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Symbolic knowledge at work: Comitology and learning from experts in European technology policy

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DISCUSSION PAPER



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Symbolic Knowledge At Work: Comitology and Learning from Experts in European Technology Policy

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Abstract

The execution of EU laws by the European Commission is overseen by an intricate system of committees with national delegates. Comitology procedures were developed to moderate Commission action in policy implementation according to member state interests. Apparently, though, comitology has become an instrument of greater rather than less integration in Europe. This paper attempts to account for why this is so, pointing in particular to the importance of Commission-organized expert groups for interest accommodation with member states. The Commission's propensity to value expert knowledge for its symbolic functions is the bottom line of this paper's claim that use of expert knowledge frames the discourse within which agreement is achieved among EU member states for implementing measures. Symbolic knowledge at work bolsters the Commission's credibility to drive European integration but is inconsistent with what it does at the administrative core of policy implementation. To make this argument, the paper draws on qualitative research on the administration of European technology policy. It accounts for organizational effects through analysis within an organizational learning framework that links the expert-based formation of knowledge with its use.

Keywords

Comitology, expert groups, European technology policy, symbolic knowledge, political organization, organizational learning

Zusammenfassung

Symbolisches Wissen in der europäischen Technologiepolitik: Experten, Lernen und das Ausschusswesen

Die Implementierung europäischer Gesetze durch die EU-Kommission unterliegt einem komplizierten System von Verwaltungsausschüssen. Mit diesem Ausschusswesen („Komitologie“) wurde ursprünglich das Ziel verfolgt, die Exekutivfunktion der Kommission an die nationalstaatlichen Interessen und Präferenzen zurückzubinden. Im Laufe der Zeit scheint sich das Ausschusswesen jedoch zu einem Instrument vertiefter statt gehemmter Integration entwickelt zu haben. Das vorliegende Discussion Paper versucht zu verstehen warum das so ist und konzentriert sich hierfür auf die Einbeziehung von Experten aus Wirtschaft und Wissenschaft durch die Kommission.

Ausgangspunkt der Überlegungen ist, dass die Kommission Expertenwissen symbolisch nutzt. Symbolisches Wissen kommt bei der Überwachung ihrer Durchführungsbefugnisse durch die Mitgliedsländer zum Tragen. Damit ist gemeint, dass die Kommission ihren institutionellen Führungsanspruch in Europa untermauert, wenn sie sich bei zustimmungspflichtigen Entscheidungen über die Verteilung von Mitteln oder programmatischen Zielen auf Expertenwissen stützt. Die Legitimierung ihrer Exekutivfunktion gegenüber den Mitgliedsländern und die konkrete Implementierung europäischer Gesetze fallen jedoch auseinander, was die Bedeutung des Ausschusswesens als Kontrollinstrument zumindest prekär erscheinen lässt. Diesem Argument liegt qualitative Forschung zur Durchführung europäischer Technologiepolitik zugrunde. Die Untersuchung stützt sich auf Theorien des Organisationslernens und verbindet so den Blick für die in der Kommission gängige Praxis Expertenwissen einzuholen mit dessen Wirkungen für die Kontrollierbarkeit ihrer Durchführungsbefugnisse durch die Mitgliedsländer.

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1. Introduction

The European Commission is at the heart of the integration process in Europe (Nugent 2001). It plays a pivotal role in the definition of policy problems, the translation of initiatives into clear proposals and the management and application of Community policies; this it does with great openness towards the diverse and often conflicting demands from national governments and organized interests (Mazey and Richardson 2003; Schmitter 1996). The Commission's capacity to act as a think tank and its power of initiative are intimately linked in its pursuit of collective solutions at the European level (Laffan 1997; Metcalfe 1996). Its power among the institutions of the European Union depends on resources that help solve problems: "expert knowledge, political insight, and bargaining experience" (Kohler-Koch 1997: 48). Once legislative acts have been adopted by the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament, an intricate system of member state committees oversees the execution of EU laws by the Commission. This system of about 250 monitoring committees is formalized in the Council's Comitology Decision to balance the Commission's initiation power and its bias for legislative intervention (Franchino 2000). The procedures that were created to restrict the Commission's executive powers, however, evolved over time into arrangements, which "move outcomes toward the Commission's preferred policies rather than those of the Council" (Ballmann et al. 2002: 552). This is surprising given previous accounts of comitology that see an overall trend toward more restrictive use of its procedures in the implementation of Community policies and therefore increasing interference from government representatives (Dogan 1997).

