Communication breakdown: understanding the role of policy narratives in conflict and consensus

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Abstract

Policy narratives promote consensus within groups of political actors, but are also fundamentally divisive in their stark separation between ‘them and us’. This paper addresses this conflict-consensus paradox by identifying two narrative processes, constraint and performance, and examining their influence on actors in an original case study. The main body of the paper gives a dramaturgical account of a political conflict played out in Peterborough City Council around a new policy initiative aimed at empowering local people. A detailed analysis exposes the key narratives influencing actors in the three acts of the drama, and shows how processes of constraint and performance embroil them within a particular ‘mix’ of conflict and consensus. An overview of the findings of the research illustrates how the narratives pass on their legacies to influence action further down the line. The evidence from this particular case study suggests that narrative constraints of this type have a particularly powerful influence on setting actors on a path of conflict or consensus which processes of performance might modify, but not alter significantly.

Key words: narratives, conflict, consensus, constraint, performance, dramaturgy
1. Narrative in political conflict and consensus

The concept of narrative occupies a curious position in political analysis. On the one hand, it has been extensively debated and conceptualised, thereby gaining currency in academic, and indeed popular, writing on politics. On the other, many scholars have seemed reluctant to make the move from acknowledging its utility as an idea, to identifying how narratives actually manifest themselves in political debate, and influence the perceptions and actions of key actors in the empirical context. One of the reasons for this reluctance may be the paradoxical nature of the concept itself. Policy narratives are theorised as exercising significant influence over political actors’ thoughts and actions, and yet are dependent on those same actors for their maintenance and promulgation. They are heavily structured but sufficiently fluid to evolve over time. Crucially from a political perspective, they can engender consensus amongst actors making collective action possible, but they are also inherently divisive in their stark definitions of ‘them and us’. The literature review below identifies two key processes of narrative, constraint and performance, which may be useful in understanding this conflict-consensus paradox.

Ospina and Dodge (2005: 153) identify a ‘narrative turn’ in political analysis which, they argue, might strengthen the quality of empirical research, because narrative analysis ‘provides an appropriate method for tapping into “local knowledges,” multiple voices, and experiences in context’. They add, however, that ‘Despite the richness of this emerging work, its logic is still not widely understood ….. and the inroads that have been made so far are limited.’ They record the use of narrative analysis by some researchers as exclusively a methodological device for capturing and processing data: ‘a tool to obtain meaningful information about a topic of interest, using in-depth interviews and analyzing the stories
collected’ (ibid: 145 original italics). Deployed in this technical fashion, narrative equates to ‘Methods’ and is often disconnected from the theoretical considerations of the research effort.

In other work, narrative has been used as a loose conceptual category which has assumed a taken for granted quality of its own. For example, Blyth (2002: 37) on Great Transformations argues that ‘ideas make collective action and coalition-building possible’ and provide ‘alternative narratives through which uncertain situations can be understood’. Here narratives are assumed to be a source of consensus which guides the rebuilding process after economic institutions have collapsed. Bevir and Rhodes (2002: 140) promote their concept of ‘tradition’ as ‘a set of theories, or narratives, and associated practices that people inherit, and forms the background against which they reach beliefs and perform actions’. They delineate three narratives of Thatcherism (ibid: 142-148) which have factionalised the national Conservative party, thereby creating consensus within, and conflict between, the separate Whig, Tory and Liberal traditions.

Alongside this, an increasingly important body of work has sought to position narrative more precisely in political analysis. Fischer (2003: 162–3), for example, offers a conceptualisation of narratives as ‘chronological accounts which outline the state of an issue, what has led to it and how things will or should play out’. Roe (1994) and Stone (2002) have developed the concept of narrative under an overarching framework of discourse. These scholars are representative of a critical policy movement which argues that a dominant consensus excludes disadvantaged actors, but action through deliberative empowerment can address this injustice: ‘all voices need to be heard, so get those voices at the table.’ (Stone in van Ostaijen and Jhagroe 2015: 131)
Meanwhile, a diverse group of policy analysts have shifted the balance between the two concepts, so that narrative is to the fore, and discourse in the background. For example Atkinson (2000: 213) has developed a distinctive concept of narrative, from Jameson (1989), as structuring and limiting ‘what may be told (or said)’ to investigate the assumptions underlying post-war urban policy in Britain. Hampton (2005: 262) has used narrative policy analysis specifically to draw out ‘the preferences of diverse cultural groups and balance them equitably with those of all other interested groups’. Moody and Musheno (2006: 316-330) have applied the concept in empirical research to Lipsky’s (1980) ‘street level bureaucrats’ to uncover ‘State-Agent’ and ‘Citizen-Agent’ narratives. Again these scholars come from a critical tradition which contrasts the dominant narratives which create a broad consensus across society, with counter-narratives which conflict with and challenge these.

Debating interpretivism more widely, Wagenaar (2012: 95) has argued that Bevir and Rhodes’ ‘traditions’ perspective (above) is too static and makes little attempt to account for the fluid characteristics of narratives as they are rehearsed in the empirical context. Bevir and Rhodes (2012: 205) have countered by giving examples of their empirical work, including ‘the performing game’ in which Whitehall officials develop and test narratives as strategic responses to policy problems.

