Analyzing Innovation Narratives

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Introduction

Once upon a time, the study of narrative was an activity reserved for the literary scholars known as narratologists. Entrenched behind ramparts of specialist terminology (*fabula, sjuzet, recit, discours*) their claims for the universal and timeless nature of their subject matter went largely unnoticed. That was then. The past two decades have seen an explosion of interest in narrative, or more simply, story-telling, across an expanding range of disciplines: cognitive science, artificial intelligence, evolutionary biology and psychology, anthropology, law, medicine. More and more, the narrative impulse has been understood to be embedded deep in the developmental history of our species, a universal "category of human endeavor and experience" (Gottschall and Wilson 2005).

A few public management scholars have "taken the narrative turn" (Ospina and Dodge 2005), with stories and story-telling being adopted as both their research subject and methodology. Considering the data base generated by the Ash Institute's Innovations in American Government Awards from a narrative perspective, two things become clear immediately: the abundance of narratives embedded in the data, and the importance of the activity of narrative to both the innovation and awards processes. The object of this paper is to pursue this realization further: to demonstrate how the Innovations in American Government Awards (henceforth, Innovations Awards) can be used to produce master narratives about innovation, and how those narratives can be analyzed using concepts borrowed from narratology. Adopting this approach, the outlines of a new story begin to emerge, the story of the changing nature of public management innovation in the twenty-first century.

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The Innovations Awards is arguably the most significant public sector innovation award program in the United States, by virtue of its longevity (22 years), the size and scope of its applicant pool, the thoroughness of its review process, and the publicity and prestige accorded winning applicants. To understand the relationship between the award program and innovation narratives, it is necessary to look more closely at the competition's review process. The criteria for the Innovations Awards are originality, significance in addressing an important problem or issue, impact on clients and other citizens, and replication or replicability. Initial applicants, of which there are approximately 1000 each year from all levels of government and in all policy areas, complete a three-page questionnaire which speaks to these criteria, but requires no further elaboration, no additional recounting, chronological ordering, contextualizing, interpreting, or implicit (or explicit) advocacy – no narrative, in other words. After several levels of expert review, fifty semi-finalists are chosen.

The semifinalists complete a more detailed sixteen-page questionnaire which, in addition to more comprehensive information regarding the stated criteria, poses categories of questions which begin to elicit a narrative – an ordered and meaningful representation of events – asking about the circumstances of an applicant program's conception and initiation (back-story), its key milestones for policy development and implementation (actions and protagonists), and the obstacles it encountered and how they were overcome or accommodated (conflict and resolution). These story-oriented questions are reproduced in the appendix.

Another round of expert review leads to the selection of approximately fifteen finalists. These receive a site visit from a practitioner or academic who is a nationally recognized expert in their policy area. The site visitor completes a report (see appendix for questions) that constitutes a second, complementary level of narrative about the application. Finally, a national selection

panel, composed of prominent practitioners and academics, meets with the site visitors, and then hears five minute presentations from each finalist. These oral presentations – available for the last two years on the Ash Institute's YouTube channel (http://www.youtube.com/user/AshInstitute) – form a third, often quite different, layer of narrative. At this point, five or six winners are chosen. The analysis in this paper focuses on the finalists alone, because of the number of narratives, and range of types, they generate.

The application and review process for the Innovations Awards produces three distinct narratives by three different authors with different readers and reading contexts in mind. (The presenter of the oral narrative may be the author of the written semi-finalist material but often is not.) These are significant differences and precisely the sort of narrative issues narratology addresses. One of the fundamental distinctions narratologists make is between the events being represented (*recit, fabula*) and the narrator's presentation of them (*discours, sjuzet*). The standard narrative convention of the nineteenth-century (the great age of the realist novel), the all-knowing, all-seeing ("omniscient") narrator, often obscured this distinction. Twentieth-century developments – an increasing use of first-person or multiple narrative perspectives, experimentation with unreliable or misleading narrators, narratives enacting the process of consciousness itself – made the distinction much more apparent. Indeed, the discrepancies between external event and narrator's perception often became central to the psychological and artistic aspirations of the work. A fundamental principle thus emerges: different narrators will present different versions, aspects, or interpretations of the same set of events (Prince 2003). This can be thought of as the narratological equivalent of one of the fundamental tenets of bureaucratic analysis: Where you stand depends on where you sit. We will explore its implications for innovation stories in some detail. A second focus of narratology that is equally

relevant here is the emphasis on the interplay between author and reader, and the complex nature of the personae and roles that emerge. Thus, the implied author is the author-persona as generated by the text (the image of the author hovering over or in his narrative) as well as the shaping consciousness responsible for the narrative's form, values, and cultural norms (Prince 2003, 42). Similarly, the implied reader is the recipient mind presupposed (created) by a text, as distinguished from the actual reader(s) who engage with it (Prince 2003, 43). Again, these are concepts with direct, practical consequences for innovators and their narratives.

