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## IPAC EXECUTIVE BRIEF

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### The Top Ten Topics in Public Administration Scholarship: An International Survey

By Michael McConkey

#### Executive Summary

What do scholars consider to be areas deserving of inquiry in the broad field of public sector management and administration? In order to identify the current state of the professional interest, forty eight scholarly journals from around the world were identified and their contents of the last two years were analyzed. (This literature review was restricted to the peer-reviewed literature as it is generally acknowledged to represent the leading edge in scholarly thinking – the publication time frame being much shorter than for books.)

The top ten topics of interest to scholars were:

1. Regulation
2. Health Policy
3. Organizational Culture
4. Environmental Policy
5. Democratic Dialogue
6. Public Administration of Quasi-Public Organizations
7. Governance
8. Technology Change and Policy
9. Municipal and Urban Public Administration
10. Performance Evaluation

The results of this study provides grounds to suspect that, as firmly rooted as the agenda of the New Public Management (NPM) has become, it is also in the process of being reworked from within.

#### Methodology

Over 950 articles were examined for this study and, based on the number of articles published in each category, a list of the “top ten” topics was created based on the count.

The articles were coded using 100 categories drawn from IPAC’s experience in public administration scholarship. The articles were not restricted to a single topic – often they touched upon two or more.

These topics were analytically broken down into the key trends that drove them. As with the coding of the topics, the trends were not restricted to a single article, as many touched upon more than one issue. The analysis of these driving issues therefore required a recognition and assessment of several analytical patterns.

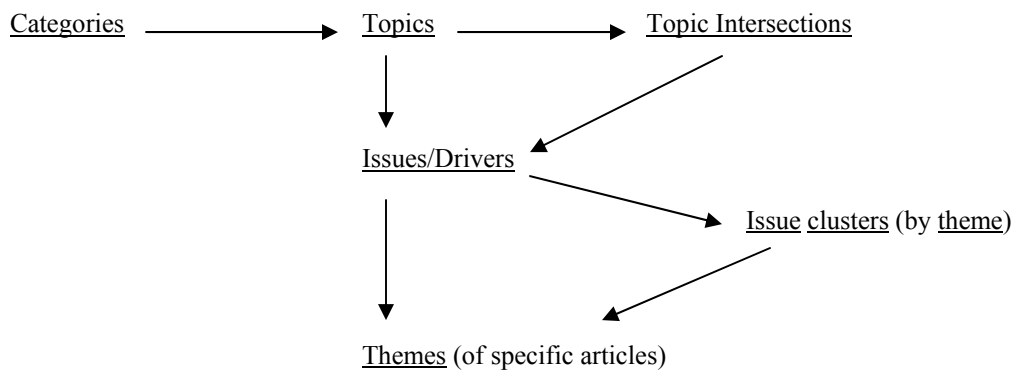
In addition to individual issues this study revealed a number of clusters. Disparate issues that nevertheless shared a common theme were

brought together and examined in light of their commonality.

Not surprisingly, a number of issues appeared as important drivers in more than one topic. Issues such as “networks,” “learning” and “the Internet”, for example, intersected many topics, suggesting overlapping concerns in the literature. Indeed, this study concludes that a set of meta-topics are reinforced by some of the intersecting issues.

The topics were then broken down into the specific themes discussed in particular scholarly articles. (The actual articles being referenced in footnotes, readers interested in this level of detail are encouraged to see the actual study which appears as New Directions #19 on the IPAC website [www.ipac.ca](http://www.ipac.ca). In this “Executive Brief”, only the dominant themes within the broad topics and their distinguishing and intersecting issues are identified.)

The divisions of the analytic breakdown look like this schema:



In keeping with the popular tradition of “TOP TENS”, the countdown begins at the bottom and works its way up to the top topic of interest.

### 10. Performance Evaluation

Performance evaluation in this context refers specifically to the evaluation of public administration itself as a form of organization and practice. Within this topic, there were separate evaluations of the performance of policies and programs respectively. They, consequently, are not included in tabulations that placed this topic in the top ten. Additionally, there was a distinction maintained between articles that emphasized the merits and techniques of performance evaluation practices and those that emphasized the possibility and consequences of such practices. The former were included here, while the latter were included as part of topic # 5 on organizational culture.

There were a number of issues that could be broadly categorized under the common rubric of

“approaches to performance evaluation.” These included: responsive evaluation, along with systems-, theory-, goal- and results-based approaches.

Certainly, a few issues elicited more frequent discussion. These were the use of indicators in performance evaluation (including one article on the use of dashboards); five articles addressing performance evaluation in local public administration; five addressing the role of measurement; and six articles addressing performance management, with particular concern for the role of evaluation in such management.