This paper tries to account for why comitology is an instrument of greater rather than less integration in Europe. With a view to the proliferation of Commission-organized expert groups over time and across sectors (Gornitzka and Sverdrup 2008), section 2 develops the argument that expert group involvement helps the Commission to accommodate interests and present itself as the Community's conscience with ideas that reflect the European concerns. The Commission draws on expert knowledge in a way that bolsters its credibility among member state governments (Boswell 2008). Expert knowledge becomes symbolic knowledge at work when the Commission seeks approval for its policy choices among member state

governments, thereby substantiating its particular preferences and positions. Drawing on theories of organizational learning and Niels Brunsson's insights about political organizations, the analytical frame in section 3 nurtures the expectation that consultation of expert groups strengthens the Commission's position with comitology committees. But this has little to do with what is done at the administrative core of policy implementation. Evidence for this claim is provided in section 4 with findings from qualitative research into the history of European technology policy implementation. Implications for control of the Commission's implementation powers round out this paper.

2. Comitology committees and expert groups in the implementation of European policies

The functionalist explanation contends that the committee system overseeing acts implemented by the Commission began in the 1960s with the development of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) as a response to EU member states' need to delegate executive powers to the EU administration without losing control (Blom-Hansen 2008). The administrative set-up of comitology had staying power; it served as the precedent for many other areas of legislation. Rules for different degrees of delegation and control were formalized in the 1987 Comitology Decision in areas like environment policy, consumer protection, transport and energy, single market creation or research and technology development. Comitology enables member states to challenge individual administrative decisions and influence the broad outlines of Commission policy; it operates as an early warning system for potential Council intervention and permits the member states to be closely involved in funding decisions (Dogan 1997). Oversight is limited to three categories of committees, viz. advisory, management and regulatory, whereby the level of control over the management process increases progressively from the first mentioned category to the last.

Comitology was reformed in 1999 to streamline the accompanying procedures by specifying the policy areas appropriate for each category: for instance, agricultural and financial support measures were to be implemented under the management procedure, whereas measures of a general scope including the safety of humans, animals and plants were to be dealt

with under the regulatory procedure. The reform also increased the role of the European Parliament to exercise control of the Commission's management in areas where co-decision applies. The Commission is required to provide the Parliament with broad information on drafted implementation measures, including agendas and records of committee meetings and voting results of opinions delivered by a committee. Over the years, the major formal changes in the comitology system achieved greater systematization and transparency, but at the same time they made debates more technical and less politically interesting (Alfé et al. 2008). The established comitology practice of presenting politically salient issues in technical terms remained (Landfried 1999).

Controllability of the Commission's implementation powers is frequently conceptualized with the principal-agent model. In this model, "the principal (member governments) entrusts the agent (Commission) with the necessary powers to attain pre-defined political goals (for example the power of direct applicability of European law)" (Egan and Wolf 1999: 251). The Commission serves as the engine of European integration within the limits of member state preferences (Pollack 1998). Delegating the task of proposing solutions to the Commission as the executive agent reduces decision-making costs among the member states (Blom-Hansen 2008), but the implication may be that the agent behaves in ways that diverge from the preferences of the principal. In principal-agent analysis, oversight procedures like comitology are a means to prevent "bureaucratic drift", that is, the Commission's tendency to pursue its own interests rather than those of its legislative principal (Ballmann et al. 2002). Principal-agent analysis suggests that the Commission's primary goal is to propose integrationist legislation. The price to be paid for stable discretion in this area is *ex post* control procedures (Franchino 2000).

The tilt of principal-agent analysis towards controllability obscures the fact that the preferences of member state governments may be quite different, especially in the enlarged Union of 27 member states (Bauer 2002). There is no optimal way for the Commission to safeguard member state interests in policy implementation. Information asymmetries in favour of the Commission can be exploited to accommodate interests and assume responsibility for European problems and solutions. The sharp increase of Commission-organized expert groups is noteworthy in this context: Gornitzka and

Sverdrup (2008) found 1237 expert groups as of January 2007 compared to 851 such groups in 2000 and 602 in 1990. These groups do not make formal political decisions, but they may affect the way in which problems are conceived and ideas generated to resolve them, by giving advice, providing scientific knowledge, sharing practical experience and information and serving as forums for exchange of views and perspectives. The Commission's interaction with expert groups is a significant element of the European governance structure, a routinized practice and a tool for extending its capacity for action, according to Gornitzka and Sverdrup. If this is true with regard to the Commission's implementation powers, then control and oversight through comitology appears precarious.

