

## On Focusing Events and Telling Stories

Public policymaking is such a buzzword right now not just amongst political and social scientists, legislators or lawyers but more and more in other fields such as health and health care, disasters and humanitarian affairs to name a few. In some ways, this is seen as a general acceptance that influencing policymaking in terms of either changing existing laws or creation of new ones is in of in itself an important intervention and action point for the issues that these fields focus on and struggle with. The readings this week gives a particular focus on that discussion by putting forward ways and means by which a policy agenda is set and how instances such as focusing events and use of symbols dictate on that agenda setting and more often than not turn the usual power relations differently.

Kingdon sets the tone in his piece when he discusses how focusing events, crises and symbols helps in putting into the limelight information or indicators regarding hazards in transportation and health that otherwise are just dormant or not paid attention. He shows how focusing events, crises and symbols are not one and the same but rather like a spectrum of forces that may or may not come together and thus affect how the indicators are highlighted and the impact of response as a result. Focusing events in of in itself may not arouse response but when framed or seen by particular individuals or groups as crises may totally change how they are approached. The evolution of a symbol, that of a tangible or 'dramatic' personification or objectification of the focusing event or crises, further pumps attention to the issue and fuels response and eventually policy.

Birkland furthers the discussion of focusing events in his article on Exxon Valdez catastrophe and on mobilization and agenda setting. He lays down five characteristics of focusing events namely 1) events that are sudden; 2) relatively uncommon; 3) harmful or reveals possibility of potentially greater future harms; 4) concentration of harms in a particular geographical area or community of interest, and 5) known to the public and policymakers simultaneously. This definition is of great utility for interest and advocacy groups of a particular issue in identifying and recognizing a focusing event as it happens such that they are able to capitalize on the sudden shift of attention on the issue so as to mobilize support and resources at the same time a diffusion of the monopoly of agenda setting and policy formation from those whose interests have been previously protected, uncontrolled or regulated. Birkland exemplifies such phenomenon in the Exxon Valdez incident that catalyzed mobilization by different groups affected by the issue, gave them strategic reason and opportunity to work together and collaborate and became a tangible and objectified symbol of effects and hazards that environmental groups were able to use to gain more support. But, Birkland also presents cases of how events may seem to be focusing in nature but do not have the same impact and effect as that of the Exxon Valdez. He compares responses to earthquakes and hurricanes and identifies a problem with a non-organized "hurricane group" that makes it impossible for mobilization even after a focusing event.

The readings illustrate the leverage that focusing events afford in the arena of policymaking for interest groups that work on issues that are considered dormant or not on the radars of policymakers. This should be taken critically though in that in as much as focusing events provide a shock in the system that may bring issues to the attention of policymakers, focusing too much on them leads to a very linear thinking about disasters, reactionary attitude in policymaking and a complacency in terms of tackling root causes: vulnerabilities, entrenched disparities and unequal power relations.