Understanding co-production as a new public governance tool

Maddalena Sorrentino, Mariafrancesca Sicilia & Michael Howlett

Published online: 25 Sep 2018.

Submit your article to this journal ⬈

View Crossmark data ⬈

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Understanding co-production as a new public governance tool

Maddalena Sorrentino [a], Mariafrancesca Sicilia [b] and Michael Howlett [c]

aDepartment of Economics, Management and Quantitative Methods, University of Milan, Milan, Italy;
bDepartment of Management, Economics and Quantitative Methods, University of Bergamo, Italy;
cDepartment of Political Science, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, Canada

ABSTRACT

Co-production has become a buzzword for both scholars and practitioners in the past decade. This introduction to the thematic issue 'Co-production: Implementation problems, new technologies and new designs' unpacks the concept of co-production and illustrates how it has been operationalized on the ground in diverse country-specific contexts. To facilitate the analysis, we make a distinction between 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' forms of co-production, even though the practice has not really been around long enough to have established a tradition in the true sense of the word. However, these two distinct forms of co-production are highly useful conceptual lenses through which to view the finer details and nuances, to identify the enabling conditions and to foreshadow the governance challenges, but also to highlight the innovating role co-production plays in forging public services and public policies. Thanks to the rich and varied ways in which the contributors have approached this central topic; the thematic issue enables the research and practice to more fully appreciate the ins and outs of co-production and suggests the most promising directions for future study.

Introduction

The thematic issue is the fruit of two panels hosted by the ICPPP 2015 annual meeting in Milan, Italy. The first panel, titled *Merging policy and management thinking to advance policy theory & practice: understanding co-production as a New Public Governance tool*, was organized by Michael Howlett, Anka Kekez Koštro and Ora-Orn Poocharoen. The second, titled *Public problem-solving through co-production*, was organized by Maddalena Sorrentino and Mariafrancesca Sicilia.

The aim of the panels was to bring together scholars working on co-production who share an interest in advancing the field. To sharpen the growing focus on co-production in public-sector reforms and in the academic debate, more analysis and investigation is needed. First, the term coproduction lacks conceptual and definitional clarity, given that it is used to refer to a variety of collaborative governance arrangements that can involve a

CONTACT Maddalena Sorrentino ✉ maddalena.sorrentino@unimi.it 🖂 Department of Economics, Management and Quantitative Methods, University of Milan, Via Conservatorio 7, 20122 Milan, Italy

wide range of actors in a wide range of activities of the public service cycle (Howlett & Ramesh, 2017; p. 3; Osborne & Strokosch, 2013). Second, since empirical studies on co-production are still scant, there is little evidence available on either the facilitating conditions or its relative impacts on the co-production actors involved and on society as a whole.

The tracks sparked a lively debate in which the multifaceted nature of co-production was confirmed, as well as the fact that it brings together a wide range of activities, state actors and laypersons (including civil and communities groups) to produce valuable services in diverse policy domains. The tracks also highlighted two distinct traits of the more recent co-productive arrangements: (1) the use of asynchronous information and communication technology (ICT)-based modes of interaction mediated by web-based platforms and mobile devices; (2) expected outcomes that go beyond the empowerment of the individual service user. This focused our analytical attention on the growing emergence of co-productive forms that take an alternative path to the 'dyadic' relation between service provider and service recipient (i.e. parent–teacher interaction or the doctor–patient relationship). The first aspect of note is that co-production has moved up the ladder in the managerial toolkit, from something that enriches and qualifies the public service offering to, for all intents and purposes, a policy tool directed at a wide arena of potential beneficiaries. The second is that co-production has thus become a driver of innovation in public services.

As the thematic issue's guest co-editors, our interest is centered on the key features of co-production to emerge against the backdrop of a changing policy environment and to discuss and expand the key insights of current literature. To do this, we need to respond to a series of questions: how has the concept of co-production evolved since it made its first appearance in the 1970s? Is it possible to identify a *tradition* of co-production despite the many definitions of the term and the different practices used on the ground? And, if so, what distinguishes the non-traditional forms from the traditional ones? What deficits or critical factors led to the inadequate outcomes?