The intellectual trajectory of narrative therefore is not very dissimilar from that of political analysis as a whole (Hay 2002: 1-58), with different schools of thought developing from a diverse range of sources, and producing their own distinctive sub-literatures and controversies. Boswell (2013: 622-624) offers a synthesis of narrative as a concept, which attempts to delineate some common ground. In this formulation, policy narratives are...
accounts that people rely on to explain political issues … built up over many interactions, helping those who subscribe to them to make sense of the world and their place in it’ (ibid: 623). They influence political actors’ thoughts and actions ‘by limiting the possible ways of viewing that issue’. Narratives possess a number of structural features which bound actors’ perceptions and constrain their possibilities for action. Firstly they are structured around ‘plots’ which link events together in causal chains and weave together ‘the evidence’ in such a way as to make the outcome seemingly inevitable. Secondly, they are populated by a cast of clearly defined characters who ‘possess agency to varying degrees, some making conscious and consequential choices, with others being powerless in the face of events’. Thirdly, they are typified as ‘canonical’, in the sense that plots conform to well-worn scripts, and characters are often typecast as villains, victims and heroes. And finally, they transmit powerfully normative messages about how society should be, and what action must be taken to ensure this.

However, Boswell (ibid: 623) also argues that narratives are typified by elements of fluidity, and rely on actors for their maintenance and promulgation. Narratives are ‘not fixed entities’ but evolve through rehearsal, and ‘are always open to interpretation to some degree, both because narrative texts themselves are ambiguous and because their articulation in public debate is always diffuse’. Ambiguity is an important feature of policy narratives because sufficient imprecision of meaning and generalisation allows a diverse range of actors to interpret them to fit with their particular value orientations, and join forces in support of, or opposition to, a particular policy. Articulation in public debate may reinforce these coalitional tendencies through rehearsal and confirmation, but can also expose the different meanings
concealed in that narrative, and provoke clashes with counter-narratives articulated by opposition groups (see, for example, Radaelli 1999, Miller 2011).

In this respect, Laws (2001) and Hajer (2009) are helpful in teasing out how narratives might accommodate both consensus and conflict. Laws (2001: 7) considers the performative character of speech in deliberation and the misunderstandings and conflicts which can occur in deliberative arenas. He argues ‘For speech acts to go well there must be agreement on the conventional procedure that is being invoked and what this implies for who should be there, what is appropriate conduct and reasons. We would expect both a level of uncertainty and disagreement about these questions and an effort to resolve them. The latter might play out in the performative dimension of conversation rather than in the explicit content.’

Hajer (2005 447-448) argues for a ‘dramaturgical dimension’ in policy analysis which ‘considers politics as “performance”, as a sequence of staged events in which actors interactively decide on how to move on’. With relevance to misunderstandings and conflict, he suggests that when participants ponder the conventions appropriate to the arena in which they are performing: ‘perhaps an answer to the question cannot be found in the register of political practices known to them. Or, more precisely, different actors most likely will understand the practice in terms of their own register.’

In summary this brief literature review offers some insights into two processes of narrative which are implicated in generating both conflict and consensus. Through constraint, narratives limit the possible ways of viewing an issue, encourage actors to share a common view of the world and form coalitions for action. However, they usually do this through
ambiguities and generalisations which disguise basic disagreements and misunderstandings. In this way policy narratives can be said to ‘structure in’ potentials for both conflict and consensus. The same narratives rely on actors for their maintenance and promulgation, and in this way the process of performance provides a dynamism which complements their structural characteristics. Through repeated rehearsal of narrative performance can consolidate consensus across actors, but previously disguised conflicts may also be exposed.

The main purpose of this paper is to examine how policy narratives manifest themselves in political debate, and how they influence the perceptions and conduct of key actors. To achieve some leverage on a ‘slippery concept’ (Boswell: 2013: 622), it homes in on the specific question of how policy narratives promote conflict and consensus through constraint and performance. After a section on the methodology of the research, the main body of the paper proceeds with a dramaturgical account of a political conflict played out in Peterborough City Council around a new policy initiative aimed at empowering local citizens.

2. Methodology

In 2010 the author of this paper began a two year evaluation funded by the AHRC and its partners of the extent of citizen participation in the city of Peterborough in the east of England. The methodology employed in this overarching research project involved contextualising a recently launched programme entitled Citizen Power in Peterborough within a wide variety of top down and bottom up policy initiatives which had emerged in the city over the previous decades. In the course of this work, evidence was taken from 32 participants in recorded interviews, and, in addition, 31 site visits were made to make
observational notes, and attend various meetings and forums. From secondary sources, over 150 website articles and documents were accessed on Peterborough and its politics, and posted contributions were collated from 72 members of a blog and video forum which promoted citizen participation in Peterborough.

Narratives relating to citizen participation, and Peterborough politics in general, were collected as a specific category of data in this contextualisation. These covered a wide range of issues from law and order and immigration to education, transport and environmental policies. A particularly recurrent theme was a debate about how far Peterborough had benefited from its transformation from a small market town into a city, as part of an ‘overspill’ programme aimed at relieving housing pressure on inner London in the 1960s. As the data collection process progressed, it became clear that contested narratives of this sort were a particular bone of contention within the local Conservative party which dominated the city council. Indeed shortly before the fieldwork began, these underlying tensions began to be played out in public, in a conflict sparked by the implementation of Citizen Power in Peterborough (henceforth CPP).

The opportunity arose therefore to conduct an additional piece of research which comprised of studying the conflict within the Conservative group as a distinctive example of political theatre, and interrogating the narratives which were being collected as possible factors in the unfolding of that drama. The formal arena in which the conflict surfaced was a scrutiny committee of the Council in which one faction within the Conservative group took the opportunity to embarrass the party’s leadership by attempting to derail the CPP programme. As data collection progressed, it became clear that the processes through which the programme had been designed were important to explanations of its later vulnerability, and
so the scope of the study was expanded a few months backwards in time to capture the planning meetings which had structured potentials for conflict and consensus into the project.

