers in their decisions. Questions of rights, justice, distribution, and democracy are all fundamentally humanistic in nature. Many of these types of questions just cannot be answered without humanistic analysis. Attempting to do so strips the richness from the discourse and impoverishes the very systems we attempt to apply to the organization of society.

Despite the approach undertaken in this project being limited in its scope, it still provides some helpful insights into the usefulness of the humanities to public policy. The interpretive approach helps us to develop a framework for better *understanding* humans and the specific cultural and historical contexts that inform their actions. Applying this to academic policy writing assisted in highlighting how even a thing as seemingly esoteric as academic writing can have a practical policy impact. By further examining this question through the lens of the Iraq War, we can see the literal life-and-death conditions that are at play in limiting the role of the humanities in public policy. It is not truly possible to have a robust national security apparatus without addressing questions of culture, language, anthropology, and history. In addition, applying the critical lens to actual public policy writing in the form of a policy brief showed how writing directly for policymakers is an opportunity to give voice to historically

marginalized groups. Bringing diverse perspectives into the actual policy process contributes to efforts to give a more humane tint to the implementation of public policy. Without this perspective, we risk doing more harm than good to the populations we are ostensibly attempting to help. Finally, applying the rhetorical lens to newsletter writing gives us a chance to see the connection between rhetorical methodologies and the meaning of citizenship and democratic discourse. Grabill's framing is helpful here because it clearly ties these threads together in a way that makes rhetoric more than just a way of understanding what is said—it is also the process by which we come to make a choice in speaking and writing, and those choices are informed by social and cultural constraints that we face as citizens.

This project is by no means the final say on the subject of the humanities and their relationship to public policy. It is only an attempt to make a small contribution to the ongoing conversation on this topic. Nevertheless, it is important to orient it within the context of how others might be able to build on this in the future. There are many avenues one could take to build on the research established here. Practitioners should view this project as a template for how to incorporate humanities methodologies into their own work. Whereas this might seem like an unappealing option to non-academic policy writers, it is still of the utmost importance. Applying humane lenses to policy problems will only serve to enrich their own methods of analysis. This project does not ask practitioners to abandon their current modes of analysis, but it does offer some tools for engaging in a mixed methods approach that includes more humane elements in their

research. Such an approach will buttress current and future research by orienting it toward people, which is, afterall, our entire reason for engaging in such practices. Scholars with an interest in policy can build on this work by taking steps to clearly tie their work to impact on public policy. This is not to suggest scholars should be concerned with "measuring" or "metrics" on this margin, but that if they wish to inform public policy, it is possible to engage in scholarship while also having an impact on how policy is formulated. Finally, the hypothetical experimental design alternative of this project is a worthwhile one and should be explored. It is my hope that, if this project reaches anyone, there will be an effort to set up a control-variable experiment that expands on how one or more of these methodologies might perform in a variety of settings.

If our public policy culture continues to turn away from the humanities it risks removing everything that makes public policy worthwhile in a complex society. Devising the rules by which we all must play in society cannot be done without incorporating humanistic concerns. The art of governance requires a humanistic approach. Fostering the relationship between policymakers and the polity depends upon the constant loop of communication that occurs in a democratic society. The scholars who have addressed this in the past recognize the exigence of such a situation—without the humanities, policymakers risk underappreciating the role that inarticulable knowledge plays in a society, and such an assumption could prove disastrous for a society. Technocratic methods can only get us so far in effectively organizing and addressing complex social phenomena. Humans are rich and complex, and as such their social and cultural

worlds are rich and complex. Ignoring this in favor of pursuing metrics and measurables risks everything the humanities gave us, like notions of rights, justice, democracy, and the general health of human social life. It is with this project that I hope to move the needle just a little in favor of a more humane public policy framework.

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Appendix A. Interview Transcripts

Interview: Virgil Storr (this interview was conducted via Zoom)

Eric Celler (00:01):
Okay. So you're pretty familiar with the IRB process, I'm sure. So there are some kind of proforma questions I have or things I have to go over. Before we get started. Um, uh, I can confirm that you've received the consent form. I saw that you signed it and returned it on DocuSign. Yep. Um, let's see. Do you, uh, is it okay to use your name or would you prefer to use an alias for this conversation?

Virgil Storr (00:28):
Um, I assume it's okay. Yes, it's okay to use my name.

Eric Celler (00:32):
Okay. I'm gonna try, I mean, the information is, I'm

Virgil Storr (00:34):
Gonna try to say nothing too controversial.

Eric Celler (00:35):
Yeah. I mean, my questions are gonna strictly be, have to do with your professional experience, so

Virgil Storr (00:41):
It's up to you. Good.

Eric Celler (00:42):
The content provide. Um, so the kind of goal of this, uh, research project just to kind of, is to gather data, uh, to better understand professional practices of writing and specifically policy writing. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, um, commenting on policy formulating public policy. Um, and so the, the data that I'm gonna, I'm trying to gather will be used to help contribute to a better understanding of how, um, of one, how that's done, and two, how the humanities can play a, play a better role in that process. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, um, versus kind of the more technocratic approach of the last, what, 60 some odd years. Um, and so, yeah, so the comment too is kinda the exact same thing as comment one, so I'll skip it. But,

um, there'll be about nine questions, um, hoping it take only about 45 minutes. Um, we are currently recording. I will transcribe this later. Um, and the information will only be disseminated in, in an academic setting, uh, primarily part of my capstone project and potentially as part of conference presentations or an academic slash scholarly article.

Virgil Storr (01:52):
Okay.

Eric Celler (01:52):
Um, and if you wish I can omit your, since you're not using an alias, if you wish I can omit your name at, at later stages of this project, depending on how the conversation goes. Um, so before we get started, do you have any questions about

Virgil Storr (02:07):
I do not.

Eric Celler (02:08):
Okay, cool. Then I will go ahead and start with my questions. So, uh, first can you tell me a bit about your research and how it's informed by Lavoie's Don Lavoie's, um, interdisciplinary humanomics approach, um, to understanding social sciences and other disciplines as they relate to the social sciences?

Virgil Storr (02:30):
Okay. Yeah. So I work in, in I guess three areas mostly, uh, that, one of 'em is on how culture impacts entrepreneurship and economic action. Uh, the other is on how communities recover, uh, and respond to and recover from disasters. Um, and the third one is on the, so the social and moral aspects of, of markets is all three of 'em in various ways are connected to, um, to what I would call the, the, the, the Lavo project. And so lemme try to spend some time just sort of explaining what he was hoping to do.
(03:13):
And so, Okay. Where to start, Dawn was chained as in prison tag was, was what we call an Austrian economist. Right? He was an economist influenced by, um, Mesis and Hayek. And, and Colin Lockman is, cause it was his dissertation advisor. Lockman was his closest. Um, um, you know, uh, his, his, his work is part of more closely aligned with, with, with Lockman's work that Austrian economics. This is a push to economics that, um, at its heart is and stresses the meanings that individuals attach to their action is being the key focus of the, of the field. And so, Hayek wrote an essay several, um, several decades ago now

where he, where, where he describe, he talks about the facts of the social sciences. And in that essay, he makes the observation that unlike the natural sciences where, um, the facts of these things out there, uh, for the, um, for the social sciences, the facts of the social sciences are what people think and believe, Right?

(04:30):
They're the meanings that individuals attach to their, uh, environments, their actions, their choices. And those are the things that, that we are, we as social scientists are trying to, A, uncover and b makes sense of. And three, figure out what the implications of those things are. And so when you get so, so sort of flash forward to, um, Dawn's work, and Dawn is trying to say, Okay, well, how do we as social scientists, um, actually do this task, right? Of getting at the meanings that individuals attached to their actions, right? Like, how do we, how do we take seriously this commitment to, to what what also gets called subjectivism? And that the, the, um, in that effort is where he discovers, um, Garmer, uh, who is a philosophical eu, you know, the founder of that, of that, that approach to hermeneutics that it is, uh, approach to, um, hermeneutics is all about, you know, understanding, it sort of has its roots in biblical scholars trying to make sense of biblical tax.