The anthology of thematic articles presented here narrows the knowledge gaps outlined above. Drawing on different academic perspectives, the studies document the rise of co-production in various geographical contexts and levels, illustrate diverse empirical cases and offer accompanying theoretical reflections. The thematic issue would not be complete without an introductory overview of the selected articles with commentary by the guest co-editors, which is guided by their personal interpretive keys. However, the introduction is not intended to substitute the original articles, which make a far richer and more insightful read.

To organize our discussion, we start with a description of the conceptual origins of co-production, mapping its journey alongside the waves of public-sector reforms that marked the changing of the old public administration (OPA) guard to the New Public Management (NPM) guard and then to the present one of Public Governance. We then briefly review the diverse forms of co-production. The section after that delves into the modes of interaction and expected outcomes in order to understand the difference between traditional co-production and non-traditional co-production. Next, the factors that facilitate co-production are scrutinized under the governance lens; this analytical key shows that co-production cannot survive without adequate political support and organizational capabilities. The closing section summarizes the implications for practitioners and the future avenues of research.

Public administration and co-production: three waves

The concept of co-production both as a discourse and a practice dates back to the 1970s. In this section, the different meanings taken by co-production within the scope of the general models of public administration (PA) are presented with the aim of showing how co-production has been conceived since its first appearance. Each PA model is built on specific values, organizational ideology and the assumed best way to deliver services; each model assigns specific roles to the service recipients, to civil servants and to politicians. Rather than outmoding each other, the diverse PA models coexist and sediment on top of each other (Benington & Hartley, 2001; Hartley, 2005; Pollitt, 2016). Therefore, depending on the circumstances and the context, the policy-makers and public managers make decisions according to one or the other conception of governance and service delivery. Generally speaking, the focus of attention has shifted at least three times in the past few decades.

Until the end of the 1970s, the dominant management paradigm in PA – herein referred to as the 'old public administration' – was based on the separation between politics and administration; control is hierarchical and bureaucratic, based upon rules, formal procedures and norms that legitimize and regulate administrative action (Weber, 1968; Wilson, 1887). In this paradigm, the governments directly provide services to the public that is conceived as a 'fairly homogenous' passive and inert client of services (Hartley, 2005), while the active participation of citizens is assumed to be very limited. The reason why co-production has been proposed as an alternative solution to this traditional model is the belief that, unlike the production of goods, the production and delivery of services is difficult without the active participation of the recipients (Ostrom, 1996, p. 1079). Citizens are not the passive targets or beneficiaries of government activities, but become vital elements in their success or failure (Brudney & England, 1983; Parks et al., 1981; Sharp, 1980). The inputs of the citizens are deemed necessary in both the soft services (education, health, disaster management, etc.) and the hard services (police, waste management, national security, etc.). Hence, 'co-production implies a mix of production efforts by regular producers and consumer producers' (Parks et al., 1981, p. 1002).

The reform of the OPA model aimed to improve the efficiency and the quality of the public service and was done with private-sector-inspired logics and tools (Ferlie, Ashburner, Pettigrew, & Fitzgerald, 1996; Hood, 1991, 1995; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011). This gave rise to the NPM model that advocated the adoption of managerial tools and market-type mechanisms, such as organizational disaggregation and specialization, a focus on performance, and the widespread use of the contracting-in and the outsourcing of services. The NPM turned the OPA on its head by rebranding the beneficiaries of public services as consumers that can exercise choice, for example, to leave a specific provider if their needs are not fully satisfied. This new context changed the conception of co-production from something inherent to public services to something that can be added to the repertoire of service delivery arrangements available to public managers in the attempt to increase efficiency and do more with less (Alford, 2009).

More recently, the emergence of the 'new public governance' model (Bingham, Nabatchi, & O'Leary, 2005) has moved this global wave away from the traditional hierarchical forms of organization and competition, recognizing different collaborative

arrangements as viable governance options at different levels (Howlett & Ramesh, 2017). It puts emphasis on inter-organizational relationships, networks, collaborative partnerships, participatory governance and other forms of multi-actor relations (Agranoff & McGuire, 2003; Emerson, Nabatchi, & Balogh, 2012; Huxham & Vangen, 2013; Kickert, Klijn, & Koppenjan, 1997; Stoker, 2006; Wu, Ramesh, & Howlett, 2015). In advanced industrial societies, the inclusion within the governing processes of a plurality of actors in addition to the public sector is considered a practical way to address increasingly complex problems (Sorrentino, De Marco, & Rossignoli, 2016). In this sense, the engagement of citizens in the public service cycle reinvigorates the achievement of public purposes and is seen as a useful option.