Having defined the timescale and arenas which would be captured, Jackson’s (2006: 271-278) three stage ‘process tracing’ approach was adapted to identify which narratives were most influential within those arenas, how and why they had gained prominence, and how actors were attempting to use them within the empirical setting. In this way the ‘delineation of the cultural resources’ was undertaken by selecting out and testing which of the stories and narratives collected for the much wider study into citizen participation in Peterborough were most influential in the particular arenas under investigation. The ‘tracing of specific histories’ involved looking back through the data (a ‘genealogical analysis’) to detail how these narratives had evolved over time (why, for example, Peterborough’s historical connection to London was of continuing significance to the city’s politicians). While these first two stages focused on processes of constraint, ‘deployment’ directly addressed the performance of narratives by examining how they were articulated in the particular arenas under investigation, and how different groups of actors attempted to use the normative messages conveyed by these policy narratives to achieve their strategic objectives. The conventions governing those arenas were also investigated through interview, direct observation and analysis of committee minutes in order to understand how these influenced performance in the case study setting.

In practice, this quickly became an iterative, rather than linear process, with a tacking back and forth across the data, which also included member checking to test initial findings. Four narratives emerged from this process which broadly represented the positions of the two factions within the local Conservative party, and, in the city at large, the predispositions of
large groups of citizens, who either favoured a radical agenda to drive Peterborough forward, or were inclined towards a much more cautious, incremental approach. Negative case analysis (Schwartz-Shea 2006: 103-108) was conducted to examine whether other stories and policy narratives outside the four selected were influential in the case study arenas. True to the messiness of narrative in general, a number of interconnections were found between the content of the four policy narratives and other stories (e.g. about immigration, education). However as the analysis proceeded, it became clear that in a map of Peterborough narratives the four selected encapsulated the common historical reference points for the more detailed stories and narratives which were connected to them, and to this extent, could be afforded the status of key narratives with some confidence.

The arenas and timescale captured by the methodology allowed for a dramaturgical interpretation of the findings in three acts. In addressing the specific question of how policy narratives promote conflict and consensus through constraint and performance, therefore the research design was not constructed in positivist fashion to demonstrate a linear relationship of the type x causes y. Rather from an interpretive perspective (Yanow 2006: 5-26, Bevir and Rhodes 2013: 205), the end products are intended to be the presentation of a political drama in which the processes under enquiry are exposed for both the researcher and the reader to interrogate, and a plausible explanation of the influence of narratives on actors emerges as the action unfolds.

3. The case study

This section is structured with the intention of building up layers of understanding of the case study for the reader. A who’s who, or dramatis personae, of the leading actors is provided
through brief pen portraits. Then the contents of the four narratives which were found to be most influential in the case study are detailed. A basic account of the drama in each act is presented, complemented by an analysis which focuses on how specific combinations of constraint and performance influence conflict and consensus in the empirical setting.

3.1 Dramatis personae

The Peterborough Development Corporation

Peterborough is located at the centre of a large rural hinterland in the east of England. In the 1960s it was designated as a new town development in a central government programme to relieve overcrowding in London. Although local politicians played their part, the Peterborough Development Corporation (PDC) was dominated by senior level outsiders from London business and politics, who developed the small market town into a city by building good quality, low rise housing in the green spaces between the urban centre and the villages. Many of the new residents came from the inner London boroughs, and the PDC built a transport infrastructure to connect the new townships to the ‘old town’, and redeveloped much of the city centre. Although long disbanded, the PDC provides a common starting point for the narratives of the city’s modern history.

The Peterborough Conservative Party: Traditionalist and Modernising factions

The local Conservative Party has been the driving force in Peterborough politics for the last fourteen years. During that time it has easily been the largest single party on the Council, at its peak in 2008 holding 43 out of 57 seats. However electoral success has not quelled ideological and territorial conflicts within the group. For 2000 to 2009 the leaders of the Council and senior members came from the north side of the river Nene and pursued a Traditionalist Conservative agenda, seeking primarily to increase both the economic
prosperity of the city and the party’s control of the Council. Just as these objectives seemed to be within their grasp, however, a Modernising faction within the party based on the south bank of the river mounted a successful challenge to the Traditionalist leadership. They promoted a radical agenda for change, arguing that the Traditionalists were ‘people who only wanted to be in power for power’s sake’, and had poured development funds into the northern wards, while neglecting the south side of the city.

From May 2009 the Modernisers effectively took over the Council, and the Traditionalists were purged from the Cabinet. The Traditionalist faction was now much smaller and less powerful than the Modernising grouping. Nevertheless it remained capable of disrupting the policy initiatives of the leadership through hostile briefings to the local press, high profile defections to minority parties, and its presence on the Council’s scrutiny committees.

The ‘Strong and Supportive Communities’ Scrutiny Committee

Nationally, scrutiny committees were part of New Labour’s attempts to improve the quality of local government through the Local Government Act 2000. They were modelled on the powerful Select Committee system in Westminster and were intended to hold the local executive to account in a similar way (Coulson 2011). In Peterborough the ‘Strong and Supportive Communities’ Scrutiny Committee was one of several established by the Modernisers shortly after their in May 2009. Its powers are limited to calling in policies relating to community cohesion and empowerment, interrogating witnesses and, as necessary, making recommendations to the Council for improving those policies. It comprises of seven members in total, with a Conservative chair and a 3/3 balance between the ruling Conservative party and all the other parties. If the Peterborough Conservative party were united behind its leader, then this 4/3 arrangement would normally secure it a majority in
votes taken in the committee. Because the party is deeply factionalised, and there are ‘non-aligned’ members from the wide variety of different opposition groups eligible to serve on the committee, the situation is intrinsically more volatile.

The Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA)

The RSA is a London based charity which ‘seeks to harness the extraordinary amount of untapped creative potential in society - by empowering people to be active participants in creating a better world’ (RSA 2014). Founded in 1754, it too has recently undergone a modernising phase with a new Chief Executive determined to turn it from a ‘talk shop’ into ‘a think and do tank’. This new role is shaped by Robert Putnam’s (2000) ideas on developing ‘social capital’ in communities through locally driven projects. Innovation and experimentation are key concepts in the narrative for increasing citizen participation, as are an identifiable legacy of change, and replicable activity which can be deployed elsewhere.