A critical reading of research within the epistemic communities approach reveals that knowledge provided by experts from academia and the business sector to the Commission has less to do with these individuals than with the political structure in which they act (Radaelli 1999). The Delors committee, for instance, was given an authoritative voice in the movement that led to a substantial departure from national sovereignty over monetary policy because former Commission president, Jacques Delors, used it to validate his idea that low inflation policy should be the basis for monetary cooperation (see Verdun 1999). To conceive of epistemic community activity and ideas as the independent variable and decision makers' preferences as the dependent variable is misleading (see Zito 2001). The implicit understanding of expert knowledge as an objective, interest-free and transferable good in the epistemic communities approach neglects the process in which it endows the Commission with authority in the policy process (Horn 2008).ⁱ In the political domain, expert knowledge is not "out there", ready to be absorbed but is constructed to fit particular ends (Bennett and Howlett 1992). The distinction between the Commission's activities which aim at knowledge gathering (including policy feedback and causal beliefs to generate innovative ideas) and efforts to use expert knowledge as a political asset to oppose competing interests and broker deals is often blurred in practice (Brown 2000).

Understanding the relationship between proliferating expert groups and comitology cannot be dealt with sufficiently in terms of the instrumental function that expert knowledge may have at early stages of the policy process. The Commission's propensity to value expert knowledge for its

symbolic functions (Boswell 2008) is the bottom line of this paper's claim that formation and use of expert knowledge in the implementation of European policies creates gaps in member state control. Symbolic knowledge at work can be examined within an organizational learning framework. It captures the implications of symbolic knowledge at work, which are the Commission's ability to satisfy the expectations of powerful groups in its environment but to shield the core of supranational administration from criticism and external intervention. The Commission is a political organization that wins the support for its implementation powers and agenda setting because it meets the demands of member states through what Brunsson (1989) calls "talk" and "decision", i.e. ideology which the political organization is anxious to demonstrate to the outside world but which may have little to do with what it actually does at the core (see Brunsson and Olson 1993).

3. Learning from experts in a political organization

Studying the formation and use of expert knowledge in the Commission resonates with the traditional approach in organizational learning theory that distinguishes between the creation of a willingness to learn, the accumulation, distribution and interpretation of knowledge and its integration with organizational memory as distinct stages of learning (Berthoin Antal and Krebsbach-Gnath 2001; Huber 1991). This research suggests that learning does not simply occur by acquiring knowledge from internal or external sources, but encompasses internally-based and externally-oriented strategies for identifying (new) knowledge and for disseminating that knowledge deeply and widely enough for action to be taken. Knowledge gains need to become meaningful to an organization's activities through interpretation and memory storage in order for it to have an effect on organizational behaviour. Organizational learning in this perspective is often accompanied with the expectation that the processing of knowledge expands an organization's potential range of behaviours (Child 1997).

Stage models of learning are criticized for their overriding emphasis on the processing of knowledge, lacking sufficient understanding for the activities and social practices that sustain learning (Gherardi and Nicolini 2001). Applying the notion of learning to the Commission requires understanding

of its role as the “steering body of the world’s most encompassing supranational regime” (Hooghe 2005: 862) with an ongoing interest in the expansion of its competences (Kröger 2008). In the broad range of decisions taken through comitology, like the allocation of grants under expenditure programmes or the modification of standards under health and safety legislation, it is unlikely “that the Commission would be able to ride roughshod over the interests of its opponents (which invariably include at least one member state), or manage its priorities in an impositional style” (Cram 1994: 199). But the Commission can make a difference in decision making if it focuses on background processes like “discourse framing” or the creation of its own constituencies to raise support for particular policy solutions (Bauer 2002). The analytical framework below takes up these ideas and proceeds in three steps: (1) learning from experts starts with the evaluation of the institutional environment in which decisions on the criteria used to identify potential recipients of Union monies are taken; (2) the context is scrutinized for those processes in which gathered knowledge is shaped to become meaningful for Commission activities and (3) used to bolster the Commission’s credibility.

Towards an analytical framework

Step 1. Comitology rules exist both in principle and in practice (Alfé et al. 2008), a distinction that is gaining momentum in recent theorizing on organizations. Feldman and Pentland (2003), in particular, develop this distinction conceptually to examine continuity and change in rules. They develop the notion of *performativity*, which assumes that individual performances of a rule may either reproduce or alter the rule through practice. A practice is “carried out against the backdrop of rules and expectations, but the particular course of action we choose is always, to some extent, novel” (Pentland and Feldman 2005: 796). The principle of a given rule is reproduced when it is used to guide the communication of normative expectations, to account for appropriate behaviour and to serve as point of departure for sense making. It is subject to change when people start to ignore the rule, replace it, or reproduce it differently. On these grounds it is argued that *the recursive relationship of rules in principle and rules in practice helps us to assess the current functioning of comitology from a*

dynamic perspective and account for the possibility of limited controllability.