A final narratological approach that will inform this analysis involves the consideration of formal structures (plot, characters, contexts) to identify and characterize narrative genres or types. Vladimir Propp, a Russian formalist critic, pioneered this approach with his *Morphology of the Folk Tale*, first published in Russian in 1928 and widely translated into English in the late 1960s. Using 100 Russian folktales as his data, Propp identified 31 fundamental structural elements which he claimed constituted a sort of universal grammar of narrative. While Propp's work had its critics, then and now, this notion of a typology of narrative elements has been widely adopted. We might be more familiar with it in its popular culture form of movie genres, and genre-specific standard plot-lines and character types (the lone gun-man and his Western narrative, the spunky romantic-comedy heroine "meeting cute" with her designated sparring partner and eventual mate, the world-weary detective in his noir universe of dangerous women, sinister gangsters, and corrupt cops). And these have, in fact, often been subjected to similar structural analysis (Hayward 2006, 185-8). Without attempting anything as rigid or formulaic, this analysis will also consider common structural elements that emerge from our set of innovation narratives. The goal is not somehow to "prove" that innovation stories are the same as

novels, folk-tales, or films. I am interested rather in who tells innovation narratives, how they tell them, and to whom, and what that can tell us about the nature of public sector innovation itself.

Methodology

This is exploratory research. I have therefore chosen a mid-sized sample consisting of the 15 finalists from the 2008 competition and the 16 from 2009. As discussed above, these are the only applicants for which all three types of narrative are available. Given the manageable sample size, I read and coded the applications and site visit reports myself. A larger sample would have required several coders and the checking of inter-coder reliability. I have included as an appendix the questions in the applicant and site visitor questionnaires that I used. I viewed the 2008 finalist presentations on YouTube and attended the 2009 finalist presentations at the Harvard Kennedy School. I also observed the session before the finalist presentations where the selection panel held consecutive ten-minute meetings with the 16 site visitors. (There was very little difference between viewing the oral presentations as YouTube clips and attending them in person. Observing the panel's interactions with the site visitors did add significantly to my understanding of the site visitors' narrative function. This will be discussed in some detail below.)

Typical narratological analysis, as undertaken by literature or film scholars, tends to use small samples and prefers a qualitative to a quantitative approach.[1] Public management scholars who use narrative analysis often position their work in opposition to the prevailing positivistic and statistically-oriented research paradigm in public management. This is primarily because the

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[1] A recent exception is Bulman (2005), who studied 185 high school movies – virtually the entire universe of the genre – breaking them down into sub-genres, but undertaking no coding or quantitative analysis.

narrative framework has focused on empathetic understanding from within rather than detached explanation from outside a narrative, has resisted quantification, and has redefined tests of quality, for example in terms of credibility or plausibility rather than statistical validity (Dodge, Ospina, and Foldy 2005). By using a sample of 31 – close to the level at which positivist researchers will do statistical testing – and explicitly coding, this paper strives to occupy a middle ground between statistical and narrative methodologies. The results are presented as hypotheses for further research either using larger samples or in detailed case studies. There has been a tendency within the discipline to view the two approaches (story versus numbers) as inherently opposed. My methodology assumes the importance of the interactions of the two. Beginning with formal coding and numeric analysis, I move from the patterns the numbers reveal to the narrative morphology they also provide. It is, in a sense, a question of reading the story in the numbers, a practice premised on the belief that neither one alone tells the whole tale. The paper also revisits some of the conclusions I drew in previous quantitative studies of government innovation, re-viewing them in this new, narrative light (Borins 1998, 2000a, 2000b, 2001).

One difference that might be expected between statistical and narrative studies of innovation is that statistical studies, if they are to produce significant results, require variance in both dependent and independent variables. On the other hand, narrative studies start with the assumption that there are common archetypal narratives and that actual cases are close to the archetypes. In the language of statistical research, the narratological expectation is that observed values are unimodal and have little variance.

Using a sample of the most highly rated applications to determine the characteristics of successful innovations is, of course, subject to the criticism of selection on the dependent

variable (Kelman 2008). The purpose of this study is not, however, to determine what differentiates successful from unsuccessful innovations, but rather to explore the structure of innovation narratives. Still, we could expect some difference between successful and unsuccessful innovations in the latter stages of the narrative, for example the former achieving some impact, recognition, and replication, while the latter would achieve little impact and would likely be cancelled. (In terms of genre, it is the difference between the success story with the happy ending and the cautionary tale that ends in failure.) Unfortunately it is only the highest ranked applications that have the multiple narrations that are essential to this study. Conceivably, a researcher could attempt to find or develop narratives about visibly unsuccessful innovations to the extent that practitioners would co-operate with such an initiative, which is not at all certain. Such an attempt, however, is beyond the scope of this paper.

[Table 1 about here]

Structural Analysis of Innovation Narratives

Reading the awards applications for their narrative structures involved a form of analysis that could certainly be characterized as subjective, though without the methodological limitations the term usually implies. The object here was to make the coding book a point of departure, to engage with the material in a holistic, chronological way as well, paying special attention to issues of continuity or, conversely, internal contradictions, chronology, implicit narrative viewpoints, and implied readers (and knowledge communities) in order to identify common elements in the 31 narratives. Inter-coder reliability was beside the point. This is an approach

which expects, indeed invites, interpretive variation. Other readings do not invalidate its findings.

I focused on the inception of the innovation for two reasons. First, because the Innovations Awards favor originality, the innovations may often be presented reasonably soon after their inception, which limits the information available about their evolution. Second, the questionnaire asks about obstacles – one of the key aspects of evolution – but does so in a separate question from the one about milestones, which makes it difficult to determine when an obstacle arose, somewhat obscuring the conflict and resolution aspect of the narrative.

The narratives began with the circumstances that generated the innovation. In 26 of the 31 applications, it was possible to determine a long sequence of events pre-dating the conception of the innovation, which I refer to as its prehistory. In some instances, the innovation was applying a previous innovation to a new context.