3.2 The narratives

This section gives an account of each of the four narratives which were found to be most influential in the case study. The text below sets out the broad thrust of the normative message which the narrative conveys and a brief description of the stories which are most important in delivering that message.

Box 1 about here

The Wasted Years

The stories of *The Wasted Years* form a trenchant critique of the Traditionalist faction of the Peterborough Conservative party. Its central message is that these timid politicians frittered
away the opportunities afforded the city by the new town development. This narrative influences the thoughts and actions of both the Modernisers as they look back over the city’s modern history, and Peterborough citizens who are more generally critical of the Council’s record over many years.

The stories of the *PDC as a progressive force* argue that it placed the city in an excellent position to maximise its inherent strategic advantages; while stories of *Small town politicians* suggest that, after the Development Corporation left, the local members were out of their depth. They didn’t have the knowledge, experience or the ambition to develop what the PDC had gifted them. Stories of *The London Dynamo* link the past to the present by arguing that Peterborough’s relationship with London has always been a driving force for the local economy, not just through the PDC, but back to the arrival of the London Brick Company in Peterborough in the 1920s. Today many residents commute down to London on a daily basis, bringing back their wages and fuelling the city’s economy.

The Chair of Peterborough’s Leisure and Arts umbrella organisation articulated *The Wasted Years* narrative in these terms: ‘… after the Development Corporation left I used to feel that Peterborough lacked the confidence that a city of its size needed ….The Development Corporation was enormously successful and of course had enormous swathes of funding to make it successful … It was a very hard act to follow … And I don’t think they had the confidence … because they weren’t the ones who had done it. The ones who had done it left and went to other jobs in London … There has been a sense in the city of the politicians being small town politicians running a big city… a growing city.’

*The Need for Change*
The stories in *The Need for Change* narrative often complemented *The Wasted Years* by providing a prescription for action. They emphasised that radical change was long overdue, and must be led by politicians with a long term vision for Peterborough. This narrative influences the thoughts and actions of the Modernisers as they look forward to the city’s possible futures, and those ‘progressives’ within the city who see strategy, vision and innovation as the answers to the city’s current problems.

Stories of *Long term vision* rehearse the failures of the Traditionalists and then draw a stark contrast in favour of the Modernisers, who possess the foresight to propel the city forward. *The Case for innovation* stories aver that civic entrepreneurship involves investment and risk-taking undertaken for the public good. Peterborough can benefit from ‘opening up’, listening to citizens and bringing in expertise from outside. Stories of *Delivery* argue that in the past the Council has had a reputation for making plans but failing to deliver - talking but not acting. They pledge delivery in core policy areas such as employment and skills, urban infrastructure, the local environment, arts and culture, and education.

In the words of the leader of the Modernising faction and new Leader of the Council: ‘(under the Traditionalists) it was all about who would support the Leader to stay leader, who would support so-and-so to do that, and so on. Well, that’s ok if your ultimate aim is only to be a politician. That’s great, that works, doesn’t it? But if you are the elected leader of a city your job is to transcend all that crap and to deliver what is in the interests of the city, irrespective of what that means to you politically or personally. Now you’ve got to get off your arse and make the right decisions and plan for the future.’

*The Great Wen*
The Great Wen and Steady As She Goes narratives are interpretations of much the same events as The Wasted Years and The Need for Change narratives but lead to very different conclusions: we need to hold outsiders at arm’s length and go our own Peterborough way. The Great Wen narrative influences the thoughts and actions of the Traditionalists in the Conservative party who believe that the umbilical connection with London has done more harm than good, and of ‘ordinary citizens’ who resent the displacement of their own expertise by outsiders.

The stories of The PDC good and bad do not entirely discount the PDC’s achievements, but are much more critical of the damage done to the fabric of the city and surrounding area. In particular they draw attention to the detrimental impact on the villages engulfed by the city, the destruction of much of the old town centre, and a large influx of inner city Londoners who did not understand Peterborough and its ways. Stories of Experts from outside express a deep-seated resentment towards interference by those ‘from the big city’ claiming superior knowledge and abilities. London drains our young talent presents the capital as a strategic problem to be addressed now and in the future: our young and talented people disappear down to London never to be seen again; therefore we need to find ways to develop and retain all our home-grown talent.

A backbench councillor spoke of the suspicion he encountered when he moved with his family from London to Peterborough in the 1980s: ‘There were lots of Londoners … we’d had the London overspill. So as a Londoner we were treated very much with suspicion really … I think you definitely had Peterborians but then you had these Londoners.’
One of the RSA Project Managers recognised the *Experts from outside* problem in the past and present: ‘There is a long standing issue around people coming into Peterborough, doing a project for a couple of years and then disappearing with zero impact, costing a lot of money…. and there are really bad connotations with consultants, if you like…’ Another expressed it in terms of resentment: ‘If I use particular words … I pick up on *resentment* a lot … resentment that you guys from outside, you posh think-tank people, you’ve got the money that we need …’

*Steady As She Goes*

These stories lead to the conclusion that the city was on the right course up until 2009 under the Traditionalists: the Modernisers are now wasting money and resources and must be brought to book. This narrative influences the thoughts and actions of the Traditionalists as they appraise the city’s economic and political trajectory now against their time in power. It also appeals to a wide spectrum of politicians, managers and citizens who are suspicious of experimentation and innovation, and see measurable outcomes and evidence of ‘good housekeeping’ as essential to the Council’s credibility.