(05:42):
That, um, Gadamer's insight is that, you know, with something like all action in some sense is a, is a text that can be read, that can be made sense of, that can be interpreted like a text. And in the way that we interpret tax, that, um, it is a, you know, the act of interpretation is an act of continually continual probing and questioning of the text so that it could reveal its its answers and insights, right? And that, and so Dawn finds in this a useful tool, right? Like a useful, um, sort of wedge into trying to do that. And he comes away with it saying, Okay, um, if we as social scientists, uh, in the business of understanding or trying to interpret the actions of individuals who are themselves in the business of interpreting and trying to make sense of the world, that a couple of things are gonna have to inform our approach with that, we're gonna have to one, think of science, uh, think of our social sciences, not some objective science, right?

(06:56):
Not some objective science of subjective phenomena, but as an interpretive exercise all the way down. Um, uh, and, and so then that sort of then pushed him to say, Okay, so what are the things that actors are then using to interpret the world? And one of those things is culture. The, the individuals have what good says, or embedded in what God says is a sort of a, you know, webs of significance that they use to make sense of, uh, the world. That one of the things, although we can't, in a, in a interpretive exercise, I can't get into your head and figure out what you are, you Eric, are thinking, what I can do is come to understand the things

that are influencing the choices and the insights and the ways that you're approaching the world and what, you know, culture is one of those things. (07:48):

I can sort of come to learn and appreciate what your cultural fame is, and then use that to try to help me to make sense of what is going on, what, what, what, you know, what you're choosing, whatever, at least in part. And so, just to tie back to my, like, so my first, you know, my first, you know, the first thing I mentioned in terms of the line of work that work in sort of the world of culture and interpreting and making sense of entrepreneurial action, entrepreneurship, uh, and economic action generally is directly influenced by that, Right? As you can see, sort of like, it, it, it sort of culture then becomes primary is a thing to study mm-hmm. <affirmative> understanding how, um, different cultural lenses impact the, the entrepreneurial choices of differently situated entrepreneurs becomes a thing. Uh, that's the focus, uh, that sort of emphasis on the meanings that individuals attach to their actions, their interpretations, uh, their cultural lenses also informs the, um, the work on, uh, how communities were coming from disaster that Right. (08:57):

That I, um, first I channel, right? But then with, um, a number of other, um, my colleagues here mm-hmm. <affirmative>, and that that is again, something that, you know, that tries to uncover the way that the actors that we were, um, the actors that we were studying, um, how they made sense of the phenomena that they were experiencing and the strategy, you know, Yeah. Would inform the strategies that they adopted as they tried to, um, come out of that. And then finally, the, the, the whole emphasis on the, um, uh, social and moral aspects of markets comes out of a, a sort of basic observations, actually wanted the dates back to Lavo, which is that, um, the markets, you know, the econ textbooks, for instance, present of sort of picture of our market that is, that is, um, somewhat thin, somewhat sterile, somewhat cold mm-hmm. <affirmative>, but individuals don't actually experience the market in that way. The markets that we experience, we experience as these cultural, social and moral spaces.

Eric Celler (10:09):
Right.

Virgil Storr (10:10):
So if we wanna understand the markets as individuals experience, and we then have to look at these other aspects and not simply the sort of, um, you know, coldness of bids and ass or, you know, you know, price and profit and these kinds of things, but these other components that are also a part of the way we engage in market activity. So that was maybe too long an answer

Eric Celler (10:33):
To No, that was, that was, that was excellent. Um, it gave me a lot of stuff that I could work with. Um, so then obviously your, uh, your work and carrying Lavoie's kind of legacy, um, and what he did, um, is much more as a social scientist, um, you know, economist, but you also do a lot of overlapping work, kind of, and correct me if I'm misstating this or, or, you know, misinterpreting, but, uh, because of the three things that you pointed out that you work on, there's a lot of overlapping in the humanities, right? Yep. Um, just obviously in terms like the social and moral spaces that markets provide, that's a lot of, that's, uh, a lot of those are questions of, you know, uh, philosophy and history and culture and stuff like that. Um, so I guess from that and from your own work, do you see a connection between public policy and the humanities? Um, and then also on top of that,

Virgil Storr (11:34):
Did we,

Eric Celler (11:35):
Do you think they're separate? And if they're separate, do you think there should be a connection? Oh, did I lose you? Oh, hold on. I'm not sure if you can hear me,

Virgil Storr (11:48):
But, uh, I think we froze.

Eric Celler (11:51):
Yeah, I can sort of hear you, but you're, you're sitting still. Uh, let's see. Let me try to restart my camera here. Maybe it'll help. I don't know. I don't use Zoom very often, so let's see. Hang on just a second. Virgil, if you can hear me. Sorry, can you hear me?

Virgil Storr (14:20):
I can hear you. I gotta, apparently my privacy stuff is, Lemme do that. Um, but we can, we can talk while you're, I I did it for some reason. The Mason, um, connection is not behaving.

Eric Celler (14:42):
It's, it's quite likely. It's also on my end too. We don't have, uh, it's, despite being right outside of Atlanta case, you can sometimes be mid third world. Okay. I see you now. Oh, I don't, I think you're muted.

Speaker 3 (15:18):
Yeah. For some reason in the Mason connection isn't working quite right. Okay. So I'm doing it for my cell phone.

Eric Celler (15:23):
Oh, okay. Okay. Um, okay. Well, if you can hear me, I'll just keep going. Yeah. All right. Um, let's see, what was I saying? So

(15:38):
The, the work that you've done and the way that it overlaps with the humanities, my question is, uh, do you see a connection between public policy and humanities? Um, if you don't, should there be in your opinion?

Virgil Storr (15:52):
Yeah. So, so, you know, if you sort of, you know, flash back to the discussion, the, the, the, my answer, the previous question, the, you know, it mentions a number of ways that there are, um, all these connections, right? That it, it talk, you know, And so understanding culture, um, how culture impacts action, um, was, you know, as sort of described as being a prime, um, consideration of, of the approach that I take to answer these questions. That's a thing that's informed, um, in a lot of ways by, um, how anthropologists approach the question of and of culture and their understanding of culture. Um, you know, folks like Clifford Geertz and, and his understanding of, of, of culture, but also, uh, the approach to, um, the sort of a graphic approach is a way of uncovering their, um, the ways that, that, that different people sort of make sense of their worlds is, you know, sort of a key, um, methodological, you know, a, you know, a key methodological strategy.
(17:14):
And so it's a, it's a project that's sort of deeply influenced by, um, uh, by the humanities in that respect. Uh, the other, the other couple of ways that it's deeply influences that, um, none of those projects make sense without a, without sort of a historical grounding and historical appreciation. Um, and so history becomes, um, and the archival work, you know, that, that undergoes a lot of the good histories becomes, um, a key, again, methodological tool that's being used to, to, to do this work. Um, and then finally, when you're looking at something like the sociological and the, the soc, this, you know, the social and moral aspects of markets that, that is, um, in many ways deeply philosophical, uh, project like coming to understanding, coming to appreciate even what the questions are in that space is, uh, is, you know, is a effort that begins in many ways with, um, Aristotle <laugh>.

(18:35):
And, you know, so sort of continued throughout like a lot of the live conversations and, and questions about even how you approach that, that topic, um, is, you know, deeply philosophical in the, in nature. And so, I don't know, I don't think that we could approach any of these questions without bringing humanities, and in many ways, I think the, the divide. But I guess I personally think the divide between the social sciences and the humanities is a weird one mm-hmm. <affirmative>, that we're all in the, you know, we're all in many ways in the human sciences and we're all trying to make sense of, um, you know, human action, human choice human thought, and what have you. And so given that our, we share this common, this common subject, it's hard to imagine making sense of understanding human beings and our full richness without bringing in insights from all these different subtle ways of tackling these questions.