- The US Department of Transportation/US Navy Global Maritime Domain Awareness program scaled up globally an existing program of tracking ships based on transponder information used on the St. Lawrence Seaway and Panama Canal.
- The Lawrence, MA Auto Insurance Fraud Task Force applied problem-oriented policing principles developed by New York City's CompStat program in the 1990s to the problem of staged automobile accidents that benefited fraudulent lawyers and chiropractors.

In other cases, the innovation represented a new initiative to deal with a long-standing problem where previous initiatives had failed outright, run their course, or had achieved only limited success.

- The Massachusetts health insurance connector authority was established to ensure that all residents have health insurance, and followed unsuccessful initiatives to achieve universal coverage going back to Governor Dukakis in the 1980s.

- The New York City Acquisition Fund is a partnership of the City, seven foundations, and sixteen banks to facilitate the purchase of land and buildings for affordable housing that was initiated after the city's stock of foreclosed housing, which had been used for that purpose since the 1970s, had been exhausted.

- New Leaders for New Schools was founded by Jon Schnurr, who had worked on educational policy in the Clinton Administration, and came to believe that an essential but hitherto overlooked component of reforming public education was improving the quality of leadership, particularly at the school principal level.

The Innovations Awards, by making originality a criterion, are looking for inventions, such as a new solution to a new problem. Conceptualizing the diffusion process as a logistic curve (as in Rogers 2003), the program is looking for those at the lower tail of the curve, and by publicizing them, is attempting to increase the slope of the curve. On the other hand, the incrementalist approach to public policy most notably articulated by Lindblom (1959, 1965) argues that in the public sector there are rarely strikingly new problems or solutions, but rather there are difficult problems of long-standing, and any initiative to deal with such a problem is likely inspired by or a modification of a previous attempt. Put in terms of Thomas Kuhn's (1962) familiar notion of scientific paradigms, even the most innovative public servants are usually engaging in the equivalent of normal science rather than paradigm-shifting revolutionary science. The existence of a prehistory for 84 percent of the innovations in this sample (see Table 1) would

seem to be consistent with Lindblomian incrementalism or Kuhnian normal science, thus leading to hypothesis 1:

H1: Public sector innovations are usually the latest in a series of incremental responses to difficult long-standing problems.

In 26 of the 31 innovations in the sample, the process of initiating an innovation was one of solving, or at least responding, to a policy problem. There were two types of exceptions to this rule and they provide interesting contrasts. In one application, the Arizona Department of Corrections's Getting Ready initiative, it was clear that then Governor Napolitano was looking for a systemic transformation of the department to emphasize rehabilitation. She appointed as Director Dora Schriro, a prison reformer who had headed the Missouri Department of Corrections. A hostage-taking six months into Schriro's tenure was the crisis that provided a mandate for this transformation. In contrast to this story of a dramatic and highly visible breakdown, in four cases the innovation was a result of an opportunity, in effect a solution in search of a problem. In two of these a federal grants program was responsible for launching the innovation. The third – the Washington DC data feed initiative involving the posting of raw and real-time operational data – was an outgrowth of the city's CapStat program to produce online performance data. The fourth – the Boston Teacher Residency program – came about when Strategic Grant Partners, a coalition of family foundations, offered School Superintendent Tom Payzant funding for a major initiative of his choice, and Payzant decided to use the money to develop a program of specialized training for cohorts of new teachers.

Organizational turnarounds, such as that in the Arizona Corrections System, create a compelling narrative of organizational failure and redemption and thus attract considerable

attention. In previous research using large samples (Borins 1998, 154), however, I determined that fewer than 5 percent of innovation awards applications can be characterized as turnarounds. Identifying only one of 31 applications as a turnaround is consistent with previous research. The story of a failing institution brought back from the brink by visionary leadership in the face of crisis has an undoubted appeal, not least in the potential for a triumphant "Hollywood ending". But it is the product a very particular confluence of circumstances and should not be considered as a dominant innovation genre. Opportunistic innovations can also create a compelling narrative, a tale of shrewdness, ingenuity, and "guts" in the sense that there were available resources which the innovator was clever enough to recognize and grasp and creative enough to capitalize on. But the infrequency of both these narratives leads to a second hypothesis.

H2: The most common sequence for initiating a public sector innovation is a response to a policy or management problem.

I then classified the sample in terms of the type of problem they were dealing with. The bulk of the sample (23 of 31 cases) were aimed at less well-off segments of American society, for example people without employer-funded health insurance, children in inner-city schools or the child welfare system, and inmate populations. Broadly speaking, I define these innovations as repairing, or at least patching, the social safety net (stories of intervention). The other types of problems included public security at either of the national or local levels (4 cases) – stories of protection – environmental problems (2) – green stories – or initiatives to improve the internal functioning of government (2) – reform stories. In a previous paper (Borins 2001) using a sample of innovations from the 1990s in the US and in both economically developing and advanced countries in the Commonwealth, I noted that the incidence of innovations involving less-privileged populations was much higher in the US than in the economically advanced

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Commonwealth countries (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Singapore, the UK), where the innovations were often targeted at the general population, or at business, or were internal to government. The pattern for the US more closely resembled that of the economically developing countries. This sample suggests that is still the case. Because the pattern in the economically advanced countries of the Commonwealth differed markedly from that observed in the US a decade ago and now, I would not use the most recent US sample as the basis for a hypothesis about the types of problems public sector innovations address that was intended to be applicable internationally.