*Look at the facts and figures* points out that Peterborough’s economy has grown steadily over the last twenty years. Applied to the local Conservative party, it highlights the annual increases in the party’s majority accumulated under the Traditionalist leadership (in 2008 they held 43 out of 57 seats). Stories of *Pet projects* are rehearsed regularly by the opposition parties in Peterborough, as well as the Modernisers’ opponents within the Conservative party. Increasing bureaucracy is a regular generic theme, but more specific targets are the modern fountains recently installed in Cathedral Square, and the proposal floated by the new Leader that Italian style water taxis on the Nene could relieve traffic congestion in the city. *VFM* narratives draft not for citation at this point June 2015
stories are a local contextualisation of the national Value for Money narrative and have been firmly embedded in the council for many years. They are particularly influential in its scrutiny committees, which, at a time of 28% cuts to its total budget, interpret VFM as an essential test of the worth of new, and existing, projects.

The defeated Traditionalist Leader of the Council touched on *Look at the facts and figures* in highlighting his administration’s practical and political achievements: ‘It is very difficult to tell how he (the new Leader) will do in his role, as he has a lot more outside interests from the Council that will take up a lot of time ….. (During our time in power) There have been many positive steps forward in the city... While I am sure that there are things that we could have done better, I think we got more right than wrong, and that has been reflected at elections.’

Later two senior Traditionalists explained their defection to Peterborough’s small English Democrats party by combining the *Pet Projects* and *VFM* stories: ‘Our number one reason for doing this is the fact the current (Conservative) party is no longer concerned with the wishes of the people and is pursuing its own agenda. People are tightening their belts and cutting back because times are difficult. But the Council, under (the new Leader), decided its response is to spend a quarter of a million pounds on complete bureaucracy, such as extra offices.’

(The timeline figure about here)

### 3.4 A political drama in three acts

The timeline above gives the reader an overview of the case study, breaking it down into three acts: Design, Implementation and Challenge, and Reframing. In the text below a basic narratives draft not for citation at this point June 2015
account of the drama within each act is presented. An analysis section then explains which narratives are active in that arena, and how constraint and performance promote conflict and consensus.

**Act I - The Design phase - late 2009 to July 2010**

A few months after the Modernisers in the council had mounted their successful coup, a group of local authority Chief Executives attended a presentation on ‘active citizenship’ at the headquarters of the RSA in London. Shortly afterwards, Peterborough City Council entered into discussions with the RSA to design what became Citizen Power in Peterborough (CPP). Over the next eight months, two sets of meetings between the RSA and the Council developed the programme incrementally until it contained six individual ‘strands’.

Box 2 about here

The first set of discussions was conducted between elite members of the two organisations in a consensual atmosphere and produced the first three CPP stands (see first three strands in Box 2). The second set of discussions focused on the project’s funding base, and brought in Council service managers who were keen to ensure that the programme included core delivery issues which rated highly on their agenda. In response the RSA agreed to add three more strands, each focused on the Council’s service priorities.

A variety of Council actors were now making a wide range of different demands on the RSA. A 70 page scoping report published by the RSA in early 2010 formed the basis for the agreement between the partners, and, rather than being a measured evaluation of the chances of success of the project, shifted the balance, in the words of the RSA’s CPP Programme narratives draft not for citation at this point June 2015
Leader, towards something of ‘a post hoc rationalisation’ of ‘what they (the Council) needed’. In overview Box 2 shows the eclectic mix of six strands which were produced by the two rounds of discussion.

For his part, the middle manager in the Council responsible for promoting the CPP programme to councillors was dismayed when he received the Scoping Report from the RSA: ‘I read it through five or six times and still came out with thinking I’m not quite sure what its saying ……it was the pitch. It was pitched up here, rather than down here …. It wasn’t pitched in a Peterborough way, if you like.’

**The Design phase – analysis**

In considering how narratives constrain actors’ perceptions, only a few months previously, the Modernisers had won control of the Council on a platform articulated by *The Need for Change*, and this narrative continued to influence their thoughts and actions as they entered the first set of discussions with the RSA. The RSA brought their own home-grown narrative which also privileged innovation and experimentation and had little regard for outcomes and metrics. In turn this convergence produced a powerful mutual understanding between the partners around the primacy of *The case for innovation*. Hence an agreement was quickly reached between elite actors from both organisations on the first three strands for the CPP programme which were very much citizen focused, and innovative and experimental in that they required long term investment for uncertain outcomes.

This affirmation of their core narrative also enthused elite actors in the Council to the extent that they failed to see the need to ‘sell’ the project, or anticipate criticism of the programme from the Traditionalist faction, the media and a sceptical public. Their capacity to view the
initiative was constrained in terms of limiting their ways of viewing the project from anything other than the vantage point they occupied jointly with the RSA.

In considering the processes of performance, the second round of discussions focused on finance and resources for the project, and brought into the arena a wider group of Council managers whose thoughts were influenced by the pragmatism of Delivery. As the three additional service based strands were put forward for inclusion, the RSA’s CPP Programme Leader became concerned that the package as a whole was losing focus and becoming incoherent. However, the ‘appropriate conduct’ for this arena had already been modelled in the first set of discussions by the elite RSA and Council actors, and there was a clear expectation on this second ensemble that consensus would continue to rule the day. Hence, in producing the scoping report, an attempt to satisfy all demands was made which avoided acting out the potential conflict around being more selective, and instead embedded it in the CPP programme itself.

**Act II: Implementation and Challenge - July 2010 to February 2011**

The Council had previously ruled that any new policy initiative must be considered by the relevant scrutiny committee. And so the ‘Strong and Supportive Communities’ Scrutiny Committee examined the CPP programme at three meetings in September and November 2010 and January 2011. The actors who were called to the committee at this stage were the RSA Programme Leader and individual strand managers (rather than Council officers), and the meetings showed a consistent pattern in terms of the focus of questioning and the tone of the interchanges.
Councillors repeatedly asked questions about the overall cost of the CCP programme, about project management and evaluation, and duplication with existing services. The RSA representatives eventually responded to this questioning in some detail, but were criticised for not answering the points directly, and not speaking in ‘plain English’. In turn the RSA workers were bemused by the very practical focus of the scrutiny, and felt they were being asked ‘the wrong questions.’