Eric Celler (19:45):
Great. Okay. Um, so I guess in connection to that, which is not a question I had listed, but one I just thought of in your, in your response. Um, you know, I think in some ways you see, when you see, like, you know, policy writing or commentary on po on per on public policy, um, sometimes you can see that influence of the humanities, you know, people who have an appreciation for history and culture when they're talking about certain public policy issues. But, um, I think it, in, in a lot of places, public policy commentary tends to lean more toward, uh, kind of away from that and more toward the quant aspects of social sciences, um, or other elements of policy that kind of don't take into consideration, at least wouldn't claim to take into consideration, uh, of influences from the humanities, despite the fact that it's kind of unavoidable. So, I guess question is, uh, how have you seen the trend in public policy writing, not only in your professional experience, but even just kind of the history post World War ii, if that's not too big of a question for this.

Virgil Storr (21:05):
Yeah. And so I guess my, the, the way I think about this problem is, I mean, I think what you observe is correct. Um, there has been a, a, a sort of increased move to what, um, high equit call sciences, right? Um, that has occurred that that's, that's, that's actually not been driven, I don't think, by, by policy per se. I think that that's been, uh, a trend in the social sciences and even in the humanities, in homeless facts mm-hmm. <affirmative>, uh, since the period that you see increasingly, um, the, uh, economic history becomes not a thing grounded in you sort of the interpretation of, of archival, but it becomes Cleo metrics or Right, you know, economy to trying to understand these kinds of questions. Anthropol, you

know, um, anthropology, uh, has moved in some ways from being about, uh, let me spend, you know, ex you know, a number of months, years trying, you know, embedded in a particular cultural context and understanding it to, um, you know, what looks more like experimental economics or experimental psychology in a lot of ways actually is, you know, doing, you know, a series of experiments in, in the lab and what have you, that, um, so you've seen this trend in a lot of, of different spaces, right?

(22:43):

Where, um, disciplines, econ, economics certainly, but disciplines across the social sciences and humanities are becoming increasingly, um, s and, and what have you. And that when, and so I guess my view of that is similar to Hayeks, which is that, and he used the, he used the termism as, as a kind of, as a, it's a pejorative term. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, what it means is it's things that are taking on the appearance of science, but are in fact not truly scientific. Right? Right. Because if you were truly scientific and you were trying to understand human beings, your approach would get you closer to human beings. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, it wouldn't get you, um, detached and removed in such a way that the, the things that are represented in your, um, you know, your attacks or your, your, your scientific to ex acquisitions don't want recognizable as human means in, in some way.

(23:40):

Right. And so, um, so I think that that, that is, that sort of science has affected the discipline and it's also affected the policy writing that, uh, maybe is informed by those disciplines. And so, like, I think, I guess I think the trends, uh, have moved and, and I think the motivation behind it is in fact a kind of, um, in some ways an illusion of objectivity, right? That, that we've, we've come to believe for whatever reason, that if the thing looks, you know, is a pair's very complicated and complex. Yeah. Um, and it's using a lot of technical tombs and jargon, and it's involving calculations that we can't do, right. That some that has been drained of its, um, you know, been drained of any, you know, prejudice or bias. Right? In fact, it's not right. And, and so therefore, if we can present this thing as an objective, uh, outcome, uh, then it can, it sort of, it's strengthened the policy space is gonna be, um, you know, increased. Yeah. And I think that that, I think that, I think in some many ways that's just an illusion, right? It's a kinda full and full science. It's of sciences.

Eric Celler (25:18):

Yeah. And I mean, that's obviously outside the scope of this project, but raises a whole lot of questions about expertise and, and kind of the expert class and a lot of stuff that, you know, obviously, uh, you and I are both aware of from <laugh>,

uh, our our own professional experiences. Um, so I, we're kind of getting into time here, so I wanna move through the questions mm-hmm. <affirmative>. Um, so I guess when writing about public policy, which, um, I know there's this smattering of that in your career, um, as an academic, what sort of considerations do you take into account when you're trying to consider the audience you're writing for? So that's, you know, whether you're writing for an academic audience or policymakers, or just, you know, an op-ed, like an interested lay person. Um, are there things you think about in, in, like, is there a framework you have for each of those approaches? Or do you just kind of write what you know the best you can for the outlet you're aiming for, if that makes sense?

Virgil Storr (26:29):
Yeah. Yeah. I mean, I think communicate, like if, if you wanna communicate, you gotta care a little bit. You gotta care about the person on the other side of Yeah. Of the, of the, who you're trying to communicate with. And so suddenly the audience ma and it informs what I do. The way I try to have it enter into though, is mostly ensuring that, um, there's a, that I'm beginning with what the, the person I'm, I'm writing I'm hoping to communicate with is likely to, to know about and understand. Okay. And if they don't know, understand it, then I try to, um, explain it. And so it's less about, um, you know, much less about, um, you know, I do, you know, the serious work in my academic work and I do little non-serious stuff in my op-eds. And it's not about like dumbing down the, you know, to get to the op-eds or anything like that.
(27:36):
It's much more, well, I can assume a certain sort of stock of, of knowledge when writing to an academic audience in a particular field. And I can't necessarily assume that if I'm working, you know, writing some more general audience. And so if I'm going to make claims that are, that are built on, you know, somebody of work or somebody of knowledge that I've gotta make sure I've gotta explain that, and I've gotta way that, that they, they can understand. So that's the thing that mostly drives, to the extent that though my writing in those types of spaces look differently, it's not that I'm saying different things or what have you. Right. Um, or that I'm just trying to make sure that, um, I'm understood and that requires maybe I, I don't assume that people know certain things in one space that I can't assume that they know in another.

Eric Celler (28:26):
Yep. And that makes perfect sense. Um, thank you. That was sort of an out of left field question, but I, uh, needed to have at least a couple of more applied things in here. But, um, going back to kind of your more to the more academic sort of stuff,

um, can, can you talk a bit about Lynn Ostrom's approach, the multi multiple methodologies, multiple methodologies approach, and how her patchwork vision of common resource management kind of can be an informed contemporary public policy? So when it comes to things like, you know, water rights between states or, you know, obviously power management out west, um, with kind of the rolling brown outs you see of in like California and stuff like that.

Virgil Storr (29:18):
Yeah. So, I mean, I guess a couple of insights there, right? So one on the connected, right? And so the, the mixed methods thing is, you know, the way I understand the way, the point I see her trying to make there, and, and she does implicit like working together and, and a of outlets where she makes this, this, this argument, uh, ANGs aligned to the way I I I approach this, um, sort of, you know, I approach my academic work in, in the policy work that, that, that's come out of it, which is that the question should drive the methods that you adopt. And so sometimes what you're asking is in fact, a question that, um, is a quantitative question mm-hmm. <affirmative>. And so that the way you answer that is necessarily, uh, a quantitative approach. Sometimes the, the, the, the question that you're asking is one that, that would benefit from, um, the kinds of, um, isolating of, of, of factors that can only occur in our, in a lab.
(30:40):
And so an experimental strategy makes sense. Sometimes the questions you ask really depend on understanding the, the, the, the, you know, the meanings that individuals on the ground are bringing to bear, right? And so if you're, if you're asking a question like she asks, or how do you, how are people in this particular contacts organizing in such a way that allows them to manage this resource in a way that, um, doesn't lead to the oversaturation that we would expect to happen in a common pool setting? And that, that if you're, you know, you, the concern is about the strategies that individuals are bringing to bear and you gotta talk to the individuals, right? That, that demands a kinda of field work. If after doing that, you're trying to figure out, um, what particular, um, what particular institutional environments allow for that to come more readily, that then maybe something like, uh, a lab makes sense.
(31:53):
Cause then you can bury those institutional, um, frames and see what, see what occurs, right? And so I think that that's the way, um, I think that's what's behind the, the, the mixed methods strategy, which is if you try to understand the world, um, and you ask them questions of the world, some of those questions demand certain kinds of answers. It would be weird to answer a question about, you know, how much with an, with a word <laugh>. And it would be like, like a number if

you're answering that, asking that kind question. And vice versa, it'd be where to, to ask the question about, you know, meetings and to answer with, you know, a regretted or something. Yeah. <laugh>. So that's a strange thing too.

