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Faster and Better: A performative intervention

An ethnographic account of the struggles between 'old' and 'new' decision-making practices

This paper can be regarded as an ethnographic 'meta-study' of an interpretative research project concerning public infrastructure development. Although the actual research specifically focuses on the practices of political-executives during the decision-making process about potential projects, this paper uses ethnographic methods to reflect upon the context of the research project. The main theme of this context is that decision-making processes in complex infrastructure development in the Netherlands are perceived as unnecessary long-winding and of poor quality. From the early 1990s onward, consecutive research commissions have produced advisory reports aimed at improving administrative decision-making and in 2008, the Minister of Public Works decided to start up a project direction with the aim to change the practice and culture of infrastructural decision-making. Even though studying this cultural change intervention was not the primary objective of our research project, we were still semi-embedded in this project direction, allowing us to give an ethnographic account of the practices of the project direction. We were able to gain access to many documents and witness formal and informal events organized by the project direction. We also had several in-depth interviews and meetings with members of the project direction and also with many top public professionals and political-executives that were actually the target groups of the project direction.

This study takes on a narrative approach, regarding stories as building-blocks for meaning (Czarniawska 2004; Brown 2008; Bruner 1990). The ethnographic story of the attempted intervention –based upon stories and accounts from the field - will be grounded in the perspective of performative struggle, a key conceptual lens that has been developed within our research project. The social constructionist concept of performativity concerns the process of meaning making as a process through which any theory or conceptual idea can 'come into being' in reality (Austin 1962; Butler 1997; Callon 2006; Kornberger & Clegg 2011). The crux of performativity is that a theory, a strategy or an idea is not only a description of how the world is, could be or should be; instead, the activities and practices flowing from these 'ideas' actualize or bring into being this idea and its underlying assumptions of the world. The assumption in this paper, developed during our research, is that actors can reflect on such a strategic vision and its performative effects and in consequence they strategize to influence the performative process of world-making. This view on performativity entails that actors envision a strategic agenda road map for bringing into being their ideas.

When looking through the lens of performative strategizing, one could say that The Minister is using the project direction, called 'faster and better', as a performative strategy to change the culture of decision-making. The task of this direction is to create practices that bring into being the

‘new approach to decision-making’. Interestingly, the project direction engages in a rational, process-oriented and especially instrumental attempt to change decision-making practices, designing a new toolbox, new instruments and a new streaming model of the decision-making process. However, these new instruments are quite successfully dispersed within the Ministry but they are not so easily picked up by public professionals of other governmental organizations involved in infrastructural decision-making.

Moreover, there is not much focus on political-executives –for instance Aldermen or Provincial Deputies – that are in the end responsible for decision-making. These actors function in a political reality and do not hold the instrumental rationality of public professionals (Stone 2006). According to the MacKenzie’s typology of performativity (2006), the political-executives and public professionals from other organizations practice a *generic performativity*: they use the concepts and language of the project direction, but they do not significantly change their behavior. The *effective* or ‘*Barnesian*’ type of performativity (MacKenzie 2006), which would truly create new practices and a new decision-making culture, can only be witnessed within certain departments of the Ministry. In the meantime, other performative change interventions started by the Minister, such as ‘simpler and better’, are competing with ‘faster and better’, especially when the project direction is dissolved after one-and- a – half year.

In conclusion, it could be claimed that political executives and external public professionals ‘broke the meaning’ of the ‘Faster and Better’ intervention too early, for they only used its concepts without altering their decision-making practices. The performative stipulation during a large closing conference on ‘Faster & Better – next’ didn’t result in a clear follow up strategy even though the enthusiasm in the field was great. The ‘Faster and Better’ intervention – initially a powerful narrative and a strong performative strategy – had a gradual impact on the culture of decision-making in several area’s through the formalization of instruments and practices. However, the change did not reach the whole field as was intended.

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