The most striking characteristic of this sample of innovations is the high incidence of inter-organizational cooperation – in narratological terms, the multiplication of the role of protagonist. In 26 of 31 cases (84 percent), cooperation was present in some form, and in only five did the innovation happen entirely within an organization. Some of the instances of inter-organization cooperation involved partnerships of two, for example a technology developed jointly by the Idaho Department of Water Resources and academics at the University of Idaho to observe and map water usage based on data from NASA's Landsat. More complicated partnerships involved a larger number of organizational participants based in the public, private, and non-profit sectors. Thus, the Boston Teacher Residency Program involved a partnership among the Boston Public Schools, seven family foundations coordinated by Strategic Grant Partners, and the University of Massachusetts at Boston, which oversaw and provided a graduate credential for the teacher training program. The New York City Acquisition Program was led by the City housing department and involved investments by seven foundations and sixteen banks to create a pool of $230 million. The Global Maritime Domain Awareness program was funded by the US Navy with software development by the Volpe Center, a research unit in the Department of

Transportation, and expanded its reach as 37 nations agreed to provide transponder data from ships under their registry in return for access to the entire database.

It is worth noting here that the narratives the Innovations Awards competition elicits are by no means the only story to be told. In the majority of instances in my analytic set, there was another narrative implicit in the material: a story of inter-agency interaction as the necessary condition to successful innovation. Increasingly, it would seem, an innovation narrative is also a partnership story. This has interesting implications both for researchers focusing specifically on partnerships, and, potentially, for the design of future awards applications. It is a point I will return to. (A researcher interested in partnerships would be seeking information on their characteristics – how they were initiated, the steps taken to build them, the resources contributed, the sequence in which the various steps were taken (Bardach 2008). Some, but not all of these categories can be inferred from the existing application narratives. For example, it was clear that while some of the partnerships were informal, many others were maintained by memoranda of agreement involving such matters as contributions of staff and financing.)

My research indicates that, over time, there has been a dramatic increase in the percentage of the highest-rated public sector innovations in the US involving inter-organization cooperation, from 29 percent in a sample of 217 semi-finalist applications in the state and local government innovations awards between 1990 and 1994, to 57 percent of a sample of 104 finalist applications to the Innovations Awards (which included the federal government) between 1995 and 1998, to the 84 percent observed in the 2008 and 2009 finalists (Borins 1998, 2000a). It might be the case that innovations internal to one organization represent the low-hanging fruit (or what Karl Weick (1984) called small wins) almost all of which has now been picked. Thus the innovation frontier has moved to more difficult policy or management problems that require the

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efforts of several organizations. It would be interesting to see whether this trend is reflected in the entire applicant pool as well as those chosen by the experts for recognition. If it is, that would mean that practitioners are in agreement with what appears to be the consensus of the experts about where the frontiers of public sector innovation are now located. In any event, Kanter's (1998) finding in her review of the literature on private sector innovation that "the innovation process crosses boundaries" seems increasingly relevant to the public sector. Hence a third hypothesis:

H3: Public sector innovations usually require inter-organizational cooperation. (This is a story with more than one hero.)

I then coded the initiator(s) of the innovation and compared it to the results for 1990 to 1994 and 1995 to 1998 (Borins 2000a). Percentages for politicians (18 percent in 1990-94, 27 percent in 1995-98, and 23 percent in 2008-09) and agency heads (23 percent in 1990-94, 28 percent in 1995-98, and 32 percent in 2008-09) were roughly similar, but the percentage for middle managers (32 percent in 2008-09 versus 43 percent in 1995-98) dropped somewhat while the percentage for front-line staff dropped sharply (3 percent in 2008-09 versus 27 percent in 1995-98).[2] The drop in innovations initiated at these levels is likely explained by the increase in the percentage of innovations involving inter-organizational cooperation. A front-line worker may readily take the initiative in an innovation in her own organization, but she would likely feel she lacks the authority to initiate an innovation involving cooperation with another organization. The authority to negotiate across organizational boundaries and establish partnerships usually rests at the upper levels of any organization. Hence hypothesis four:

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[2] Middle management and front-line staff were coded together in 1990-94 (Borins 1998).

H4: Public sector innovations involving inter-organizational cooperation are less likely to be initiated at the front lines than at higher levels of the participating organizations.

This is a significant change in the tenor of the innovation narrative, a shift from a tale of individual initiative and inspiration to a collective process of planning and implementation. It is a shift that alters considerably the typical roles and "plot lines" we can expect to encounter.

The final aspect of the initiation process is the support of high level executive players or legislators, which was present in 24 of 31, or 74 percent of applications. In some cases, such as the Boston teacher training initiative, the head of the organization initiated the innovation. In others, such as the Arizona Department of Corrections, the chief executive (Governor Napolitano) set the initiative in motion through a senior staffing decision and remained supportive as a high-ranking deputy (Commissioner of Corrections Schriro) led the organizational turnaround. In three applications from New York City, each involving considerable inter-organizational cooperation, Mayor Michael Bloomberg made it clear that he was backing the project. For example, he endorsed an initiative (Project Zero) of the Commissioner of the Office of Probation to provide community-based alternatives to incarceration by convening a meeting with family court judges to discuss the program's achievements and urge them to support it.

The literature on innovations considers high-level support as a necessary precondition, generally by creating a climate that is receptive to new ideas being developed at lower levels of the organization. I would modify that argument slightly to take into account the influence of inter-organizational cooperation. Innovations internal to an organization can move ahead as long as there is a supportive climate. Innovations involving inter-organizational cooperation,

especially if there is a large number of participants from various sectors of society, need a specific show of support from leaders who are acknowledged by all. Hence hypothesis five.