Traditional and non-traditional co-production

Co-production, by capturing a wide variety of practices and activities under 'a rather heterogeneous umbrella concept' (Verschuere, Brandsen, & Pestoff, 2012, p. 1094), has increasingly become a core element in the public realm, one that reflects the new paths taken by the PA.

The various forms of co-production differ in both the 'co-' side and the 'production' aspects of the term (Alford, 2014; Fugini, Bracci, & Sicilia, 2016; Nabatchi, Sancino, & Sicilia, 2017; Sicilia, Guarini, Sancino, Andreani, & Ruffini, 2016). The 'co-' side refers to who is involved in co-production. Generally, co-production implies the presence of two types of participants (Nabatchi et al., 2017): (1) state actors who are (direct or indirect, in the case of contracted-out services) agents of government serving in a professional capacity (the so-called 'regular producers'), and (2) lay actors who interact with the state actors. In both the literature and the practice, different roles meet and mix with different rationales for participation (Nabatchi et al., 2017; Thomas, 2013).

On the whole, it is easy to spot the difference between individual co-production and collective co-production. Individual co-production describes those situations where a client or a customer, individually or in a group, participates in the production or part-production of the services they use, receiving 'benefits that are largely personal' (Brudney & England, 1983, p. 63). Collective co-production builds on the idea that co-production is not confined to users (Alford, 2014; Bovaird, 2007; Nabatchi et al., 2017) but involves other types of people, such as citizens, volunteers or non-governmental partners. This type of co-production is designed to produce benefits for the entire community (Brudney & England, 1983, p. 64). Alford (2014), in seeking to reconcile the collective and the individual dimensions of co-production, identified three kinds of co-producers according to the type of role they play in the process: consumers, suppliers and partners. Consumers stand at the end of the service delivery process and act as co-producers in their secondary role, whereas suppliers and partners do so as part of their primary role. A comparative study across Europe (Bovaird, Van Ryzin, Löffler, & Parrado, 2015, p. 19) revealed that the characteristics of those who are active in collective co-production differ significantly from those who undertake individual co-production. In particular, collective co-production is associated even more closely with self-efficacy than individual co-production.

Moreover, the 'production' side of the concept of co-production is multidimensional. In some cases, 'production' refers to situations in which state actors and lay actors work

together at the service delivery phase (Alford, 2009). In other cases, 'production' is used in a broader way to refer to any stage of the cycle of public services. (Bovaird, 2005; Bovaird & Loeffler, 2013; Sicilia et al., 2016). In this respect, Nabatchi et al. (2017) distinguish four phases of the service cycle in which co-production may occur: *co-commission* groups those activities aimed at strategically identifying and prioritizing needed public services, outcomes, and users; *co-design* captures all those activities that incorporate inputs form users and their communities into the operation decisions regarding public services; *co-delivery* refers to the joint effort of state actors and lay actors at the point of delivery of services; and *co-assessment* categorizes the monitoring and evaluation of public services.

The fact that we are dealing with a continually evolving concept with a wide variety of applications means it is possible to devise a working classification that separates the traditional from the non-traditional forms of co-production, albeit with the caveat that 'simply negating something does not amount to constructing a dichotomy' (Rutgers, 2001, p. 5). Despite all the limitations and difficulties of drawing a sharp line between the ever-changing and context-dependent forms of service governance and delivery, two interrelated dimensions can be used as discriminating elements: the modes of interaction used by the state actors and the lay actors (individually or collectively); the results of the co-production effort (*intended outcomes*).