### 9. Municipal and Urban Public Administration

A number of other topics have relatively concentrated instances of local public administration being discussed in the literature – as just seen with the five references mentioned in relation to performance evaluation. However,

this category is defined not by the location of particular practices but by their source. A public administration practice could be exercised in a specific locale, but be exercised by a regional or national government. This topic only captures those practices that have municipal or urban public administrations as their source.

Though a wide range of issues drove this particular topic – e.g., greening of brown fields, containing of sprawl, Chief Financial Officers, responding to climate change and building child-friendly cities – only two issues were addressed more than once. These were concerns over innovation and sustainability. Each of these was addressed twice.

## **8. Technology Change and Policy**

This topic captured concerns over public administrations' response to technology – both the challenges and opportunities posed by the rapid and continual changes that have characterized contemporary society. This includes government's efforts to offset, or ameliorate, potentially deleterious effects of technological change and the implementation of public policy to harness the potential of new technology in the interest of improved public service.

There were a range of distinctive issues raised, (e.g. cloning, the use of biometric identity cards, technology policy, technology-based development). However, two thirds of the articles on this topic were concentrated on two issues: the Internet and biotechnology.

Internet governance also received attention, as did one article which addressed the neglected role of the public sector in facilitating the development of the Internet.

## **7. Governance**

The theme of this topic is of course a complex one that is still subject to much dispute within public administration scholarship. For some the term connotes little more than the exercise of the responsibilities of government. In this sense one speaks easily of good or bad governance – a job well or poorly done. However, particularly as it relates to the public sector – as opposed to the private – the term increasingly carries sociological and political science implications. Even these, though, are not entirely agreed upon.

For some, the term is used to refer to the larger processes of governing the polity and society: taking account of the influence of non-governmental forces. Interest groups, lobbyists and policy networks are among those who contribute to the ultimate decision as to the particular manifestations of governing priorities.

For others, the term “governance” has become a short hand to evoke dramatic transformations within the very organization and practice of governing – its processes and structures. For these scholars the traditional silo-based form of government can be, will be, or is being transformed into horizontal, devolved or distributed networks that involve a host of agents – different levels of government, arms-length public organizations, quasi-public organizations, the nonprofit and the private sectors.

The largest concentration of discussion regarding this topic focused on Europe. This included thirteen discussions of the European Union. These included discussions of policy mediators, coordinated governance, administrative convergence and a common visa policy in the E.U., and the influence of E.U. and the role of the European Commission. This topic also included six discussions related to the issue of the New Public Management (NPM) movement. Another issue of similar concentration was that related to questions of federalism.

As mentioned above, though, the issues that really drove this topic were those associated to the view that contemporary governance entailed an emerging new form of horizontal practice and organization. Among the discussions clustered around this issue were the four discussions of multi-level governance; a discussion of distributed governance; two on flattening hierarchy; five on devolution or decentralization; seven on networks; and the ten on the related themes of collaborative governance, “whole government” or “joined-up” governance.

## **6. Public Administration of Quasi-Public Organizations**

This category included the processes of managing the creation, and supervision of the operations, of non-governmental organizations with public service responsibilities. This category did not include arms-length government organizations such as crown corporations and agencies. (They were coded and calculated in

another category that didn't make the top ten.) While there is the potential for a certain overlap with topic 7 dealing with governance, the emphasis in this category is on the creation, supervision and operation of such organizations, rather than the management and administrative significance of their functional relationship to government.

The two main clusters could be described as ASD and civil society practices. There is also a dispersed third cluster with an emphasis on collaborative networks. It is this third cluster that has the most overlap with the governance category. It is the other two issue clusters, however, that really drive this topic. The civil society practices cluster entails six discussions of the role of civil society, as such, and seven articles addressing specific forms of non-commercial civil society forms: voluntary groups, nonprofits and NGOs. (It is interesting to note – in light of the observed overlap between this category and governance – that in this issue cluster the greatest area of overlap with another topic is with the other category trend that displayed a high level of overlap with governance: democratic dialogue – to be discussed below.) Non-commercial quasi-government organizations are widely perceived as potentially valuable venues for citizen engagement.

The most concentrated cluster driving this topic, perhaps unsurprisingly, was that involving issues of ASD practice. This cluster drew nearly half the articles codified in this category. This included the two most discussed issues in this topic: contracting and partnerships, each addressed in eleven articles. The cluster is rounded out with six articles that addressed privatization.