H5: Public sector innovations often require the support of chief executives and/or legislators, particularly if they involve inter-organizational cooperation.

These hypotheses can be combined into an archetypal innovation narrative that would take the following form. Innovations in government generally involve a new response to a difficult and long-standing policy or management problem. In the US, the problems involve issues like delivering a comprehensive package of support services to people in need, providing effective and efficient health care for people who do not belong to private plans, improving life-chances for students in inner-city public schools, or coordinating national defense against unconventional and networked insurgents. Making progress in responding to these problems necessarily requires coordination of public sector organizations whose mandates are limited to encompass only a part of the problem. Non-profits as well as the private sector have expertise or other resources that could be enlisted in such partnerships. These innovations are often initiated by individuals whose scope of vision is broad enough to see the big picture, which would include politicians, agency heads, and civil society groups. The required partnerships are often legitimated by senior elected or appointed executives such as a governor, mayor, or agency head, as well as legislators.

This ur-innovation narrative is a complicated one, because it encompasses so many players and interests. It is a narrative about collective effort to respond to a problem, involving negotiation about coming onboard and then, ideally, pulling together. There may be considerable variation as to how these partnerships pull together, particularly whether the partnership is

formalized through a negotiated memorandum of understanding or is as informal as a handshake. The partnership may be maintained through agenda-driven formal monthly meetings of agency directors or informal weekly lunches of middle managers. As discussed at the outset of this section, the innovation questionnaires provides a more comprehensive account of the inception than of the ongoing operation of these partnerships.

As mentioned in the methodology section, the narratological approach assumes there will be an archetypal narrative, and in this case the data point very strongly to an archetypal partnership narrative rather than, say, an archetypal organizational turnaround narrative or an archetypal front-line initiation narrative involving a front-line worker whose idea catches on with colleagues, then middle managers, and ultimately receives the blessing of the agency head and politicians. While the turnaround and front-line worker narratives are compelling because they are both simple and heroic, they do not fit these cases as well as the partnership narrative.

[Table 2 about here]

Different Narrators and Different Perspectives

In addition to structural analysis, I also considered the three different forms of narrative the application and review process elicited to understand how the narrator's perspective influenced the story that he or she told. Some quantitative results are shown in Table 2. I begin with the written semifinalist application. In every application but one, which is discussed below, the identity of the author(s) is not explicitly revealed. Thus, narratological interest would focus on characterizing the implied author and the implied reader. The implied author is the persona reconstructed from the text, and the implied reader the audience presupposed by the text. The semifinalist application involved answering 16 questions to a maximum total length of 15 pages

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single-spaced. Most of the applications used their full space allotment. Senior executives of large public sector organizations rarely have the time to undertake such a writing project. The application asks for a contact person, and it is most likely that the contact person was the primary author. In addition, the application asks for signatures from the agency head and highest elected official, so that it is likely the agency head and highest elected official, or at least their advisers, saw the application and may have contributed to it. In 18 of 31 applications, or 58 percent, the contact person was a staff member in the agency making the application, a partner organization, or somewhere else in the government. Many of these contact persons were policy analysts, grant writers, or government relations specialists. The applications request a lot of detail in terms of program design, target groups, results achieved, budgets, organizational structure audits or reviews, media attention, and expressions of interest in, or actual, replication of the innovation, as well as organizational history. Because an organization's files are not necessarily designed to highlight an innovation, and because the author may not have been involved with an innovation at every step in its evolution, a considerable amount of documentary research and interviewing was required to write a semifinalist application. Either prior to or in the process of writing, the primary author became familiar with the details of the program.

In 12 cases, mainly smaller programs, the contact person was the manager of the innovative program or agency head. If that person was also the initiator of the program, he or she would be deeply familiar with the program, and the application would bear the stamp of personal experience. The clearest example of this was the Chula Vista, CA Residential Abandonment Property Program, which obligates mortgage holders to maintain vacant property they are in the process of repossessing. This program had been developed by Doug Leeper, the Manager of Code Enforcement for Chula Vista, and he wrote the application in the first person. This was the

only application of the entire sample written in the first person, and at the meeting of the site visitors with the national selection panel, one of the panelists remarked that, in his experience, it was the only time ever that an application was written in the first person.

In reading the applications, it appears that, just as the implied author is someone with considerable technical knowledge about the program, the implied reader was an expert in the application's policy area. The writing was often detailed and technical. Authors did not bother to define terms well known to professionals in that area, but much less well known to lay readers.[3] Three (of many) such examples I encountered were "permanency" as used in child welfare; "community of practice" as used in knowledge management; and, "medical home" as used in health care. Up to the finalist competition, expert assessors possess the policy area expertise of the implied reader. The finalist competition, however, is different, because the members of the national selection panel are generalists, or, like me, generalists in all but a few policy areas. Similarly, lay readers would have the same difficulty understanding the essence of the innovation and/or why it is an advance on the state of the art in that particular policy area.