The tone of exchanges became more heated as the sessions progressed. To the extent that in the third meeting in January 2011, several members expressed their dissatisfaction with the RSA’s responses and the committee passed a proposal by four votes to three to recommend to the Project Sponsor in the Council that the CPP programme (which was by now six months into its operation) be disbanded.

The members’ VFM focus is captured in their stated reasons for this recommendation: ‘there had been no clear evidence received by the Committee on the aims, objectives, outcomes and measures and therefore the Committee were unable to establish whether the project provided value for money.’

A senior manager in the Council expressed the sense of frustration thus: ‘There are certainly things that should have been done differently. ….. Mainly to do with how it was communicated to our partners. How, how .. the RSA should have understood better in my view how to relate to real people who aren’t London-based academics.’

**Implementation and challenge - analysis**

The RSA representatives came to the scrutiny committee with a new policy initiative which was always going to be difficult to defend. Nevertheless, initially there was some goodwill
towards the programme’s broad aims, and, although the wide-ranging nature of the programme was a definite handicap, just as important for understanding what happened in Act II are the narrative constraints on the two sets of actors, and how these effects were amplified through performance. For both sets of actors who met in the scrutiny committee came with firm understandings of ‘how things will or should play out’ but these were influenced by very different narrative understandings of CPP. Certainly there was very little capacity on either side to understand the other’s terms of reference, and any ‘speech acts’ intended to achieve consensus were lost to a communication breakdown.

The RSA representatives came to the committee with their thoughts and responses influenced by their organisation’s narrative of ‘social capital’ which privileged innovation and experimentation. Their confidence in this approach had been reinforced through the Design phase by its close alignment with the elite council actors’ case for innovation. The members of the scrutiny committee, however, were working principally to the Value for money logics which required them to establish the costs and metrics by which the project could be judged, and expose any duplication with existing Council initiatives.

As the meetings progressed, attitudes amongst those members of the committee with doubts about the programme hardened, and members who had initially been sympathetic to the project were influenced by Experts from outside, and a deep suspicion of an organisation promoting itself as ‘London-based’. The performance over three sessions by actors of their mismatched narrative combinations served to widen, rather than narrow, the gulf in understanding between the two sets of participants, and relegate any possibility of consensus to insignificance.
The institutional design of the scrutiny arena is important in understanding why the exchanges became especially bitter. In addition to their formal rule based format, scrutiny committees at the local and national level come with informal definitions of ‘what is appropriate conduct’. For example, those called before the committees are expected to openly subject themselves to scrutiny, and answer questions in a transparent and direct manner. They are expected to show respect for the scrutineers as elected politicians, and be prepared to acknowledge the superiority of their democratic mandate (Coulson: ibid).

In their three performances before the committee, at one time or another, the RSA representatives unintentionally transgressed all these informal conventions. In rehearsing a narrative of innovation and experimentation to answer questions framed in terms of costs and metrics, they appeared to be wilfully attempting to evade scrutiny. In referring to academic concepts like ‘social capital’, they appeared to be trying to blind the members with science. And in holding to their line of argument robustly rather than deferring to the members’ framing of the issues, they appeared to be showing a lack of respect for the committee, and the scrutiny it was conducting on behalf of the Peterborough Council Tax payer.

**Act III: Reframing - February 2011 to January 2013**

The scrutiny committee’s powers were limited to recommending to the Project Sponsor that CPP be disbanded. This discretion lay with the Council’s Head of Neighbourhoods who made the decision not to terminate the project, but let it run while a wide-ranging and lengthy review of CPP was undertaken. Relationships between the RSA and the Council’s senior managers were by now strained, and the review was completed chiefly by the Head of Neighbourhoods and his staff.
The middle manager in the Council responsible for liaising with the CPP programme outlined how the review’s content was formulated to create a connection across stories of Delivery and VFM: ‘So the review was about providing the evidence of what had happened, what we were doing, where the money was going … aims and objectives and predicted outcomes.’ In particular, the review report highlighted the impressive ‘leverage’ which had been achieved through the programme: ‘As a Council, we have invested £250,000 into Citizen Power over two years. As a direct result of our commitment, other public and private organisations have chosen to invest a further £920,775.’

Presenting the review report to the scrutiny committee in September 2011, the senior council officers had set themselves three objectives: to highlight the substantial achievements of the six individual strands in increasing citizen participation and addressing service priorities; to demonstrate that in VFM terms the Council had leveraged in much more money through CCP than it committed; and finally, to involve elected members more closely in the operation of the project in its remaining ten months. In developing this strategy the officers were aware that they had to finesse the matter. The Head of Neighbourhoods had said: ‘We have to do this sensitively. We have to make sure we’re not riding a coach and horses through what the Scrutiny Committee have recommended.’

In their response, the scrutiny committee congratulated officers on the quality of the review, but strongly reiterated concerns regarding VFM for the ChangeMakers, Arts and Social Change, and Civic Commons strands. They also expressed concern that experts were being brought in from outside, and that expertise within the city was not being developed to ensure continuity of the programme. However, they did not press again for CPP to be disbanded, and
they agreed with the officers’ recommendation to establish a cross-party sub-group to make their own assessment of CPP and report back at a later date.

By July 2012, a great deal of evidence of the project’s effectiveness had been gathered, and a joint celebration of CPP’s achievements had been agreed between the RSA and the Council. However this was put back several times and then abandoned. Two years after its launch, the Citizen Power in Peterborough partnership issued its final newsletter which formally declared the end of the CPP programme in operational terms.