As underscored earlier, the modes of interaction that animate the first dimension of co-production are intrinsically relational and involve the joint contribution of both the lay actors and the state actors. Traditionally, these interactions have happened synchronously, through in-person, face-to-face relationships and, while personal meetings are a useful way to motivate the participation of the lay actors (or their representatives), the potential cost could impact negatively on their willingness to participate. In fact, several studies have pointed to the importance of knowledge and skills, resources and tools, and time in getting the citizens to engage (see for example (Alford, 2002; Jakobsen, 2013)). The more recent forms of co-production harness both synchronous and asynchronous modes of interaction, thanks to the use of ICT-based tools (e.g. web 2.0 platforms, mobile devices, social media, the internet, any other devices used to transfer, receive, store or process information) and related communication infrastructures.

The second dimension of co-production (intended outcomes) sees the participation of the lay actors as a fundamental assurance of the quality and quantity of the public offering (Pestoff, 2006) aimed at better accommodating the services to the real needs of the individuals and the community. This line of thought led Osborne and Strokosch (2013) to build on PA and services management perspectives to develop a three-tier cumulative scale conceptual framework, in which two forms of co-production occupy the base level and the intermediate level: *consumer co-production* and *participative co-production*, respectively. Consumer co-production implies the empowerment of the service user within the service cycle, where experience and outcomes are negotiated with the lay actor instead of being unilaterally defined by the public provider. Participative co-production occurs at the strategic level, and relies on the current experience of a service to design and plan the same service for the future. Both forms of co-production can be termed traditional because they 'occur within the *existing framework* of public service delivery with an intention to improve the efficiency and/or effectiveness of these *current* arrangements – at either the

individual or service level' (Osborne & Strokosch, 2013, pp. s39, our italics). At the top level of the cumulative scale of Osborne and Strokosch sits what is known as *enhanced co-production*, i.e. that which results from combining the operational and strategic modes of co-production (2013, p. S37, Table 1). In this case, unlike the consumer and participative forms of co-production, the service users are a driving force 'not simply to plan the development of existing services but rather to challenge their overall design. Neither of the previous modes of co-production ... implies such transformational innovation' (Osborne & Strokosch, 2013, p. S39). Enhanced co-production is time-dependent because the services require routinization, i.e. the embedding of new practices at all levels: individual, organizational and system. Enhanced co-production changes the behavior of the relevant actors. It also adds complexity for the PAs involved, which are both resourceful actors that interface with the service-user actors in an ongoing dialogue and facilitators that design the rules of the game and orchestrate competences in different and interconnected policy arenas. This active role turns the focus of attention toward organizational capacity.

In Osborne, Radnor, and Strokosch (2016), the framework first presented in Osborne and Strokosch (2013) is further refined by providing a four-quadrant typology of co-production. This conceptualization identifies pure co-production, co-design, co-construction and co-innovation, and four ideal types of value that are co-created (or co-destructed) by the iterative interactions of service users and service professionals with public service delivery systems. Briefly, the value shifts from the impact and effectiveness of public services in real time (in case of co-production and co-design) to the sense of well-being that results from the integration of user's experience of a specific service with his/her overall life (co-construction), and to the creation of new forms of public service delivery within service systems (co-innovation).

The enabling role of ICT

Public-sector organizations have increasingly adopted ICT since the 1990s. The implementation of ICT in PA is commonly called e-government. Also here, according to Pollitt and Bouckaert (2011, p. 7), several versions of e-government exist: 'an e-government that reinforces traditional bureaucratic hierarchies, an e-government that facilitates the NPM, an e-government that is designed to promote networking and wider concepts of governance'.

More recently, the pervasiveness of the Web 2.0 and the advances in ICT have inspired the development of new interactive platforms that build on extensive input from users, integration of knowledge and user participation with important potential impact on public service delivery (Frissen et al., 2008). Thus, while the initial adoption of ICT was internal to public organizations, with few implications for citizen–government interactions (Margetts, 2010, p. 38), the social media and online collaboration platforms have reshaped the relations between service recipients and administrations at two specific levels: instrumental and institutional (Bopp, 2000; Clark, Brudney, & Jang, 2013; Meijer, 2011, 2014). At the *instrumental* level, 'the advent of the Internet's unique many-to-many interactivity [...] promises to enable co-production on an unprecedented scale' (Linders, 2012, p. 446) and makes possible 'ubiquitous co-production' in virtual or physical spaces. Also, the fact that ICT applications enable interaction with lay actors anywhere means it