Step 2. The involvement of expert groups by the Commission is conceptualized as a form of “boundary spanning activities”. The notion of boundary spanning activities depicts the openness of organizations to their environments and captures the interactions across an organization’s external boundaries (Aldrich 1979). Boundary spanning activities direct attention to the processes by which knowledge gathered from external stakeholders is constructed to become relevant for organization’s ends. Knowledge formed through boundary spanning activities is relational, context-specific and anchored in the intersubjectively shared beliefs of those involved (Gherardi et al. 1998). Forming knowledge with external stakeholders through boundary spanning activities is a source of power: it absorbs uncertainty “by selectively paring away the world’s native complexity” (Gordenker and Saunders 1978: 87).

Boundary spanning activities vary with the perceived goals, underlying orientations and rules that drive this process (Crozier and Friedberg 1980). The regulation of boundary spanning activities according to standardized rules and procedures leaves little manoeuvring room to the actors who are trying to influence the terms for defining relevant knowledge and the ways it is channelled into the organization. Conversely, flexibility in the regulation of these activities gives the actors involved discretion to form knowledge according to their interests and provide it to the organizational members who are not directly involved in the boundary spanning activities. *Looking at the social constitution of boundary spanning activities with its issues of power and regulation thus reveals that valuation of expert knowledge in the Commission has to do with the structures in which it is formed and channelled into the administration.*

Step 3. Boundary spanning activities are linked with intraorganizational processes in distinctive ways (Crozier and Friedberg 1980), which determines how and to what extent the different groups in an organization gain access to the knowledge formed with external experts (Shrivastava 1983). Relevance can be created through effective handling of the communication flow between boundary spanning activities and those members of the organization who are not directly involved in these activities, but it cannot be established once and for all. The fact that organizations have multiple

realities and practices makes interpretation of constructed knowledge through boundary spanning activities an essential element of learning (Berthoin Antal et al. 2001; Levitt and March 1988). Interpretation is grounded in an organization's memory or "repository of organized knowledge" (Walsh 1995: 286), i.e. knowledge encoded in the norms and forms of an organization, its rules and routines (Huber 1991; March 1991).

There is a tension between the stabilizing element of organizational memory (Hedberg 1981; Levitt and March 1988) and the risk of destabilizing the organizational core activities through the use of knowledge that is constructed with external stakeholders. It may be inconsistent with conceptions of appropriateness in (Levinthal and March 1993) and incompatible with core beliefs (Wiesenthal 1995). Political organizations like the Commission respond to this tension through "hypocrisy" (Brunsson 1989: 39): *expert knowledge is drawn upon to satisfy the variety of ideas, demands and expectations of the diverse groups in the Commission's environment and win their approval through legitimizing or substantiating particular decisions, but this knowledge is inconsistent with what the Commission does.* Knowledge formed through boundary spanning activities with experts is mainly symbolic knowledge at work.

4. Symbolic knowledge at work in European technology policy

Implementation of European technology policy has been selected to study the implications of learning from experts for EU member state control. European technology policy is one of the few areas where a substantial policy role of the Community appears relatively uncontroversial among the member states (Peterson and Sharp 1998; Sandholtz 1998). But the inherent fluidity and shifting priorities of the influential actors in information and communication (IC) technologies fuels the difficulty of getting member states to condone a particular approach to technology policy beyond any temporary compromise (Cram 1994). The Commission has learned to gather support for the prioritization of a particular approach to technology policy, to weave the knots between the powerful actors in the field and to act as a think tank providing new solutions to the old problem of competitiveness (Cram 1994; Roobeek 1990). Increasing the importance of the Information Society in its agenda, was the Commission's attempt to re-

spond to the changes in the European industries related to IC technologies, where computing services became one of the few areas of growth during the phase of recession, market saturation and oligopolistic competition that plagued hardware manufacturers during the 1990s.

Reflecting these broad changes, this paper focuses on the management and administration of the research and technology development programme that promotes a “user-friendly information society” in the 5th Framework Programme (1998-2002) of the European Community. It benefits from a qualitative study on the administration of the Information Society Technology Programme (IST). This study is based on 43 semi-structured in-depth interviews with Commission staff (30), members of a comitology committee (7) and an expert group (6), conducted between 1999 and 2003 (Böhling 2007). Interviews with Commission officials covered different hierarchical levels, including directors, their supporting staff, heads of unit and project officers. Anonymity was guaranteed. The study relied on qualitative methodology to furnish sufficient insight into the context of learning and its potential to focus on activity sequences as they unfold (Maitlis 2005).

The Information Society Technologies Programme was intended as a turning point to address the convergence of technologies. It integrated the different foci of its predecessor programmes in the 4th Framework Programme.ⁱⁱ These forerunners include the European Information Technologies (ESPRIT) Programme, with its focus on information technology, constituting one of the building blocks of European technology policy; the Advanced Communication Technology and Services (ACTS) Programme which centred on the development of communication technologies and the Telematic Applications (TAP) Programme. The IST Programme was financially the largest of the four specific research programmes – it received 3.6 billion euro in funding – within the European Community’s 5th Framework Programme, whose total budget amounted to 14.96 billion euro. The IST Programme was administered by the Directorate General for Information Society (DG INFSO) which too was formed in the late 1990s by merging the former DG for Telecommunications and Innovation with parts of the DG for Industry.

