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Little Bites of Big Data for Public Policy by Donald F. Kettl

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In the world of public administration, there have been unceasing efforts to bridge the gap between academic and practitioner. There is no doubt that policymakers (practitioners) and policy-analysts (academics) aim to make the world better. However, Donald Kettl (2018) points out that “[s]ometimes there’s a mismatch between the analysts’ work and policymakers’ questions” (p. 5). Kettl argues that analysts who have access to data as well as the skills to analyze the data believe that they have a better sense of current problems of public policy, compared with policymakers. Meanwhile, policymakers who adopt and implement public policies sometimes feel that answers from analysts are not the most important ones. Kettl (2018) calls this the gap “between the knowing and the doing” (p. 6).

The gap between the knowing and the doing calls for a better match between analysts and policymakers’ work. Kettl (2018) argues that the first step to connecting the work of both of these actors is to address the “right” questions from policymakers. “Right” questions engage both analysts and policymakers and help both reach a compromise. Simply put, the “right” questions lead analysts to provide better answers and guide policymakers to do better. But, what are the “right” questions for the “right” answers and actions?

Kettl’s (2018) book specifies the following questions that policymakers deem important:

1. Hindsight: What does the past teach us about the future?
2. Foresight: How can we make good decisions to produce the best results?
3. Results: What have we accomplished—and how can we do better?
4. Risk: What challenges do we face that could undermine what we want to do?
5. Resilience: How can we bounce back when, inevitably, bad things happen? (p. 9)

Kettl (2018) notes that analysts can address these questions by gathering information and evidence through big data. With big data being more prevalent, it allows for the supply and use of information to help analysts generate answers, especially for the “right” questions. The author

provides rich examples showing how analysts can apply big data to their analyses to provide “right” answers. For instance, analysts can gather data on program evaluation for the hindsight questions, forecasts for the foresight questions, performance management for the results questions, risk management for the risk questions, and emergency management for the resilience questions.

Kettl (2018) also emphasizes the importance of communication between analysts and policymakers. Big data requires cleaning and preparation, as raw data may not be accessible to policymakers. Given that policymakers are buyers of knowledge and analysts are sellers of knowledge, it is critical that analysts engage in effective information delivery. To be effective and successful at delivering data, Kettl (2018) suggests that analysts tell a story with the data through data cleaning and visualization. For example, analysts can use applied statistical models, charts, maps, and metadata (e.g., Google trends and open data) to make the data more compelling to policymakers.

Kettl (2018) finally notes that analysts need to recognize five issues (humility, uncertainty, equity, ethics, and privacy) when telling their data story in a language that policymakers can understand. First, analysts need to work with humility. Social problems are often intractable, so analysts should be humble to connect with decision-makers who also recognize that problems are complicated. Next, analysts need to acknowledge a degree of uncertainty as data are not perfect. Equity is also important as big data can possibly invade privacy and treat people unequally. Finally, it is imperative that analysts remain ethical by representing the voices and perspectives of various interest groups. Analysts who keep these issues in mind can be clearer, more persuasive, and more engaging to policymakers so that they can make big data fill the gap between the “knowing” and the “doing” and move towards real-world problem-solving.

While Kettl’s (2018) book offers practical advice to analysts on how to engage more effectively with policymakers, it is sparing in its advice with respect to wider dissemination beyond the policymaking world. Kettl’s (2018) advice is particularly helpful for analysts in preparing technical reports such as policy memos. However, his advice is not focused on academics who may wish to use big data to publish in peer-reviewed academic journals. Also, there remains limited advice for policymakers as consumers and purchasers of information. Practical advice for policymakers to be more involved and to become critical consumers of big data is necessary.

Given the gap between analysts and policymakers with respect to the knowing and the doing, a need for pracademics, or a person who has experience in both academia and practice, may be useful (Posner, 2009). However, if pracademics are not available to serve as intermediaries, Kettl (2018) argues for the value of big data in linking questions (characterized by the five criteria above), answers, and actions. Big data offers new information and knowledge. Analysts can apply this information and knowledge to address important policy questions in a timely manner thus resulting in evidence-based decision-making. This process, driven by the use of big data, is an example of *uniting knowledge and action*. Kettl’s (2018) easy-to-read book and various examples of big data application are required reading for seasoned academics as well as for students who work in public administration and want to contribute to real-world problem-solving.

Disclosure Statement

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest that relate to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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