The second narrative about an application is generated by a site visitor, chosen by the Innovation Awards staff on the basis of knowledge of the policy area. The visits take one or two days. A simple program involving one organization could be completed in a leisurely day. A program involving a complicated partnership would likely present a much fuller schedule. Visits will sometimes include representatives of the political oversight authority as well as the program's clients. The site visitor questionnaire, most of which is reproduced in the appendix,

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[3] I consider myself to be an expert in several policy areas – transportation, infrastructure, and information technology – but a lay reader in most others.

encourages detailed responses that are often longer than the applications. In addition, each site visitor has a 10-minute meeting with the national selection panel that involves explaining the essence of the innovation, making an argument about why it is deserving of an award, and answering questions. It was clear from watching the interaction between the selection panel and the site visitors that the latter recognized that they were explaining an innovation to a generalist audience. Site visitors sometimes demonstrate even more knowledge of a particular policy area than the applicant. They occasionally provide a clearer account than the author of the application of how an innovation works, how it came about, and where it stands in relation to the state of the art in a given policy area.

The site visitor is also expected to play an audit role in determining whether the claims made in the application are supported by evidence. Because the finalist applications have been vetted at several stages before by reviewers with policy area expertise, it is unlikely that a site visitor will conclude that a finalist application is materially misleading and undeserving of recognition. Nevertheless, the site visitors sometimes identify weaknesses in the application in terms of the selection criteria, particularly their impact measures. They will indicate when an application has not had a formal evaluation or produced performance data, or when the performance data provided do not adequately pertain to the program's ultimate objective. They may also point out that a program elegantly solves a problem in a particular jurisdiction but that the program is the result of factors unique to that jurisdiction and therefore unlikely to be encountered, and hence replicated, nationally.

The site visitors often demonstrate acute sensitivity to the (usually implicit) organizational politics surrounding an application, for example tensions in its relationship with organizations that the innovation relies on, or possible threats, for example budgetary, to an innovation's

ongoing survival. Applicants, acting as advocates for their programs, are unlikely to point these things out, while site visitors will discover them by interviewing program clients or representatives of organizations with which it stands in cooperative or adversarial relationships.

Considering the site visitor as an auditor, his or her role can be summarized by the following hypothesis.

H6: The reviewers or auditors of a public sector innovations contribute to its narrative by explaining its workings clearly to a non-expert audience, showing where it fits in terms of the evolution and latest advances in its policy area, pointing out weaknesses in the quantitative measurement of its impact, and adding controversial elements of the narrative not divulged in the application.

In narrative terms, the site visitors, reviewers, or auditors are providing what narratology refers to as a counter-narrative, defined as a narrative that parodies, inverts, distorts, or subverts the familiar formal structures of a given genre. Any well-established genre will generate counter-narratives. Examples from film include Mel Brooks's *Blazing Saddles*, a parody of the western, and *Young Frankenstein*, a parody of the monster film. Parodies are not the only form of counter-narrative. One sub-genre of high school films – particular relevant to the Innovations Awards' focus on programs helping the underprivileged – concerns heroic teachers who inspire their inner-city classes to levels of achievement they never imagined possible. Well-known examples of the genre are *Stand and Deliver, Dangerous Minds,* and *Freedom Writers.* Less well-known, but distinctive, counter-narratives in this genre include *Half-Nelson*, in which the would-be heroic teacher suffers from a cocaine habit, and *Cheaters*, in which a teacher in an inner-city school initially inspires his Academic Decathlon team to improve their performance, but later

rationalizes their cheating to win the state championship. If, in her role as expert, the site visitor's narrative can complement (or contradict) the application narrative, the visitor as institutional outsider can also function in a manner analogous to a traditional omniscient narrator, viewing the "action" of the innovation narrative, and its organizational "settings" from a more distant and detached perspective, able to see and record aspects of the story not visible to the protagonists (or which they choose to omit).

Additionally, in their role as auditors, the site visitors can bring important information to bear on the question of motivation: why do organizations make the effort of applying for innovation awards? I assumed the most likely reason for applying is that the public servants associated with an innovation want recognition of their achievements either intrinsically or because it will advance their careers. My finding in previous research was that a major reason for either the public service or non-governmental organizations establishing awards was to improve public service morale, which assumes that recognition, either to individuals or groups, would have this effect (Borins 2000b). Reading the site visit reports, however, another reason emerges. There is an inferred organizational interest in making an application, which I found in 25 out of 31 applications, or 81 percent. Achieving national recognition from the innovations awards program, whether as semifinalist, finalist, or winner, is thought to enhance the viability of the innovation itself.

Many applications were concerned about funding in several senses: maintaining the support of existing funding sources, diversifying their sources of funding to protect against a reduction in funding from existing sources, and seeking funding to expand. The site visit report for the Volpe Center, which developed the Maritime Domain Awareness program, thought that an award would enhance the center's prestige in DoT and thus ensure ongoing funding that it

could use to enhance the software. The Boston Teacher Residency program had not expanded as much as planned due to the city's financial problems, and the site visitor felt that recognition would help it build support to survive in a deteriorating fiscal climate. New Leaders for New Schools currently gets 73 percent of its funding from foundations, now an uncertain source due to the impact of the recession on foundation endowments, and it would therefore like to increase its corporate, public, and individual funding. The second source of uncertainty applications identified results from political changes, in particular the departure, due to term limits, retirement, or electoral defeat, of the politicians who had supported it. Kingsport, Tennessee's higher education initiative involved the establishment of a campus of a technical community college there. The mayor, college president, and editor of the local newspaper, all of whom championed the project, will soon retire, and the site visitor wondered whether their successors would be equally committed. Recognition was seen as a way of creating ongoing support, with the winning of an Innovations Award becoming an important element of the innovation's official story, the "happy ending" that justifies its telling. Because innovations often introduce new activities into an organization, a third source of uncertainty is whether these activities will ultimately be rejected if they are seen as not fitting the organization's strategic direction. One of the 2009 applicants was the Defense Department's Emerging Contaminants Program, which tracks the development of new scientific knowledge about whether chemicals or materials the department is using are hazardous and, if so, attempts to mitigate the risks. The program has the benefit of doing the EPA's work proactively in a DoD setting, but could be seen by the military as expendable, because it does not involve DoD's core mission. The site visitor felt that an innovation award would build support within the department for the program. These instances of inferred organizational interests lead to a seventh hypothesis:

H7: Public sector organizations often seek recognition as a means of maintaining financial, political, or managerial support for their innovations.