The convergence of technologies may have been a sound reasoning behind the merger of ESPRIT, ACTS, and TAP, but once decided upon by the

Council and the Parliament it seemed that reality was lagging behind. Having begun the effort to foster convergence of technologies in the broadly defined Information Society and promote the utility and the affordability of the new goods and services to be developed within IST, it became clear among Directorate General staff and interested parties that the task was more difficult than expected. Bridges had to be built, sectors crossed and multi-disciplinary research fostered by an administration that did not have the experience to do so. Whereas the predecessor programmes had focused on distinguishable sectors in the economy, the Directorate General was now challenged to operate somewhere between the constituencies of IT, telecommunications, software, content producers and very different fields of use such as automotive manufacturing, the entertainment industry and the healthcare sector. The empirical evidence shows that the Directorate General coped with this challenge through learning from experts within the context of comitology.

The current functioning of comitology in European technology policy

The implementation of the IST programme in the 5th Framework Programme was monitored by a regulatory committee. The members of the committee were appointed by the governments of the member states, the accession countries and the associated states to represent their interests in managing the IST. The committee had to approve the annual work programmes before they could be implemented; it also had a say in the funding decisions. One head of unit explained: “One of the decisions we [the Directorate General] can make is a work programme. But the member states must agree to that work programme before we can implement it.”ⁱⁱⁱ The delegates had to concur with the description of the topics, the priority setting and budget allocation in the work programme before calls for proposals could be made. Hence, the subsequent evaluation of submitted proposals and the monitoring and evaluation of those selected were also contingent on the committee’s consent. In a sense, then, the Directorate General “can only act as good and efficient as we are supported by the member states”. According to another head of unit, achieving this kind of support implied that

“... the content of the work program is compatible with the national priorities. ... So these representatives [the committee members] know the priorities of their ministries, and they want to make sure that this is reflected by the work programme, as it is defined in such a way that the European funding reinforces the efforts which are made by the member states.”

The Directorate General got the support of the committee and attained the majority vote in decision making on the updated work programmes and funding of research proposals because it discussed extensively with the individual delegates. Interviews with the administration's staff and committee members revealed that informal discussion and negotiations between both sides helped to reproduce the voting procedure and the other formal arrangements. Informal committee meetings, corridor meetings, e-mail exchanges, phone calls and, as a national delegate explained, “informal wine tasting and dinner” with officials, took place *ad hoc* to reconcile conflicting interests and find agreement. Officials and delegates stressed that a “continuous dialogue” with the Directorate General acting as “consensus seeker” furthered the achievement of consensus when a work programme was drafted. An official, in his capacity as a member of the support staff to one director explained: “During the course of that [interaction] views change and we begin to understand what is important [and] what is less so through the discussion.” The importance of informal discussions equally applies to the way agreement was reached about funding decisions, as pointed out by the following delegate:

“Some people of the Commission say: What will you say in the committee? Will you say ‘No’ [to] this project? Will you say ‘Yes’? What do you want? What is the problem? Why is there a problem? And we have a negotiation. ... And when we are in front of the committee, yes, we agree. But all the problems have been treated before, outside of the committee, in bilateral or trilateral meetings or between different partners. It is the classical way [to] work.”

In principle the committee had a substantial say in a number of programme management matters but in practice its influence was limited. The strong reliance on informal discussions for reaching agreement solidified the general expectation inside the Directorate General that the committee was “more of a financial committee that has an overseeing role in [the DG's] implementation of the programme ... [it gets] very little feedback from this committee now about directions for research.” The delegates

acted appropriately when representing their governments in the management of the programme and showing an interest in its administration. Directorate General staff was firm on this matter, which led to disappointment among delegates about the apparent lack of concern for their “interesting backgrounds in science, technology, and strategy ... and experiences like having run a national programme” in the field. One delegate stated: “It is true that the committee deals primarily with administrative tasks, but it also approves a work programme, doesn’t it? So in the [committee] there is definitely expertise available.” Regarding the preparation of the IST programme for its inclusion in the 6th Framework Programme, another delegate noted that the Directorate General “didn’t analyze the industrial situation. All these discussions, they were at the technology level. ... They [DG staff] didn’t have a very clear understanding of the industrial situation in the different countries.”