Eric Celler (32:40):
Yeah. Okay. Um, okay. I don't think I have any follow ups to that question, but, uh, thank you. So let's see. Um, so Pete and Matt talk about in, um, applied main line, you know, the limitations of public policy, obviously, um, and kind of, uh, in terms of kind of what policy ought to do versus what policy can do. And so how, when considering those two things, right, what the ought versus can, um, kind of dichotomy, um, how do you go about writing about policy in a negative sense? Like how do you write effective policy recommendations or commentary on policy that ultimately just calls for humility on the part of policymakers, right? Like instead of my, I imagine that far more effective and effective in the sense of like, getting more eyeballs on it and more interest is calling for big policy, big time policy activity, right?
(33:50):
Like some calling for a politician or, or a policymaker to engage in some kind of action re versus, you know, saying like, maybe the right thing here to do is to step back and consider the limitations of our knowledge. Um, I guess how do you, how do you as a writer go about framing that sort of approach when you're trying to communicate with people who are in kind of a decision making capacity? And even, even in like, you know, within Mercatus, I guess, you know, if you're trying to talk to people in influence change or influence, uh, certain policy decisions, it can be anything.

Virgil Storr (34:28):
Yeah. So I think, I think there's two, I think, I think the two thing that I, that I try to keep in mind, the one I try to keep in mind, um, I guess I myself try to be and continue to be humble, right? Which is that, that, that I'm, I'm mindful that, um, I am unlikely to come up with something like optimal policy, right?
(34:54):
You know, like, so the skepticism, you know, comes to me too. So I try to be humble as well. And so what I try to then do when I'm doing, like, when I'm including policy recommendations and stuff, or doing direct policy essay type stuff, or writing op-eds that have some policy recommendation is I try to, um, I try to myself be, be humble and that one of the things that leads me to do is to, um, the recommendations that I tend to make in those settings tend to be very modest in terms of, of what they ask. And so in a, in something like, uh, uh, you know, understanding communities assets have to, you know, like, you know,

post-disaster policy say, which, you know, kind of policy should to, should people adopt, uh, in the book with, uh, Stephanie Athlete Law Group, the, you know, that book is all about how entrepreneurs help, you know, can play a critical role in helping communities recover from disasters, right?

([35:58](#)):

That's the, the argument in the book when it comes to the, um, the policy chapter that the insight there is actually ends up being a very, um, well, we take to be a very modest one, which is to say, if we're right and we think we are, we've amassed a bunch of evidence that suggests that we're probably right, um, then at a minimum what we should be do, we should be doing. And a policy space is giving more scope and space to entrepreneurs to, to act, right? Like, that is not a radically transform the administrative state that is not a, you know, you have knowledge problems to prevent you from doing X, Y, and Z that is, uh, uh, at a minimum you should be giving, um, you know, more space to these, these figures to do things that they do, Right? Right. And that, that, that allows, hopefully it allows a policymaker to say, Okay, well, I'm not willing to go all the way up here, but certainly I could be more, I could be less restrictive towards entrepreneurs in this, in during this period.

([37:13](#)):

Yep. Right? And so that's the way I've, I've, I've tried to approach it, which is to, to myself be modest when, um, offering those insights, keeping my conclusions grounded to my, my work. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, right? And so what you won't see, I have opinions on a whole host of policy things, the out is you will not see me writing anything like a, an oped or a policy brief or whatever on a space that I've not researched extensively. Right. It just doesn't occur. Right. Um, and so, and that's because I'm, I'm also trying to be modest here. Yeah. Right. And, and like, well, I think I know this and, and, and this is, this would be a logical response to this.

Eric Celler ([38:05](#)):

Okay. Um, okay. Yeah, no, that, that makes perfect sense. Sort kind of what I anticipated you would say, but I'm glad to have it on the record. Um, so kind of in that vein of understanding policy and how it gets produced and, you know, whether it's a full policy or norms that kind of get elevated into policy, um, you know, we see kind of a lot of bad policy in the public sphere, um, but it's not the only place where we see bad policies emerge. Right? Um, so you and Nona have Nona Martin store for the, uh, for the sake of the, the recording, uh, have your 2008 paper, right. Perverse merger orders, um, which I think 2008 is the right year for that. Um, so in, in that, you kinda talk about these perverse immersion orders you can see coming out of private action.

(39:06):
And, you know, it's not always opt, you don't always get the optimal outcomes from markets. Um, you know, bad things can still happen even when it's just a voluntary spontaneous order. Um, so when you're writing about public policy and civil society, um, how do you go about, and, and maybe you kind of already answered this in my question about the, the way you approach audience, but when you're writing to an audience, say for instance, that has priors that say, you know, look, government's a lot better at solving these sorts of complex social problems, or you have an audience that has priors that say, No civil society is better at solving these complex social problems. How do you go about, and I guess more of your work would lean into this, is writing to the people with that first set of priors and trying to talk about how, like, you know, the evidence suggests that civil society can actually handle a whole host of complex social problems that we might not naturally think that it could handle. Um, but there are ways that it's imperfect. So how do you kind of, I guess, strike that balance when you're trying to make a case for, um, keeping things bottom up while also recognizing the fact that bad things could still possibly come out of that? Does that question make sense?

Virgil Storr (40:28):
You know, it does, and I mean, like, I, I try to, like, I'm not, like, I don't, I I try not to be Pollyanna about any of this, you know, any of the solutions, like the wall is a messy Yeah. Um, you know, messy place and, and, um, and even the best social, you know, you know, the sort of, you know, the best, you know, socioeconomic setting is, is gonna have all sorts of things that are, that are ba you know, from all perspective, bad or problematic. And, and so there, the question is always a competitive question, right? Like, we're always competitive themes, and so we're always, it is never in isolation. Um, you know, Mark, it's good in some sense, right? It's always, um, okay, if we're dissatisfied with this particular social outcome or this particular economic outcome, are there, is there some alternative setting that might get us a better one, right?
(41:36):
Yeah. Um, and then the, that, that has to be, you know, justified and understood and, and, and argued for. And so in thinking about some sort of social problem and, you know, maybe speaking to someone who says, Okay, has the social problem that exists, you know, it seems pretty flirtatious, we need to have some robust state action to fix this or solve it or what have you. Uh, the question, and I think is, um, for them is just the kind of, and what I try to do in my policy work when I'm addressing them is, okay, so what would it take for government to be able to solve that particular social ill? Right? What would government need to

know, Right. And are they to know it? Right? And so one of the things that in the disaster work, again, that that becomes pretty limiting for government in this space, is there a number of questions that that, that, that government actors Ill position to understand, including basic things like, is the disaster really happening right now?

Eric Celler (42:56):
Yeah.

Virgil Storr (42:58):
Right. So like, so if, if, if we can't count if, if, if, if government actors are gonna meet epi ill positioned to even an answer the question, is this a crisis or not that is occurring, then it's unlikely that they're going to be well positioned to figure out the precise kinds of solutions to that disaster that are gonna be right for, um, you versus just me versus someone else given our different settings and, and, you know, social circumstances and backgrounds and skill sets and all the other things that we, resources and everything else that we might bring to, you know, solving a particular problem. Right? And so, and so that kind of questioning, I think is the way to begin with that if, you know, when writing to an audience that maybe has that, that bias that you mentioned. I think just sort of beginning with, um, that kind of questioning, okay, what would you need to, like, how would you, these are problem solve.