The third narration concerning the applications is the oral presentation by the finalists to the national selection panel. Each finalist had 5 minutes to present and 5 minutes to answer the panel's questions. Two people associated with the innovation made the presentations. The most frequent presenters were the program managers, but other presenters include someone at a higher organizational level such as a governor, mayor, or cabinet secretary, or a client of the program or front-line worker involved with the program. The last item in Table 2 indicates how presenters used the very limited time they had to present. The essential thing was to explain the concept. Most presenters said something about their innovation's impact and included some quantitative measures. The difficulty in using quantitative measures is that visual aids, such as Powerpoint slides, are not permitted, so using more than two or three numbers likely confused the selection panel.

Two narrative components of the presentation, each used in about a third of the applications, were a short historical narrative about how the program was initiated and developed, and a short testimonial by a client of the program or front-line worker about how they personally benefited from the program. After watching all the presentations, I concluded that there were some instances where a narrative was used in a particularly compelling way. Dora Schriro, Director of the Arizona Corrections Department, incorporated a testimonial by a female prison officer (in uniform) who observed that, as a result of the new approach to corrections, prison officers had become more approachable, and recounted a conversation with a tough inmate who agreed that the atmosphere in prison had changed for the better. The choice to include other voices in the oral presentation is a shrewd narrative strategy, but one that carries

certain risks. Do you rehearse and control the first-person accounts to ensure they remain on message, compromising the spontaneity and authenticity that are their most effective contributions to the story you seek to tell? Or do you surrender control over this part of your narrative and hope that your "characters" do what is needed, or at least remain within approximate narrative bounds?

One of the other 2008 finalists was the Intelligence Community Joint Duty Program, an initiative requiring intelligence professionals to complete assignments outside their home agency as a prerequisite to senior executive promotion. The program was one of a set of initiatives to enhance cooperation among the 16 intelligence agencies. The lead presenter was Mike McConnell, Director of National Intelligence, a cabinet-level position. McConnell began with a very brief history of American intelligence, arguing that intelligence information shortened World War II by two years, describing how intelligence contributing to winning the cold war, but admitting that a new approach would be needed to respond to Al Qaeda and similar organizations. In this instance, a framework was created within which to situate the innovation narrative, presented by a narrator whose credentials commanded immediate attention. The overview he provided reframed a story that might otherwise have been read as a rather narrow innovation in personnel policy. McConnell's narrative shrewdly altered the interpretive possibilities. It is worth nothing that both programs discussed here were among the winning applicants.

What we have been considering, then, are three genres of innovation award narratives generated by the application and review process. The semi-finalist account is a closed narrative, an insider's story, addressed by authors with policy expertise to their equally expert colleagues within the same policy area. The site visit report functions in some ways as a counter-narrative,

sometimes posing questions about whether an innovation has actually achieved what it claims and sometimes pointing out unresolved conflicts or uncertainties an innovation faces. Finally, the oral presentation is an advocacy narrative that attempts, sometimes through either complementary historical or testimonial narratives, to persuade a generalist audience that an innovation is deserving of the award.

Conclusion

We have now reached the end of our story, with two fundamental questions still to be addressed: why should and how can innovative practitioners, the Innovations in American Government Awards Program, and academics studying public sector innovation make greater use of narrative and narratological analysis? First, succinctly, why. Narrative – telling a story – is one of the oldest forms of human communication, traceable back to our evolution as a species. Narratives resonate. They endure. Narrative is particularly powerful in engaging emotional identification with an individual, a group, or an initiative. It can be a powerful motivator for action (Ganz 2009). It differs qualitatively from analysis, which focuses on understanding how to act to achieve desired ends.

Innovative practitioners need to use both logic and emotion to win and maintain support for their initiatives. Maintaining innovations requires publicizing them, directly though the media and/or through applications to innovation award programs. Successful innovators will also be publicizing their programs to would-be adopters, either because awards programs encourage or require it, or because would-be adopters want to learn about their innovations. In any of these circumstances, innovators should have a compelling story ready to tell. The story will be of different lengths in different circumstances and should be consciously tailored to the audience. In

addition there will be aspects of the story that the practitioner might want to emphasize, such as the challenge of launching an innovation in an area where previous initiatives had failed, or the inventiveness of the solution devised, or the nature of the network the innovation has engendered.

The Innovations Awards program currently makes limited explicit use of narrative, requiring semi-finalists to provide only a partial narrative and then generating two additional narratives for the finalists. It could elicit more coherent narratives in the semifinalist applications simply by asking for them. It could gather together the five questions relevant to narrative analysis (see the appendix below) under the overarching theme of an innovation narrative, and then subdivide it into three sequential stages: conceptualization, initiation, and ongoing operations. Under the conceptualization phase, it would ask for the circumstances or problems leading to the innovation, previous efforts in the agency or jurisdiction making the application to deal with the circumstances or problems, and whether the innovators adapted any antecedents or other innovations. Under the initiation phase it would ask how the innovative idea came about, how the program embodying it was designed and launched, and which individuals and organizations were involved. Under the ongoing operations phase, it would ask about how the innovative program dealt with opposition, obstacles, and criticism, and how the program has been modified or how it evolved. Applicants would also be asked to provide a time-line to accompany the narrative.