## 5. Democratic Dialogue

This topic entails all discussions related to the full range of practices that bring the public into a governance process. IPAC has promoted the concept of “governance dialogue” as an umbrella term that encompassed the full range of public participation in both policy-making and service delivery.<sup>1</sup> However, the need to clearly distinguish this topic from topic #7 required the use of a slightly altered rubric.

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<sup>1</sup> See the IPAC website on Governance Dialogue: [www.quantumgovernance.ca](http://www.quantumgovernance.ca).

Some might consider that because most of the issues dealt with under “democratic dialogue” in fact address the means to provide better public input into governance, this topic should be considered a subset of the “governance” category. We felt that their variances make the distinction a credible choice. All the same, it is worthwhile to observe that had topics 5 and 7 been combined, the resulting category would have easily constituted the number one topic in the public administration periodical literature over the last two years.

There is a pattern of three issue clusters that provide an analytic coherence to the “democratic dialogue” topic. These three clusters could be described as: social forms, process theory, and institutional fora.

The social forms cluster gathers a series of related articles that all touch in some way on the relational practices of popular participation. These include one discussion of participatory governance; two discussions of each democratic governance and community involvement; and three discussions of community governance.

The process theory cluster entails an article on prerequisites to participation, two discussions of interactive policy-making, three discussions of discourse and seven discussions of deliberation. This cluster of issues all address the conditions and possibilities for the kind of democratic dialogue that would allow the public to effectively and fairly engage in the processes of effective governance. The emphasis on deliberation, as revealed by the extent it was discussed, is especially important in this regard. It cuts to the very core of both the means to, and legitimacy of, substantive and effective public participation in decision-making.

The third issue cluster driving this topic, institutional fora, was concerned with the actual mechanisms that could provide a concrete and effective forum for democratic dialogue. Again, there was a range of fora discussed, from the use and revitalization of well-established venues to the exploration of more creative and ambitious practices.

This cluster included single discussions of public meetings, neighbourhood councils, public hearings and citizen juries. There also was a discussion of conditions for institutionalizing public participation. There were two discussions

of mega-consultations. And the topic commanding the most attention – in many minds the most important forum for substantive and effective democratic dialogue in complex, large scale, contemporary society – the Internet was addressed in six articles.

#### **4. Environmental policy**

The academic treatment of environmental policy, poses a number of challenges. It is highly dispersed, doesn't lend itself to especially strong cluster analysis and – as with the other policy area, health policy – endures a lot of gray area in distinguishing it from regulation. One cluster that does suggest itself is environmental planning. Most of the other aspects of environmental policy were explored by no more than two or three articles. The most concentrated focus was on sustainability, which was addressed by four articles. Other issues addressed were competition, from a variety of vantage points, and devolution, innovation and learning. There were also a number of articles addressing particular problems in environmental policy-making: incineration, watersheds, waste management, etc.

#### **3. Organizational Culture**

This category was broadly defined. Any issue that was concerned primarily with the manner in which public administrators interacted with each other or their work was included. Again, it is useful to analyze this topic in terms of issue clusters, namely challenges of professionalism, organizational dynamics and optimizing capacity.

The challenges of professionalism refer to the tendency of public administrators – particularly at the managerial level – to think of themselves as a profession. While benefits of heightened standards and ethics could be hoped for from such developments, the frequently observed danger in professionalization of an exclusivist worldview and jargon is a real danger. The two main issues identified in this cluster are managerialism and self-reflexivity, both discussed in three articles.

The cluster of organizational dynamics issues revolved around the questions of what and how things happen in public administrations. The only high concentration issue was that entailing the six articles, second highest concentration in

the topic, which addressed organizational performance.

The optimizing capacity cluster includes articles that address the means for public administrators to enhance the abilities or conditions for doing their work. Both control and strategy were addressed by two articles, competency by three articles, innovation by four, and – the most concentrated issue driving this topic – learning, addressed by seven articles.

#### **2. Health Policy**

The second-most popular topic offers some special problems: It is subject to broad definition, and, as with the other policy-based topic (environmental policy) exhibited a number of gray areas with regulation, which is the most popular topic. Like environment, the term “health” – depending upon the degree of abstraction with which it is applied – can beget a kind of conceptual colonialism. To keep some practical boundaries on the category, the purview that Health Canada would apply to itself was the rule-of-thumb guide for delineating issue qualification. The fact that some would suggest that it is the nature of bureaucratic departments to be ever endeavouring to expand their sphere of influence and authority happily provides some definitional wiggle-room.