Eric Celler (44:04):
Yeah. Just walking through the steps of like the things you would need to Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Okay. Um, I had a follow up question to that and I lost it. I don't know, maybe I'll think of it, but, um, so I guess to kind of wrap this up a little bit, um, is there anything that kind of occurred to you in the course of the conversation or, uh, that you think is valuable to bring up that I didn't mention that I didn't ask you about, Um, that you'd just like to, for the sake of the project bring up?

Virgil Storr (44:43):
Yeah, I guess one thing I would say, I would, I would flag is just the sort of, there's another advantage to, um, deploying the humanities in policy writing, um, in understanding human beings in general, but to policy writing, um, in particular there is, goes beyond the truth tracking aspect of it. Um, and that's the, um, rhetorical benefits of it that, that we're human beings are understand themselves and understand the world in terms of stories that we are, um, that is how we situate ourselves. That is how we, um, figure out our path forward, right? It's the

sort of referencing the telling of, and the referencing of stories and that one of the things that we get from the, the humanities, um, is sort of access to an insight into these stories and that that is bound to, as a, at a pure, pure rhetorical level, be an effective way of connecting with, um, policy actors and, you know, sort of the general population about what is to be done, right? Right. And so I think that there's a, the, the beyond the truth tracking stuff, the fact that, um, we are storytellers and storymakers, uh, and that humanities gives us insights into, um, those stories, um, is, you know, an additional benefit. So we just didn't get to

Eric Celler (46:40):
No, that was awesome. Thank you. Um, you and Stephanie have a paper, a fairly recent paper on, um, forget what it's called, but it's, it's on like the rhetorical choices that politicians make, like the, the, um, yeah, something like, not that that topic captures everything that you just said, but um, that immediately sprung to mind. Cause I recently, uh, discovered and read the paper, um, and intend to include it in my, in my work here. Um, okay. So yeah, that's it. That's all I had for you. I appreciate your time. Well,

Virgil Storr (47:14):
I hope it was helpful for you. Sorry about the technical

Eric Celler (47:16):
No, it's fines. I anticipated something happening with the stuff.

Virgil Storr (47:21):
Anyway, you give, you know, Erica and the kids my love, and

Eric Celler (47:26):
I will. Yeah. Thank you.

Virgil Storr (47:27):
Take care

Eric Celler (47:28):
Care. All right. See you, Virgil.

Virgil Storr (47:30):
Bye.

Interview with Matthew Yglesias (this interview was done via email)

Eric Celler:
Can you tell me a little about how you got interested in writing about public policy?

Matthew Yglesias:
I've been interested in politics and policy for about as long as I can remember (like middle school), and writing is just something that I'm good at. But I'm not much of a reporter, so even though I dabbled a little in journalism in college at a campus alt-weekly I didn't really see a journalism career as likely for myself. But I thought I would probably do something that involved writing and politics. One summer I was an intern in Chuck Schumer's office and helped draft press releases and even contributed to a couple of speeches. Then the next summer I was going to work on a political campaign but the candidate ended up dropping out at the last minute. I was bored a lot that summer, and ended up killing time by starting a political blog. I wound up keeping the blog up when I went back to school for senior year and sort of stumbled into a career through that path.

Eric Celler:
As someone with an undergraduate degree in philosophy, how have you found academic training translating to popular writing on public policy topics (especially in terms of methods and methodologies)?

Matthew Yglesias:
The basic analytic philosophy toolkit is pretty handy for doing opinion journalism. What they teach you in philosophy classes is really how to pick apart arguments and construct sound ones and that's what I do all day. The actual writing style of academic philosophers is pretty rough for popular consumption, but the methods are surprisingly similar.

Eric Celler:
Do you see a link between the humanities and public policy? If you do see one, can you explain what that looks like to you? If you don't, can you talk about what you think one *should* look like (if you think there should be a link at all)?

Matthew Yglesias:
This is a good question. I think at its best a humanities education teaches you how to read both generously and critically, how to express complicated ideas in a clear

way, and how to contextualize contemporary problems in terms of historical circumstances and general features of the human condition. I do think that a lot of times in practice people just kind of strip mine history or literature for examples to illustrate a point in a tedious way. Which is really just to say that like anything else the humanities can be misused.

Eric Celler:
As a professional writer, what are some stylistic moves you make when writing about public policy? That is, how do you make decisions about how you structure your arguments and how the piece as a whole comes together to form a descriptive or argumentative take?

Matthew Yglesias:
This is always an evolving situation, but as I enter my forties I try really hard to be very very clear and precise about what I am saying. I don't mind being a little repepetitive or even a little dull, I want people to get what I am trying to say.

Eric Celler:
When it comes to writing something like a policy brief, one of the rules is to keep it, well, brief (1-2 pages). But as an interested consumer of policy writing, I find that I benefit more from long-form content that allows me to dig further into a topic. One venue that is great for this is Substack. How have you seen things like Substack change how professional writers write longform content about a specialized topic for an interested lay-audience?

Matthew Yglesias:
The ability to go long on niche subjects is one of the real strengths of the internet. The problem with a niche policy topic is most people probably won't find it interesting. And while it's true that if you *have* to read something you're not interested in you'd probably prefer to read something short, at the end of the day if you're not interested you probably just won't read it. So the question is what does someone who *is* interested want to read? Well, he wants something long enough that he can actually learn something useful from it. The 700-800 word print op-ed is just a deadly length in that regard, enough space to bore you if you don't care but not enough to really explain anything to those who do.

Eric Celler:
How do you see the professional writing landscape changing as the subscription model makes a comeback? That is, nowt hat it is easier than ever to support individuals writers, what are some benefits and drawbacks to these emerging

changes in the industry? Are they sustainable and what are the implications for professional writing more broadly?

Matthew Yglesias:
Every business model has very serious drawbacks. The real danger point came, I think, when display web advertising seemed like it might be the only revenue model because then you have everyone exposed to the same problem all the time. Right now, I write for my substack which is a single-author subscription. I also write for Bloomberg which is a bundled subscription model. And I write for Grid which is a free-to-read ad supported publication. There's pros and cons to all of this, but in a healthy intellectual environment we want to see a mix.

Eric Celler:
Is there anything else you'd like to say about the topic of public policy writing that I haven't already asked about or that you haven't yet had a chance to address? I'm particularly interested in any particular experiences, stories, challenges, or surprises you've faced as someone who has written about policy for different publics.

Matthew Yglesias:
The biggest challenge I think is just the mismatch between business imperatives and trying to have the kind of impact I want to see in the world. A lot of the time my ideal reader is a curious college student who's really just figuring things out or a twentysomething legislative correspondent on Capitol Hill who's overworked and underpaid and doing her best to help an understaffed boss. But these aren't necessarily the people who are most appealing to commercial advertisers or who have the most money to subscribe to things. I try to address that with discounts for students and government employees, but it's still a highly imperfect system.

Appendix B. Original Unpublished Projects

Unpublished Intercultural Communication Paper

Intercultural Communication and US Foreign Policy during the Iraq War
(2003-2011)

Eric Celler

MAPW, Kennesaw State University

PRWR 6860: Language and Writing in

Intercultural Contexts

Dr. Chris Palmer

May 7, 2022

Introduction

The Second Iraq War (2003-2011) was one of the first major international conflicts of the twenty-first century, just after the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. By that time, the United States had enjoyed its position as the head of the unipolar world following the collapse of the Soviet Union about a decade earlier. With the dissolution of the USSR, it seemed that western liberal democracy had prevailed. Liberal ideals of liberty, justice, individual rights, and self-determination of peoples had won out over the collectivist tyranny of Communism. With this, the US sought to be at the forefront of the spread of these ideas across the world. It was these very concepts that informed the rationale for invading Iraq in 2003. Along with purported concerns that Iraq's dictator, Saddam Hussein, was developing weapons of mass destruction, the US aimed to topple his regime and export democracy to the people of Iraq (CFR, n.d.). But this effort was far easier said than done, for the US was soon ensnared in a protracted occupation of a country of which it had little understanding.