If one of the program's intentions is to better communicate the innovations it recognizes to lay audiences as well as to policy experts, then it should start doing this right at the semifinalist level. Thus, applicants could be asked to provide a 500 word summary (that is, the equivalent of one page single-spaced or a presentation of about 5 minutes) outlining for a lay

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audience both the essence of the innovation and the broad outlines of its narrative. This would help semifinalists prepare for the finalist competition if they happen to be chosen for it; regardless of whether they are chosen, it would help them polish their message for lay audiences, including innovation awards panels, legislators, and the media.

If the Innovations Awards did require applicants to produce more comprehensive and clearer narratives, would this enhance research about innovation in government? Over the years, applications to the Innovations Awards have frequently been the basis for case studies, and some researchers – myself included – have used larger samples of applications to generate and test hypotheses. More comprehensive narratives would aid in hypothesis generation and testing for the larger sample studies. For the case study researcher who begins with a few of the Innovations Awards applications, more comprehensive narratives would help her begin her own interviewing.

This paper has generated hypotheses that could be tested with data from larger samples from the Innovations in American Government Awards or data from other innovation awards. The hypotheses could also be applied to studies involving single or multiple cases. It also highlights the value of using multiple, and possibly contrasting, perspectives. If nothing else, I hope this paper has demonstrated that the story of narrative and innovation in the public sector has just begun to be told.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Initiation Phase

Prehistory of the Innovation

	Present	26	84 %
	Absent	5	16

Initiation Process

	Problem-Solving	26	84
	Organization is the Problem	1	3
	Opportunity (solution seeking problem)	4	13

Type of Problem or Issue

	Repairing the social safety net	23	74
	Public Security	4	13
	Environment	2	7
	Government working better	2	7

Inter-organizational cooperation

	Present	26	84
	Absent	4	13

Initiator(s) of Innovation (not mutually exclusive)

	Politician	7	23
	Agency head	10	32
	Middle manager	10	32
	Front-line worker	1	3
	Interest Group	2	6
	Foundation	4	13
	Client of Program	2	6
	University	1	3

Supportive high level player or legislator

	Present	24	77
	Absent	7	23
	N (for all characteristics)	31	100

Source: coding of applications by author.

Table 2. Narrative Aspects of the Applications

Written Application Narrator (contact person)

Program Manager/Agency Head	12	38 %
Head of Partner Organization	1	3
Agency Staff	11	35
Other Government or Partner Staff	7	23

Identifiable Organizational Interest in Application

Present	25	81
Absent	6	19

Components of Oral Presentation (not mutually exclusive)

Concept	31	100
Quantitative Evidence of Impact	20	65
Historical Narrative	12	38
Participation by Client, Front-line staff	11	35
N (for all characteristics)	31	100

Source: coding of applications by author.

Appendix

Semi-finalist (long) questionnaire questions most relevant to narrative analysis

6. When and how was the program or policy initiative originally conceived in your jurisdiction? What individuals or groups are considered the primary initiators of the program? Please substantiate the claim that one or more government institutions played a formative role in the program's development.

7. Please identify the key milestones in program or policy development and implementation and when they occurred. How has the implementation strategy of your program or policy initiative evolved over time?

8. Please describe the most significant obstacles encountered thus far by your program? How have they been dealt with? Which ones remain?

9. If your innovation is an adaptation or replication of another innovation, please identify the program or policy initiative and jurisdiction originating the innovation. In what ways has your program or policy initiative adapted or improved on the original innovation?

10. What other individuals or organizations have been the most significant in (a) program development and (b) ongoing implementation and operation? What roles have they played? What individuals or organizations are the strongest supporters of the program or policy initiative and why? What individuals or organizations are the strongest critics of the program or policy initiative and why? What is the nature of their criticism?

Site visit report questions most relevant to narrative analysis

1. Introduction/background. Comments should include, but are not limited to, the following elements: A) Problem(s): description of the problems that the program addresses. B) History: description of the origins of the program.

2. How innovation is the program/policy? Please compare the innovation with past practices in the jurisdiction, comparable approaches in the field nationally, and similar initiatives with which you are familiar.

4. How well does the program/policy run? Is it likely to last? Comment on program implementation, any partnerships between public and private sectors, levels of public support, and any conflicts or problems?

6. In light of your answers to the preceding questions, please assess this program/policy's major strengths and weaknesses and provide any strong arguments that you would make on its behalf. Please feel free to describe any additional factors not discussed elsewhere which you believe should be taken into consideration in assessing this program. In addition, describe any important information that you were unable to obtain during the site visit.

7. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the innovation's leaders as award recipients? Are they effective political players in their home jurisdiction? Are they now or could they be developed into effective spokespersons, locally and nationally, for the Innovations Program and innovations in general? Will they be effective disseminators of their program or policy in other jurisdictions around the country? Do you have any reservations about their selection as an award recipient? Is national attention likely to pose any special problems for this program or its leaders?

8. Please describe your site visit, including key people with whom you met, program activities and facilities observed, and records or news reports examined. Please attach a copy of your schedule.

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