The committee questioned the strong technology focus in the programme’s implementation. It wanted to have more socioeconomic thinking incorporated in order to “really affect the needs of the industry” and “define in an appropriate manner their needs.” But these criticisms were buffered through the Directorate General’s expert-based decision-making style of work programme drafting. The national delegates were perceived among project officers as not having “strong opinions about directions for research and things like that”, while “most of the time they can’t agree because they all have different interests”. Simultaneously, delegates referred to the comprehensiveness of the IST programme and the size of its budget which made it difficult for them to discuss substantively with the administration’s staff:

“The more widely open a programme is, the less likely it is that the delegates are experts. They tend to be bureaucrats. ... I would know much better my own country because I would know all the players. So I would understand exactly the problems in a much better way. If you make a very, very large and very wide programme, it is very difficult for one person to discuss with the Commission. ... The politician will not be able to discuss because he will lose any discussion with the Commission. The Commission will be an expert on what they are saying. Politicians will just say vague things.”

Control of decision making about the selection and funding of research proposals was in fact biased toward the Directorate General’s preferences. In its “main aim to push the industrial and economic structures toward a

new paradigm”, the Directorate General formed alliances with powerful players in business and society to “help the emergence of a so-called common view”. Doing so framed the seeking of approval among the committee members. An official with the task to support work programme drafting explained that the policy-makers in the member states have to be convinced “that there is an interest to develop such a vision and to address certain aspects in research.” The Directorate General set the agenda in the negotiations with the delegates through the formation of a discourse on the future Information Society in Europe, “running the show really with little influence of the member states” as one delegate observed.

The formation of expert knowledge through boundary spanning activities

The formation of the discourse on the future Information Society took shape in boundary spanning activities with experts who were gathered in an advisory group. The 26 members of the group were selected by the Directorate General for their expertise and authority. Most of them originated from the business sector – large, European-based corporations that can be considered as main drivers in the development of IC technologies. Drawing on the Commission decision of 22 October 1988, the Directorate General provided the expert group with an official mandate to advise on proposals for spelling out the annually updated work programme, to assess views about the timetable of calls for proposals, to consider criteria for evaluating project proposals and to determine verifiable objectives for achieving the aims of the IST programme’s key actions. This mandate was redefined in the process of drafting the work programme. Given the difficulties of achieving technology convergence, the heterogeneity of the programme’s constituency and competing interest constellations, the Directorate General’s senior management eventually realized that the group’s speaking with a concerted voice about future trends in the Information Society could prove to be an asset for coming to terms with the Council decision on the IST programme, which required the anticipation of changes in technology, markets and socioeconomic contexts through annual work programmes.

Drafting of the work programme was guided by the norm of openness. “Continuously keeping the channels wide open and assessing what is going on” was an important task during this process, according to one head of unit. Receptiveness to developments in the environment was seen as essential for the running of the programme. Another head of unit explained: “You are forced, if you want to do this job properly, to follow very closely all technological, policy, and economic changes.” Accordingly, the first step in drafting the work programme was consultation with the affected constituency. Meetings were set up to inquire about the needs and preferences of the research communities, with the objective “to draw conclusions as well about possible actions to anticipate future needs”. To feed into work programme design, consultation reports were then produced, based on the meetings with the research communities. Some officials with particular responsibilities in the drafting process were concerned about the “danger” of consultation reports: “You might end up with a report that [has] a little bit of everything and ... no definite line of producing.” One of them explained:

“You need to focus because you do not have available all the money in the world to spend. ... And this focusing runs counter to the fact that there are many interests from the various constituencies ... but only a few aspects are considered to be of strategic importance for Europe.”

The drafting process of the annual work programmes was the main area in which the involvement of the advisory group became effective. The group described its view on the future developments in Information Society in terms of the ambient intelligence vision, which was perceived as the concept of converging technologies – that is, bringing together electronics, information technology and communications in such a way that technology becomes less visible, yet more relevant.

“The key issue was to sell the idea [of ambient intelligence] to the directors that there was something in it for them”, as one member of the Directorate General unit “Work Programme and Cross-Programme Themes” noted. The work programme unit was a new unit designed to coordinate the drafting of work programmes; it operated horizontally across the different directorates of the administrative hierarchy. Because the work programme unit had a stake in the establishment of a coalition between the Directorate General’s senior management and the expert group, the unit used the

plenary meetings of the group to nurture agreement on a rationale that could bind the different parts of the programme together. Its immediate access to the directors and the group's experts gave it authority in the delicate balancing of work programme drafting. The work programme unit looked at the group's advisory reports as "key recommendations" because they "reinforced [its] position ... as a unit [strengthening its ability and power] to give orientation."