Iraq's long history of conquest and sectarian violence made it such that it was difficult to even refer to Iraq as a country, at least not in any western sense. The various peoples and tribes that constituted Iraq meant that it was a difficult land mass to govern. More importantly, because of the diverse population, it was difficult to speak of one Iraqi "culture." It quickly became clear that the US did little to prepare for this fact. State Department official Peter Van Buren (2012) observed that education about the country amounted to

"all of three weeks" that covered what was functionally "Islam for dummies,"

with a "quick overview of the religion with some pointers on 'Arab' culture"

(12). The lack of cultural research on the part of the US would prove to be a

major contributing factor to the challenges it faced when it came to

accomplishing its objectives.

It's difficult to overstate the importance of cultural education when

entering into a society that is vastly different from one's own. It's even more

important in a military context when the stakes are so high. By engaging in

poor intercultural communication practices during the Second Iraq War, the US

set itself up to fail in the region. Indeed, it is my argument that intercultural

communication failures did not only contribute to the debacle in the Middle

East, but were a primary cause of it. By painting the region with broad "Arab"

strokes, the US severely underestimated the cultural and linguistic diversity of

the country, not to mention the vast cultural differences between the Middle

East and the west, and ultimately implemented a policy that was designed to

fail from the outset.

History & Culture

Before diving deeper into the intercultural interactions between the US

and Iraqis, it is important to first get a better understanding of Iraq's geography

and history. Iraq itself is interculturally rich. Over the course of the war,

discourse in the US would often lump all Iraqis into a single national identity,

but this was a massive misrepresentation of the various peoples

and cultures that populate the territory. While it is true that all Iraqis (outside

of Iraqi Kurdistan) speak Arabic, and Islam is by far the majority religion, Iraq
is still quite varied linguistically and culturally depending on where you look
across its geography. In the mountainous regions, you will find the Kurds with
their own distinct language and culture. The Tigris and Euphrates valleys are
dominated by Iraqis who are Shi'a Muslim in faith and Arab in identity. To the
south, the city of Basra is populated by individuals from the Indian
sub-continent and Iran. Baghdad is a majority Shi'a city with a large Sunni
Arab population with some Kurds and Christians sprinkled throughout;
northern Iraq is a collection of all of these identities (Allawi, 2007, p. 19-20).
As should be clear by now, it is impossible to capture the diverse ethnic,
cultural, and linguistic diversity of Iraq in a single word. This is significant
because the assumptions underlying the US policy in Iraq did not account for
the richness and depth of Iraq's history, as well as the vast patchwork of
cultures that defined it. Because of this, the people on the ground were forced
to operate with broad assumptions about the region that did not match up with
their experience once they were there. Indeed, such a lack of understanding
and knowledge meaningfully contributed to the policy failures in the region.

Iraq's history is long, so a thorough treatment is outside the scope of
this paper. Nonetheless, it is still worthwhile to hit some important points so as
to situate the 2003 conflict properly. The current conditions within the territory
can be traced all the way back to the Ottoman-Persian Wars that lasted from the
early 16th century to the late 19th century. These wars entrenched the racial
and ethnic animosities between the Sunni Muslims and the Shi'a Muslims that

persists to this day. In modern times, the end of World War I can be seen as a key period in the country's history; this was when the Kingdom of Iraq was established by the British to manage the region. Even so, King Faisal, who was appointed by the British, was unable to manage the various competing interests of the territory. The rise of political Islam in the 1950s saw competing political ideologies like Da'awaism (Arab Communism) and Ba'athism (Arab National Socliasm). Ba'athism ultimately won out thanks to brutal political tactics, and eventually emerged as the dominant party. After the brutality of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988, President Saddam Hussein sought to further consolidate his own power as well as Iraq's power in the region (Allawi, pp. 20-30). This required suppression of opposing forces such as Shi'a Muslims and Kurds, all while trying to hold together a country that continued to be defined by its diversity and historical ethnic strife. Again, it is important to reiterate that this is by no means an exhaustive history of the region, but a broad roadmap to help us understand what the US was getting into in 2003 and the seemingly insurmountable historical momentum it ignorantly went up against.

While Iraq's history is long and complex, so too is its culture. But to discuss the cultural aspects of Iraq, it is first important to establish a working definition of "culture." It is a difficult term to pin down, but anthropologist Clifford Geertz provides a robust and useful framework for thinking about the concept. According to Geertz (2017), culture is "a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which [people] communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes

toward life" (89). That is, culture is a rich tapestry of shared history and

meaning, and interpreting this tapestry is of the utmost importance if one

wishes to engage with other cultures in a productive way.

The US did not hold this conception of culture during the invasion and

occupation of Iraq. Quite the opposite, in fact; the Department of Defense

defined culture as "an aspect of geography," a "feature of the terrain that has

been constructed by man. Included are such items as roads, buildings, and

canals; boundary lines; and, in a broad sense, all names and legends on a map"

(as cited in Chandler, 2005, p. 24). This clearly misses the mark when it comes

to understanding peoples' interpretations and attitudes about the world. But it

does provide a useful insight into the military's mindset as it sought to change

the hearts and minds of the people whose country it invaded. In addition to the

rather flat characterization of culture, the US contended with problems of

ethnocentrism and analytical bias. Pre-deployment training did not account for

the important Iraqi cultural conceptions, such as the importance they place on

family and honor (Chandler, 2005). Hofstede is helpful here in looking at the

various dimensions on which values conflict or overlap between the US and

Iraq. For instance, on the Hofstede scale, the two countries are functionally an

inverse of each other. Specifically, in terms of power distance (the attitude of

the culture toward power inequalities) and individualism (the degree of

interdependence a society maintains among its members) the US and Iraq

score 40 and 97 and 91 and 31, respectively (see Appendix; Zaharna, 2009).

These measurements suggest that the two cultures are infused with values that

are likely to conflict. And, as useful as the Hofstede scale is, it still cannot capture all the nuance of something as complex as culture. Nevertheless, it might have been a useful tool for the US instead of the strategy of entering the war arena with broad assumptions about the people living in it that only served to hurt both the operational goals of the endeavor and also the civilians who were impacted.

Failing to take cultural differences into account in a nuanced way does not allow for empathy to develop among the actors in the situation, which can lead to "othering" members of the out-group. For example, troops would often resort to stereotyping Iraqis. It was common for American soldiers to refer to Iraqis as "hajis," which is a "stereotyped slang expression that blankets all Iraqis as being part of the insurgency" (Chandler, p. 22). This is extremely problematic for a few reasons. Removing individual agency and reducing an entire people to a single identity is not a sustainable path, especially if an invading force is ostensibly tasked with maintaining order and good relations with locals. Furthermore, one would suspect that such ignorance would hinder any objectives of a military operation; if those on the ground do not have a working knowledge of the local culture and norms, how are they expected to minimize conflict and misunderstandings? Indeed, lack of cultural knowledge was cited as one of the primary causes of conflict between American occupiers and locals (p. 22). There are a lot of subtleties to interacting with individuals from a different culture that can only be learned from spending time in that culture. One such aspect of culture that requires paying close attention to its

subtleties is language, which will be discussed in the next section.

Language, Culture, & Communication

As discussed above, Iraq is a complex web of cultures and ethnicities and within these many and varied cultures and ethnicities are different languages and dialects. While Arab is universally spoken in the country, its dominance is dependent upon region, village, or tribe. Such linguistic diversity brings its own challenges when national borders are drawn around it and people are forced to live near and interact with each other. And that's not even to speak of outsiders coming in and attempting to make sense of it all. The US's view of Iraqi culture as a monolithic expression of the Arab world only exacerbated its challenges in interacting with the locals. Due to poor preparation, the forces on the ground faced a spectrum of difficulties ranging from basic miscommunications to life-threatening misunderstandings.