Again, though perhaps not as tidily, a cluster pattern analysis helps delineate the issues driving this second topic. A couple jurisdictions stand out in the literature: the U.K. and Canada. In the case of Canada, this no doubt reflected a bias toward Canadian journals in creation of the survey sample. Still, all but one of the articles was in Canadian journals. There are four other discernable clusters: those related to ASD practices, policy management concerns, sector problems and health care coverage regimes. Most were highly dispersed.

The cluster of issues around ASD practices in health policy included a couple discussions of both policy entrepreneurship and corporatization, and three addressing constraints on privatization. The health care coverage regimes cluster was the most concentrated set of issues driving this topic. There were two discussions of managed care, three of medicare and eight – the single most concentrated issue driving this topic – addressing the broader area of health insurance.

## 1. Regulation

With over one hundred citations in the literature over the last two years, regulation is far and away the leading topic in the public administration scholarly periodical literature. It is worth noting too that, though they exist, and despite IPAC's special interest in the area,<sup>2</sup> no periodicals specializing in regulation were included as part of the periodical sample for this survey.

This topic in the literature examines a high dispersion of issues, there are also a number of clusters that reward closer attention. First, there are jurisdictions that receive a lot of attention: the U.K. and the E.U. – with eight and nine articles each respectively. After that the most highly concentrated issue clusters are those that we could describe as techniques/instruments of regulation; regulatory relations; regulatory orientation; and sectors/problems of regulation. With the sectors/problems cluster there is an even dispersion of topic discussion: telephone and telecommunications, food, smoking, obesity all are discussed in three articles, and regulation of markets is addressed four times.

The regulatory orientation cluster was less evenly balanced. There was one discussion on modeling the choice between regulation and liability, another comparing the effectiveness of regulation and criminal prosecution, one on risk-based regulation, and another on “smarter” regulation. There were also a couple discussions of innovation. The most highly concentrated issue in this cluster, however, centered around topics related to the role of precaution in regulation.<sup>3</sup>

The two issue clusters, though, that really drove this topic to the top of the chart were those of regulatory techniques/instruments and regulatory relations. The regulatory relations cluster includes both relations between regulators and between regulators and regulatees. The two most

<sup>2</sup> See the IPAC Smarttape Centre for Regulatory Innovation, [www.smarttape.ca](http://www.smarttape.ca)

<sup>3</sup> A key factor in this concentration was a special issue on “precautionary expertise for E.U. agbiotech regulation,” in *Science and Public Policy*, 32(4), August 2005. That issue of the journal included discussions of this theme in Austria, Germany, Denmark, France, the Netherlands, the U.K. and the E.U. generally. There were a couple other articles addressing this issue, including one that asked “precaution maybe, but what’s the principle?”

concentrated issue discussions were around compliance and competition, with 10 and nine addressing each issue. There were a host of other issues, including enforcement, deterrence, cooperation and self-regulation.

Finally, the most richly dispersed cluster of issues driving the leading topic of public administration scholarship over the last two years is that involving techniques and instruments of regulation. A wide of range of specific instruments are addressed, along with some more general discussions over questions of instrument choice. Among the techniques discussed were the use of communications, taxes, incentives, inspection, bonds, bargaining and permits.

## Conclusion

The gray areas and tensions in distinguishing some of the topics invite the creation of broad categories. This survey of the literature suggests what might be called meta-topics:

- 1) Protecting public welfare (health and environmental policy, regulation);
- 2) Integrating horizontality (quasi-public organizations, democratic dialogue, governance); and
- 3) Intra-operational monitoring (organizational culture, performance evaluation).

Remembering the overwhelming prominence of regulation as a single topic – itself almost a super-topic – the meta-topics suggested by those sets lend themselves to an obvious observation: As public administrations increasingly move toward the integration of horizontal practices and relations, partial solutions to the challenges of effectively and accountably protecting the public welfare might be found in intra-operational monitoring and the steering-not-rowing ethos of innovative regulation.

Some might suggest that there is nothing new here beyond the old “new public management” agenda of the last two decades. However, this would be a shortsighted perspective. Around such bread-and-butter NPM issues as ASD, regulatory reform and performance evaluation, the new scholarship is engaging in a subtle reworking of many central assumptions about

governance, legitimacy and work culture. A shift from clientism to concerns with democratic dialogue, from deregulation and market forces to regulatory innovation, and from streamlined administration to a focus on the potential and importance of learning cultures, demonstrate this important shift.

This is not so obvious in the top ten topics themselves, but rather in the careful dissection of the issues that have driven those areas of interest.

*A full bibliography of the articles referred to in this Executive Brief is provided in the full study:*

The Top Ten Topics in Public Administration Scholarship: An International Perspective (*IPAC New Directions* #9, [www.ipac.ca](http://www.ipac.ca))

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