

Study identifies key challenges when communicating potential policies

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A team of Cambridge researchers sets out to define a new science for policy communications, with ambitions of finding the "Goldilocks zone" between too much and not enough information when informing both legislators and the public on complex issues.

Researchers have trawled through what little evidence currently exists on effectively communicating policy options, and point out four communication challenges that are problematic and often overlooked – yet should be required information for those making decisions that affect the lives of millions.

These include the need to highlight both the "winners and losers" of any policy decision, and to find ways of representing trade-offs between, say, financial and ecological and or health outcomes. The findings are published today in the Springer Nature journal *Palgrave Communications*.

Recent decades have seen significant progress in producing information summaries that allow people to better understand how personal health choices affect their lives, say researchers.

However, they argue that similarly clear and concise materials are rarely available for legislators – and all of us citizens – on the potential outcomes of policies with stakes far beyond the individual.

Aiming to create a new science for communicating policy options, a

team based at Cambridge's Winton Centre for Risk and Evidence Communication point out the difficulty of finding the optimal balance between "comprehensibility and coverage" of policy options when informing decision-makers.

"Too much complexity risks a lack of understanding or simply being ignored. However, a brief and easy-to-digest communication may well lack the depth and detail necessary for making an informed decision," said the Winton Centre's Dr. Cameron Brick, lead author of the new study.

He describes this as the "core tension" at the heart of communicating any policy option. "We certainly see this with Brexit, for example: oversimplifications that don't provide the full story competing with dense explanations that people struggle to understand."

"The ideal communication would provide appropriate detail in a quickly and easily understood format to help citizens and policymakers apply their own values to decisions. We want to find out if there is a template that can help achieve this balance."

In this first analysis from the recently established Winton Centre, Brick and colleagues reviewed policy communications across a wide variety of areas – from taxes to health, climate change and international trade – as well as guidance and evidence for communication effectiveness.

The spectrum of material ranged from a fairly impenetrable seventy-page report on the possibilities for the Heathrow third runway to colourful postcards emblazoned with a single statistic. All were trying to be balanced sources of information to support decision-making, yet none appear to have checked what effect their presentation had on their readers.

Policy decisions have enormous impacts, and citizens and voters need trusted and balanced sources of evidence. However, the team found surprisingly little evidence on effectively communicating policy options.

By comparing materials designed to inform personal choices with those covering policy choices, they identified four main characteristics that make communicating potential policies particularly difficult and are often neglected.

- Policies almost inevitably create winners and losers, because some groups – whether demographic or regional – become better off than others. It is difficult to summarise the effects on different groups so that audiences can weigh those outcomes.
- Policies are full of trade-offs – e.g. as financial costs go up pollution goes down – yet each is measured differently. Presenting multiple outcomes with different metrics that allow for easy comparison is a tricky communications problem.
- Individual choices rarely go beyond our own lifespans. Yet some [policy choices](#) can affect generations, and even have different effects as time goes on – another challenge for a quick summary to capture.
- Expected policy outcomes come with particularly large uncertainties from complex shifts of future social and political events and therefore generally cannot be predicted confidently.

Brick and colleagues point out that including more detail in [policy options](#) exacerbates the tension between in-depth coverage of the issues on the one hand, and the ability of audiences to get the gist of the communications on the other – and yet nobody appears to have worked on finding the sweet spot between amount of detail and ease of understanding.

"There is no standard model yet for how to tackle these four challenges,

but we hope communicators devise effective strategies as the research progresses," said Brick.

"We want to try and define that Goldilocks zone between too much information and not enough so that policymakers can see when key information is missing, and people can make choices that fit their values."

As part of the current study, they used three pieces of policy [communication](#) from major organisations such as the UK's Education Endowment Foundation and the International Panel on Climate Change to illustrate attempts to provide nonpartisan and detailed policy option summaries.

Brick and colleagues will be building on this initial work by conducting rigorous research on [policy](#) communications material, including one-on-one surveying with various demographics, and large-scale data collection through online surveys.

Professor Sir David Spiegelhalter, Chairman of the Winton Centre, added: "At the Winton Centre, we are interested in helping people judge the benefits and harms of alternative policies or regulations that are being suggested."

"The idea of our Centre is to help communicate evidence in a way that is balanced, transparent and doesn't try to coerce people into thinking or acting in a particular way."

More information: Cameron Brick et al. Winners and losers: communicating the potential impacts of policies, *Palgrave Communications* (2018). [DOI: 10.1057/s41599-018-0121-9](https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-018-0121-9)

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