Any language in use by a large population is going to have its own dialects and variants. Arabic is no different; in fact, it has been argued that "Arabic is an extreme example of a constellation of speech communities . . . masquerading as a single language" (Collin, 2009, p. 247). Specifically, Arabic is a language group that shares some similar characteristics across dialects, but not always and not always in ways that have shared meaning. Another defining aspect of the Arabic language is its diglossic nature. According to Nichols (2014), diglossia "refers to the linguistic situation where an Arabic dialect is used at home and informal settings and a formal version of the language . . . is used for broadcasts, literature, lectures, and for communication between dialect

regions" (p. 121). This raises interesting cultural questions regarding status and hierarchy within Arabic society. The fact that there is a part of the language that can ostensibly only be used by the more educated classes while others are relegated to using the informal dialects reinforces the high power distance that is highlighted in the Hofstede scale for Iraq. Given the difficulty of accessing education—especially for women—maintaining a diglossic language helps to reinforce a culture in which social mobility is limited.

While Arabic broadly is a diglossic language, Iraq specifically has a more dynamic linguistic landscape thanks to its unique geography and history. For example, "older, educated Kurds may speak their own dialect of Kurdish, Modern Standard Arabic, and Baghdadi," while "Christians from the north might speak neo-Aramaic with their families" and other dialects with their peers and neighbors (Collin, p. 250). As the invasion and occupation got underway, it quickly became clear that the US did not prepare for such linguistic diversity. Indeed, as of 2008, after "more than 5 years of actual warfare in Iraq, there is no publicly available evidence of a serious crash program to develop language capability in Arabic or Kurdish" (p. 257). Such a lack of interest in learning the local languages and dialects of the region suggests a hubris on the part of US policy that causes one to question the seriousness of the mission in the first place.

If only US policymakers had taken the effort to educate themselves on the Arabic language, they would have realized that something like "Operation Iraqi Freedom" would ring hollow in a language group with no western

conception of "freedom." Allawi (2007) articulates this problem well when he says

> Words such as "liberty" and "freedom" translated poorly into the
>
> customary usage of most Iraqis, and did not carry the same meaning or
>
> significance in Arabic. The belaboured turns of phrase of liberal
>
> ideology had no roots in Iraqi political culture and, though worthy in
>
> their intent, left most people indifferent. (p. 148)

Western political culture assumes the primacy of the individual, rich with rights and liberties that were conceived in the western canon over the course of hundreds of years. Such a corollary is difficult to find in the Middle East, so language surrounding the invasion and occupation of Iraq not only cheapens the meaning of western values, but also serves no purpose in the eyes of the Iraqis.

Pushing aside competing political ideologies, the day-to-day interactions between Iraqis and US soldiers were often fraught with communication challenges. The *Soldier's Handbook to Iraq* was issued to all US military personnel who were sent to Iraq as part of their tour of duty. The handbook was meant to prepare them for the various cultural differences they would encounter while in the country. Yet, some scholars have argued that the manual failed in its purpose by assuming a monolithic "Arab" culture (Kirner-Ludwig, et al., 2021). So, when interacting with Iraqis, soldiers were often surprised that their commands were not followed or were received with hostility. One example of this is the high value that Arabs generally and

Iraqis specifically place on politeness. If, from an American's perspective, a reasonable request or demand was made on an Iraqi and the Iraqi interpreted it as offensive or impolite, the American would be taken aback by the Iraqi's "(non-)verbal reaction to a face-threatening act" and interpret it as "overly aggressive" (p. 228). Another, perhaps even more important example of poor linguistic and cultural education is the use of the directive "stop." This is a command soldiers had to use on a daily basis—either at checkpoints, or if they were approached unexpectedly—and, often, the response of the receiver of the command could mean life or death. But in Iraqi culture "stop" isn't such a simple word. As recognized by Iraqis, "stop" in Arabic is "a highly salient feature of *Qur'an*" and as a command is "exclusively for Allah to make use of" (p. 230). The fact that soldiers were not prepared with the rudimentary knowledge of the word "stop" in Iraqi culture is unforgivably negligent. Split decisions are made on a daily basis and fractions of a second count when making these commands. Again, the practical upshot is that ignoring this culturally important fact of Iraqi society put lives in danger on a regular basis.

Conclusion

The US invasion and occupation of Iraq from 2003-2011 proved disastrous for a variety of reasons, not least of which was extraordinary cultural ignorance on the part of the US. The seemingly willful negligence on the part of US policymakers resulted in unnecessary destruction of lives and property. By treating all of Iraq as a single "Arab" culture, policymakers

reduced a complex and culturally rich region to a one-dimensional enemy that stood against western interests. Clearly, this assessment of Iraqi culture was impoverished. Iraq has a robust and storied intercultural heritage that is informed by over a thousand years of history. Throughout its existence in its various forms, it has served as colonist and colony, waged sectarian violence within its borders, and dealt with modern political strife among its own people. What's more, the ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity within the region makes it such that it is difficult even for Iraqis to get a handle on what it means to talk about "Iraqi culture." For the US to reduce the complexities of Iraq into a catch-all idea of "Arab-ness" is to doom any effort to engage with the country from the start, even as an invader and occupier. Cultural knowledge is of the utmost importance when it comes to designing policy, and ignoring that fact will only ensure that hubris will win out over humility and the people who are ensnared in the policymaker's machinations will be the ones to incur the costs.

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Appendix

**Hofstede Country
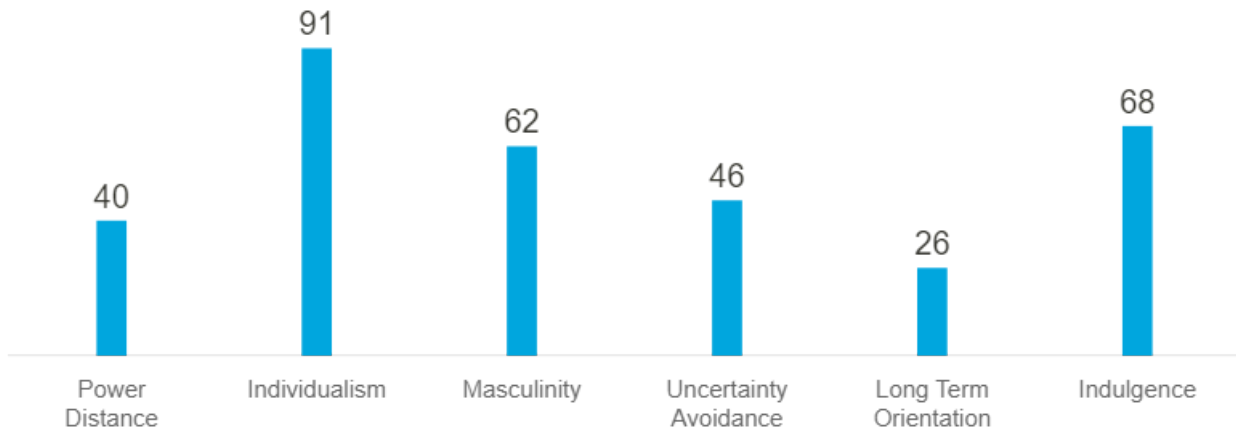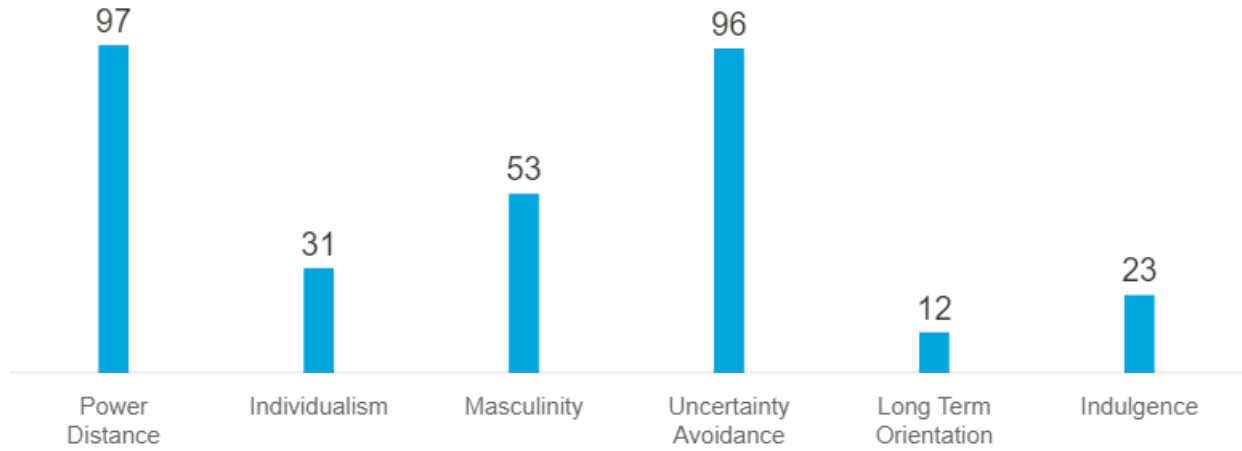Comparison Charts**

Figure 1. Hofstede Country Comparison - Iraq (Hofstede Insights, n.d.)