Because of initial scepticism among some members of the experts group concerning their exact role in programme design, a set of rules was created to encourage them to share their views on the programme's content and direction with the directors in the Directorate General. Flexibility in regulating the group's conduct provided the opportunity for the work programme unit to strengthen its role in the drafting process. One of the unit's members explained: "There were no precedents for how to manage or run [the expert group in the Directorate General]. ... There was no ideal size and no ideal constitution." The broad guidelines for the group's work were determined in the plenary sessions, held on four or five days a year in Brussels. One group member described the interaction thus: "And then these kinds of things are linked with internal things in the Commission: we have to take such and such decisions ... for us to influence it; we need that thing [by] then. That is how it works and it works quite well."

The work programme unit made sure that the recommendations of the group were channelled into the Directorate General; the unit also exerted influence concerning how these were dealt with internally. Thus use of the recommendations became a source of power for the work programme unit in its capacity as coordinator of the editorial board (created to generate a first draft of the work programme). The unit, consisting of representatives from various directorates, pulled together the consultation reports and additional inputs from each of these directorates; it then proposed a first draft to the editorial board and the directors. Although it lacked the formal authority to decide on the content, its influence was undisputable: As one official external to the work programme unit candidly observed, "everything else is [just] an adjustment of the very first strategy that is taken." The work programme unit was "holding the pen" in the editing process:

"So they [pull] this together with my director and some support from the operational sector. ... But essentially someone has to hold the pen, so it

comes down to these few people ... the process of writing or distilling information, in passing it on that certain facts and figures have to be put in, certain facts and figures have to be left out. It's in the [author's mind], for [what] purpose he is writing – what should go forward. Some information [is] passed, some ... left behind.”

This led many of the Directorate General's staff to believe that major decisions on the content of the programme were taken within this unit, the advisory group “and whoever they talk[ed] to.” By the end of 2000, then, just one year after the vision of ambient intelligence was introduced, it “had become a mainstream philosophy and [in] that sense you [get] things [done more easily] if you link [up] to that concept.” Reference to the ambient intelligence vision meant desirable action in the Directorate General: “When you try to write something and you want to get it through, you tend [at the same time to refer] to the ambient intelligence vision.” In early 2003, when the Directorate General started to implement the follow-up IST Programme within the 6th Framework Programme, pragmatic use of the consensus on the ambient intelligence vision was common practice among officials. It “has made quite an impact on the thinking. ... It is a guiding vision for the whole programme and everybody is recognizing it.”

Inconsistence between external representation and core beliefs

A crucial issue in theories of organizational learning is the process in which adopted knowledge is embedded in an organization's established beliefs and practices. Looking at the ways in which the notion of ambient intelligence was handled inside the Directorate General indicates that the initial definition of the term by those who were directly involved in boundary spanning activities with external experts became relative. The Directorate General is far from being monolithic. The vision of ambient intelligence has connotations other than its being a mere guideline for the programme as a whole. Among project officers, one of the major issues in the discussion of this vision concerned its origin because, in the words of one interviewee,

“... this clearly came from Philips. So there is some company culture also behind it; there are some corporate interests ... behind it ... you have to always [be aware of] ... how far this should influence [you]; you should know what interests are behind [it] and what industries.”

The ambient intelligence vision was criticized for its bias towards home electronics and entertainment; it seemed to be of little use for application in professional working environments – a “fuzzy term” with limited relevance for the great bandwidth of research activities within the programme. In the words of one critical interviewee,

“I strongly believe that there is no IST vision. ... This vision doesn’t apply to the full Information Society applications. It ... originated from [the] consumer electronics manufacturers’ view and the specific situation of the home user. So when you try to expand it and to speak of ambient intelligence as an overall structuring vision, either it totally breaks down, that is it becomes such a fuzzy term that everybody can just say, ‘Oh, I am doing something that contributes to ambient intelligence!’ or it generates relatively absurd results. ... I think I can even prove that it doesn’t exist because I can prove that many of the individual visions that are implemented are contradictory with each other and have not been reconciled or arbitrated in the sense that if a vision [is] structuring, then we [choose] one thing and not another.”

The discussion about the ambient intelligence vision was fuelled by at least two factors: the Directorate General’s relatively high-calibre staff and its particular organizational culture. More than half of the 540 people working for the administration were scientifically trained, performing administrative and advisory duties. Possessing a considerable level of expertise implied that a large share of the administration’s personnel was knowledgeable about the technologies, their main drivers and significant actors of (parts of) the IST programme. The vision was therefore perceived as just one way to present trends in the evolution of technologies. The ability to assess trends and developments relevant for the programme management was also coloured by different programme cultures stemming from IST predecessor programmes. In 2003, four years after the Directorate General was formed, officials pointed out the continued existence of different working practices at the operational level of programme implementation:

“How reviews are done, how projects are monitored; there are different cultures going. It depends [on whether] you come from ESPRIT, from ACTS, from Telematics. ... I mean they [some methods] got a bit more streamlined, but you still see a lot of different ways of how projects are monitored, depending on where the people came from.”