When the scrutiny committee met six months later, it considered CPP for the last time, receiving a report from the cross-party sub-group which it had set up in September 2011. This report was generally upbeat about the project and again attempted to reframe the VFM issue. However, members of the scrutiny committee criticised their colleagues for being overly positive about CCP’s value, and, in effect, censured the leadership.

In its own words, it recommended that, when considering commissioning a similar initiative, the Council should: ‘conduct a full investigation into whether the proposed programme would be value for money; appoint a project manager at the earliest stage to prepare a full business case and financial plan; and communicate key messages of the programme to all Councillors to avoid unnecessary delays or misunderstanding over the outcomes and objectives of the initiative.’

**Reframing – analysis**

Over a two year period, senior council officers, and then a sub-group of elected members, attempted to reframe the scrutiny committee’s interpretation of the CPP project by highlighting its practical achievements. However, the committee’s *VFM* and *Experts from*
outside logics retained their potency, and, although some of the recommendations of the officers’ review were accepted, the members’ sub-group’s report was rejected by their fellow members, in terms which clearly indicated that, in their view, the Leadership had not paid sufficient attention to how costs, outcomes, and the involvement of members were managed. In terms of constraining influence, therefore, the conclusion to Act III shows how the scrutiny committee’s thoughts and actions continued to be influenced by the Steady as She goes narrative.

However, constraint does not tell the whole story. In terms of performance and conflict and consensus, both officers and members showed some capacity during this period to reflect on the influences to which they were being subjected, and redeploy elements of narrative in an attempt to achieve their objectives. The officers were particularly active in this respect, and, in their review’s content and verbal presentation, they attempted to shift the members’ perception of the Facts and Figures into a light much more favourable to CPP. Delivery and VFM were articulated through a raft of evidence demonstrating activity and outcomes, most graphically in CPP’s claims to producing almost 4/1 leverage.

The committee did not accept this reframing in full of course, but their response did include some concessions to the officers’ case. They did not press again for the disbanding of CPP, and agreed to set up the sub-group recommended by the review. Initially at least, they responded to the officers’ attempts at reframing by confining their VFM criticisms to the three citizen-focused strands, thereby appearing to accept the Facts and Figures case for the three service-based strands. Overall the tone of the meetings was much less confrontational than it had been with the RSA representatives, and the members took care to congratulate the officers on the quality of the review.
This difference of tone is significant because, prima facie, here were another set of actors robustly defending CPP in a fashion which might have provoked another bruising interrogation. The difference may be explained by the caution and regard for ‘appropriate conduct and reasons’ with which the officers’ scripted and performed their strategy for reframing: their text and ‘speech acts’ redeployed the stories from the members’ narrative of *Steady as She goes*, working within the politicians’ established frame of reference, rather than directly challenging their understandings of the issues at stake. They were also seen by members to have correctly observed the conventions of the arena. In this way the conflict which was still being played out from Act II was sustained but contained in Act III, in the sense that it remained focused on actors who were now offstage, and did not unduly disrupt the cooperative relationship between council officers and members.

**Overview and future lines of enquiry**

This paper examines how policy narratives manifest themselves in political debate, and how they influence the perceptions and conduct of key actors. To gain some purchase on a slippery concept, it has focused on the specific question of how policy narratives promote conflict and consensus through the processes of constraint and performance. The end products of the research effort are the presentation of a political drama in which the processes under enquiry are exposed for the researcher and the reader to interrogate, and a plausible explanation of the influence of narratives on actors emerges as the action unfolds.

The extent of the theoretical and methodological focus is clearly a limiting factor in terms of the claims which can be made from the research component of the paper. Constraint and performance are not the only processes which might be privileged, and those scholars, for example, who conceptualise narrative as primarily a rhetorical resource at the disposal of narratives draft not for citation at this point June 2015
political actors would tend to downplay the former in favour of the latter. Nor do policy narratives themselves exist in vacuum: Boswell’s synopsis (2013) for example points to the interconnections between narrative and discourse and anecdote. In addition the negative case analysis undertaken in the research suggested that some of the inherent messiness of narrative was inevitably lost in achieving this focus: as an example, some actors in the case study were able to accommodate stories from competing narratives in ways which defied neater analytic divisions. It is clear therefore that narrowing the focus in this way can produce an artificial sense of tidiness, and there is clearly a trade-off here between the claims which can be made for the research, and the decision to home in on processes of constraint and performance.

Nevertheless, the methodology employed does appear to expose some of the key processes under enquiry, and produce a plausible explanation of the influence of narratives on actors. The detailed analysis in the sections above provides some support for this claim act by act, while Box 3 below offers evidence in overview.

Box 3 about here

The content of the ‘Key actors’ and ‘narratives and stories’ cells (rows numbered 1 and 2) in Box 3 captures some of the narrative complexity which develops through three acts. And so in Act I, consensus and conflict are principally promoted by the narrative components of The Need for Change. In Act II, these are placed in direct conflict with stories from Steady as She Goes reinforced by The Great Wen. In Act III the council managers’ strategy produces conflict and some residual consensus, as they attempt to reframe Steady as She Goes by linking it to the Delivery stories of The Need for Change. Within this accumulating complexity, there are discernible and plausible continuities as the influence of narratives is exposed not only within each act, but across acts as they pass on their capacity to influence narratives.
actors’ perceptions and conduct further down the line. In Act I elite council actors’ enthusiasm for a project like CPP is based on a legacy from their recent take-over of the council where they stood on *The Need For Change* narrative. In Act II the RSA representatives inherit from Act I an incoherent programme which they struggle to defend under scrutiny. The legacies of both the previous two acts are passed through to Act III, as council managers try to reframe the lack of focus of the CPP programme within a justifying narrative, and also deal with positions which have now been hardened over three bruising performances in committee.