Figure 2. Hofstede Country Comparison - United States (Hofstede Insights, n.d.)

Unpublished Original Policy Brief

Policy Brief

Civil Society has the Tools to Combat Disinformation

Eric Celler
June 19, 2022

Summary

Disinformation has emerged as the latest social ill for which policymakers are seeking solutions. Whether it is Russia meddling in U.S. elections, Donald Trump's "fake news," or social media conspiracy theories spilling over into real-life violence, it is clear that the rate and impact of disinformation has increased. The following document argues that addressing this problem does not fall within the scope of policymakers' actions. Instead, liberal civil society is already equipped with the tools it needs to manage its informational ecosystem in a more robust, effective, and rights-respecting way.

Introduction

Disinformation is a problem that threatens democratic institutions and social cohesion. Though it is not a novel phenomenon, the scale and scope of it has increased significantly thanks to the internet and social media.[1] Despite the real challenges disinformation poses to society, however, it is important for policymakers to act with humility when attempting to address it. Too often proposed solutions assume to know what "the truth" is or simply curtail civil liberties without asking the question of whether or not disinformation is a problem that can be addressed at all at the state level.[2] The production of information in a society is necessarily an imperfect process, but one that must be allowed to operate freely. By failing to narrowly define *disinformation*, the state's burden for passing legislation to address it risks doing more harm than good in trying to solve this complex social problem.

Two Courses of Action for Combating Disinformation: The State and Civil Society

Efforts to combat disinformation are likely to result in restricting individual freedom without stemming the flow of disinformation itself. Defined as the "purposeful intention by the sender or information provider . . . to mislead, deceive, or confuse,"[3] disinformation seems like a straightforward problem to solve: identify what is true and what is not, squelch the falsehoods, elevate the truth. Nevertheless, upon further investigation it becomes clear that addressing such a problem is not so simple, and in fact would lead to violations of freedom of speech. The social production and division of knowledge is not a top-down process; it emerges "spontaneously as the unintended consequence of many individual choices aiming at local ends and not any overall design for the system."[4] Because of its emergent, decentralized properties, the production of information is a process that is constantly updating and changing. The validity of information can change based on a variety of factors, including cultural changes, new scientific discoveries, or official narratives. What counts as disinformation today might qualify as legitimate information tomorrow, and vice-versa.

Consider the case of COVID-19. Early in the pandemic, government officials discouraged individuals from wearing masks, arguing they did little to protect against the virus and that there would need to be enough supply to protect healthcare workers. Nonetheless, as more information became available, mask recommendations were updated such that people were encouraged—and in some cases required—to wear masks.[5] This is not an example of some nefarious disinformation campaign, but instead an example of how information and science work in a healthy democracy—as more information becomes available, policies get updated and people adapt.

It is when the government designates itself as the arbiter of truth that real problems are introduced. The Biden administration has attempted on two occasions to address the problem of disinformation in the United States. In February 2021 the administration sought to appoint a "Reality Czar," which would in fact just be a board of experts tasked with determining what is disinformation, misinformation, and legitimate information.[6] In May 2022 the administration attempted to establish a Disinformation Governance Board, which would report to the Department of Homeland Security. Again, this board would seek to root out disinformation by overseeing social media companies to ensure they were doing their due diligence in moderating information on their platforms.[7] Such efforts necessarily restrict freedom of speech in the name of national

security.[8] Ultimately, the problem of disinformation is a cultural one, and must be addressed at the cultural and individual level.[9]

Curtailing freedom of speech in the name of national security is a losing proposition from the outset. As the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression points out in their comment on the proposed DHS appointment, a rule regulating disinformation "will no doubt chill or prohibit speech that the Constitution protects."[10, 11] In addition to the philosophical question of rights, there is the practical matter that reducing the amount of speech or information society has access to makes exposing disinformation less likely, not more.[12] Limiting what people are able to freely discuss is unlikely to bring falsehoods to light, and in fact will likely give them the cover they need to flourish.

If the state is ill-equipped to deal with disinformation, what of civil society? Perhaps dealing with the threat disinformation poses to democracy requires more small-"d" democratic action. Opening up the marketplace of ideas to more ideas—not fewer—will equip individuals with the tools to navigate an increasingly muddy informational landscape. As scholars Russell Muirhead and Nancy L. Rosenblum note, "Civil society groups speak truth to conspiracy as a regular part of their work."[13] Given that disinformation is a fundamentally democratic problem, it would seem that democratic discourse would be an effective solution. Civil society is uniquely positioned to fill this role. Voluntary civil associations have the local knowledge needed to address disinformation in their communities. Empowering local communities to push back against such efforts will go further than allowing faceless, nameless, distant policymakers to enforce top-down measures to manage and control information.

Recommendations

The typical instinct most of us have when confronted with a seemingly large, intractable problem is that there ought to be a law.[14] But in an imperfect world with imperfect actors, there is not much reason to expect that rigidly codifying informational standards will actually solve the problem of disinformation. Instead, liberal society should use the tools already at its disposal to parse out fact from fiction. Liberal "truth markets"[15] are an effective method for navigating the complex, layered, and fluid landscape of information.

Policymakers should recognize the limitations of their knowledge and expertise when it comes to crafting legislation meant to manage disinformation. Likewise, it should be recognized that experts have their own set of incentives when it comes to controlling what is considered allowable discourse. As such, the

challenge of legislating disinformation is immense. The likely outcome of such efforts is that individual rights will be violated and disinformation will continue to circulate unchallenged. The most robust method for addressing the problem of disinformation is for policymakers to step back and allow civil society to take responsibility for its informational ecosystem. Any other efforts functionally amount to legislating truth, an outcome few desire.

Conclusion

Given the threat disinformation poses to democracy and social cohesion it is understandable when we hear calls for the state to address it. Yet, efforts to regulate and enforce truth must necessarily run afoul of civil liberties. Furthermore, there is the practical matter of even determining what is counted as "truth." The very nature of information in an open and healthy democratic society is that it is constantly in flux and being challenged by reasoned debate. Legislation aiming to beat back disinformation would have a chilling effect that would ultimately make it more difficult to bring untruths to light and would likely have the opposite effect of silencing voices who do not want to incur the costs associated with violating speech laws. It is because of these risks that the state is not well equipped to deal with disinformation. Instead, policymakers should restrict themselves from imposing top-down regulations and allow civil society to mediate and discover truth through the process of open discourse and debate.

About the Author

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11. While a legitimate concern might arise regarding the common political tactic of "flooding the zone with

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Bagwell Center for the Study of Markets and Economic Opportunity, Kennesaw State University
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- Work with Bagwell Center and Education Economics Center Directors on creating and implementing new initiatives and programming
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Program Manager
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Academic & Student Programs, Mercatus Center at George Mason University

- Provide support for the establishment of 4 new research groups with the purpose of developing new research initiatives within the respective topics of each research group.
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