The adoption of ambient intelligence as the official programme vision has effected only limited change in the Commission's underlying beliefs about goals and objectives of IST within the 5th Framework Programme. The official rationale behind the IST was inconsistent with the Directorate General's core beliefs. Reference to the vision was primarily a means of external representation, which resulted from

“daily [involvement] in discussing the Commission's vision with [its] customers, with the [members of the] research community in Europe who want to know where [the Commission's] focus is, ... where they would be more likely to be successful in bidding for funding for research, ... what topics to choose.”

Using the notion of ambient intelligence in this way helped the Directorate General to legitimate its role for the EU member states as the driving force behind the development of IC technologies in Europe and this saved it from having its conduct questioned.

5. Conclusions

Europe's comitology system with its oversight procedures and committees was created to control the Commission's delegated powers in the implementation of Community policies. In practice, comitology nurtures the consensus-forcing decision making style among the EU member states so that individual delegates may be seen as assisting rather than checking the Commission's executive function (Alfé et al. 2008). The fact that comitology barely results in overt conflict between member state delegates and Commission officials on a proposal (Ballman et al. 2002) fits well into the underlying picture of the Commission as an agent that serves the interests of its governmental principals. But routinized regard for their interests during the different stages of the policy process does not necessarily serve member states' inclination to control the Commission. It may have the opposite effect even in the enlarged Union of 27 member states if the Commission chooses to cut through potential conflicts by commissioning the provision of effective solutions to experts. There is dynamism in comitology, which provides evidence for historical institutionalism's account, according to which the current functioning of institutions may be quite different from the intentions that led to their establishment:

“As European-level decision making becomes both more prevalent and more complex, it places growing demands on the gatekeepers of member-state sovereignty. In this context, time constraints, scarcities of information, and the need to delegate decisions to experts may promote unanticipated consequences and lead to considerable gaps in member state control.” (Pierson 1996: 137)

The recent proliferation of expert groups that are organized by the Commission requires a comprehensive understanding of their contribution to the consensus-forcing decision making style in Europe. This analysis of the implementation of European technology policy indicates that consultation with an expert group helped the Directorate General for Information Society to attain an agreement among the EU member states for those proposals requiring their consent; this also allowed the DG to present itself as the engine of European integration. Gaps in member state control occurred because the Directorate General shaped the discourse within which policy decisions were taken with little *de facto* influence from member state representatives. It determined the performance criteria according to which it wanted to be assessed. The knowledge the Directorate General made sure to gain access to in the boundary spanning activities with the expert group became a means of winning the support for its implementation powers. It was symbolic knowledge at work that decoupled talk and decision from action. Gaps in member state control of supranational administration are therefore not only the outcome of turning political questions into technical issues but also the result of organized hypocrisy: talk and decision on the development of IC technologies that could bring competitive advantage to Europe in the future were buffered from action in this area.

From this single case study it is difficult to say that inconsistency between ideology and action is an overall characterizing feature of the Commission's administrative fabric. The Commission is distinctive in terms of its sectoralization and fragmentation with very different working practices across its Directorate Generals and quite different relationships with the important actors of the separate policy sectors they address (Cini 1997; Nugent 2001). But it may prove worthwhile to treat the Commission's Directorate Generals as political organizations for creating critical awareness of the ongoing practice whereby relationships with expert groups are nurtured to supplement the Commission's own resources. The Commission

wins legitimacy for its implementing powers by associating itself with the manifold and often conflicting demands and expectations of governments. It is likely that comitology will become an institutional forum that facilitates intergovernmental discourse and promotes transnational social integration if it meets the challenge “[of enhancing] the discursive capabilities of governmental delegates, provid[ing] more accountability by increasing transparency and clarify[ing] the role of the EP in the political administration of the EU” (Neyer 2000: 114). To account for the public interest in the centralized implementation of European policies, however, politicization of expertise seems crucial.

Notes

- i See also Barnett and Finnemore (1999) and St. Clair (2006) who make this point with regard to international organizations.
- ii The mobile phone, for instance, demonstrates the convergence of single technologies into network technologies. With the possibility of sending and receiving emails, surfing the internet, and downloading music and videos, categorization becomes a tricky issue. Is this mobile device a phone, PC, TV, DVD recorder, or play station? The proclaimed convergence of technologies is accompanied by a blurring of the boundaries between what used to be historically distinct sectors in economy.
- iii All quotations in section 4 have been excerpted from the transcripts of a series of 43 semi-structured, in-depth, anonymous interviews with 30 European Commission staff, seven members of a comitology committee and six members of an expert group, conducted in Brussels, Luxemburg and as telephone interviews between 1999 and 2003.

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