Moreover, examination of the ‘Constraint promotes …’, ‘Performance promotes …’ and ‘The conflict consensus mix’ cells (rows 3, 4 and 5 of Box 3) shows an interesting pattern whereby the relationship between actors which is initially promoted by the processes of constraint dominates the conflict/consensus mix for that act: consensus in Act I, and conflict in Acts II and III. In this case study, at least, performance appears to be able to modify this mix, but not significantly change the overall direction of travel. Here it seems that narrative constraint and legacies from the previous action work in combination to influence actors’ thoughts at the beginning of an act. Their primary structuring influence then limits the impact of performance in that act to either exaggerating that effect, as in the conflict in Act II, or demanding some concessions which are subsumed into the mix. In Act I this manifests as consensus with conflict delayed, in Act III as conflict sustained but contained.

This observation emphasises the conceptualisation of policy narratives as having a significant historical presence in political thought and conduct; that is to say they predate the action of any political drama and are already embedded in the thoughts of actors before the action begins. Performance, on the other hand, is by definition bound to take place in the here and
now and, as a result, starts with a significant disadvantage in its capacity to overturn the structuring influences of constraint which have enjoyed a considerable head start.

It also raises an intriguing line of enquiry for future research which would examine whether this primacy of constraint was replicated in other studies, and, in searching for counterfactuals, would interrogate cases where performance had in fact overturned initial constraint, and actors had been able to turn the narrative tide in their desired direction. Theoretically this would throw light on the relationship between the structured and fluid elements of narrative; in practical terms, such enquiry would be of significance because the meat of politics is often about persuading people to change their minds against their embedded narrative predispositions.

Finally, the significance of the conventions of a specific arena, flagged up by Laws (2001) in the theoretical discussion, is evident as an important element of performance in all three acts. In Act I the observation of ‘appropriate conduct’ plays an important role in suppressing conflict and producing an incoherent CPP programme. In Act II the failure to observe ‘appropriate conduct’ fuels the conflict between the RSA representatives and the members. In Act III a studied deference to conventions rings some small concessions from the scrutiny committee. This final observation tends to steer the discussion back towards the influence of factors which are structured into the arena and suggests an interesting line of theorisation and application to research around narratives and conventions. In particular, as they both influence actors through constraint, where do they overlap conceptually, and how do they operate together in the empirical setting.
Acknowledgments

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Box 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Wasted Years</th>
<th>The Great Wen</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• The PDC as a progressive force</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Small town politicians</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• The London Dynamo</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• The PDC good and bad</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Experts from outside</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• London drains our young talent</td>
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<tr>
<th>The Need for Change</th>
<th>Steady As She Goes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Long term vision</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The case for innovation</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Delivery</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Look at the facts and figures</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Pet projects</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• VFM</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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The six Citizen Power in Peterborough (CPP) strands

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A citywide deliberative and action forum</td>
<td>The Civic Commons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A local network of active citizens</td>
<td>ChangeMakers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The arts and locality</td>
<td>Arts and Social Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education and locality</td>
<td>The Peterborough Curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A project addressing drug/alcohol problems</td>
<td>Recovery Capital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green innovation</td>
<td>Sustainable Citizenship</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
### Box 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key actors</th>
<th>Act I</th>
<th>Act II</th>
<th>Act III</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Elite representatives from the Council and the RSA</td>
<td>• The RSA CPP team</td>
<td>• Members of the scrutiny committee</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Council service managers</td>
<td>• Members of the scrutiny committee</td>
<td>• Council senior managers</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Most influential narratives and stories</th>
<th>Act I</th>
<th>Act II</th>
<th>Act III</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• The Need for Change Long term vision</td>
<td>• The Need for Change The case for innovation</td>
<td>• Steady As She Goes reinforced by The Great Wen VFM Experts from outside</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The Need for Change Delivery</td>
<td>• Steady As She Goes reinforced by The Great Wen VFM Experts from outside</td>
<td>• Steady As She Goes reinforced by The Need for Change Look at the facts and figures Delivery VFM</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constraint promotes .....</th>
<th>Act I</th>
<th>Act II</th>
<th>Act III</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consensus through narrative convergence</td>
<td>Conflict through the innovation/VFM tension, and through different narrative understandings of the value of CPP</td>
<td>Conflict through a continuing VFM perspective on CPP, and through hardened attitudes from the conflict in Act II</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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<tr>
<th>Performance promotes .....</th>
<th>Act I</th>
<th>Act II</th>
<th>Act III</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consensus through ‘appropriate conduct’ Conflict through competing demands</td>
<td>Conflict through repeated rehearsal of tensions and misunderstandings, and through perceptions of ‘inappropriate conduct’</td>
<td>Conflict through officers’ attempts to robustly defend CPP Consensus through officers’ reframing within members’ narrative, and through regard for ‘appropriate conduct’</td>
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<tr>
<th>The conflict consensus mix</th>
<th>Act I</th>
<th>Act II</th>
<th>Act III</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consensus with conflict delayed</td>
<td>Conflict exposed and amplified</td>
<td>Conflict sustained but contained</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
A timeline of Peterborough politics and the case study

1998
Peterborough becomes a unitary authority separating from Cambridgeshire CC

2000
The Council moves from Labour to no overall control but the Conservatives are the largest party and begin to build their majority under the Traditionalists

2009
May 2000 The Modernisers stage a successful coup and take over the Council

2010
Scoping work is completed by the RSA in Peterborough and Scoping Report published

2011
July 2010 Citizen Power in Peterborough (CPP) is officially launched

2012
September, November and January the Strong and Supportive Scrutiny Committee considers the CPP project

2013
September 2012 the Strong and Supportive Scrutiny Committee considers the Council’s review of the CPP project

Act I – the Design of CPP

Act II – Implementation and Challenge

Act III – Reframing

July 2012 Citizen Power in Peterborough is closed without fanfare

January 2013 the Strong and Supportive Scrutiny Committee censures the Council over the CPP project