is possible to 'lower the costs for reaching specific target groups and render the "long tail" [i.e. the "high hanging fruit" of additional citizens and additional information] accessible' (Meijer, 2014, p. 26); see also (Clark et al., 2013); Meijer (2011); (Meijer, 2012). At the *institutional* level, the new media shapes relations among the co-production actors, infusing co-production with a more social vibe, emphasizing interactions and fostering a sense of shared identity with public-sector organizations as well as a sense of community among citizens. Meijer (2012), in his analysis of the co-production of public service support and safety in the Netherlands, provides a few insights into this aspect, pointing out that the new media not only shift co-production away from a rational approach to a more social approach, but also strengthen the emphasis on social and playful interactions by transforming participation into a real-life game.

Nevertheless, the transformative potential of the new media must also be scrutinized for potential negative effects. For example, one crucial issue is equity. Several studies have highlighted that disadvantaged people, such as racial minorities, the less educated and those in lower socioeconomic situations, are less keen to participate in co-production (Baker, 2010; Holmes, 2011) with the risk that co-production tends to perpetuate inequities in service provision (Bovaird, 2007; Levine & Fisher, 1984; Rosentraub & Sharp, 1981). It is essential that we investigate how the implementation of new technology in co-commissioning, co-design, co-delivery and co-assessment may reduce disparities. A further concern worthy of attention is the digital divide, i.e. the gap that exists between people with and without technology skills, which excludes certain social groups from active participation.

This aspect is addressed in the thematic issue by **M. Jae Moon** in the paper: 'Evolution of co-production in the information age: crowdsourcing as a model of web-based co-production in Korea'. The study is a preliminary effort to categorize the forms of web technologies-enabled co-production and shows how individual citizens contribute to the design and delivery of services by reporting their needs, offering policy ideas and developing apps based on open data. The author identifies four different categories of co-production: (i) *crowdsourcing co-design*, which refers to the active participation of individuals or groups of citizens along with governments in the design of policies or public services; (ii) *crowdsourcing design and government delivery*, which clusters the information, such as complaints and pothole reports, transmitted by the citizens via online or mobile channels to the government, whose actors then use the data for policy implementation and service delivery; (iii) *government design and crowdsourcing delivery*, which classifies those situations in which governments involved in the planning and design stages provide citizens with open databases containing information for public services that the lay actors use to develop service apps; and (iv) g*overnment and citizens co-delivery*, which sees lay actors work with state actors to deliver public services, for example, to develop integrated public service apps and make them available to the public. The author believes that web-based co-production will continue to evolve and that there will be increasing demand for crowdsourcing delivery (Type 3) and co-delivery (Type 4). However, the catch, observes Moon, is that the future success of co-production will largely depend on whether the Korean government decides to address three interrelated capacity deficits: the technological expertise of the citizens involved in co-production; the quality of the open data; and the features of the application programming interfaces provided by the relevant public bodies.

Co-production and social innovation

Over the last decade, the concept of social innovation has muscled its way into the strategies and language of the European Union to play a lead role in addressing the tough challenges left by the financial, economic and social crisis of 2008 (BEPA – Bureau of European Policy Advisers, 2011; Maino & Ferrera, 2017). The gravity of the new problems faced by Europe's welfare systems under the condition of *permanent austerity* (Pierson, 1998) led governments to create a new role for non-state actors, inviting these to participate in the definition, development and delivery of public services. In its broadest sense, social innovation refers to 'innovations that are social in both their ends and their means' (BEPA – Bureau of European Policy Advisers, 2011, p. 33).

At a general level, drawing on the four criteria elaborated by Pollitt and Hupe (2011, p. 643) of: *broadness* ([concepts] 'cover huge domains'); *normative attractiveness* ('they have an overwhelmingly positive connotation'); *implication of consensus* ('they dilute, obscure or even deny the traditional social science concerns with conflicting interests and logics'); and *global marketability* ('they are fashionable'), co-production and social innovation could be included among the 'magic concepts' that the policy-makers use to frame and support reform efforts. Both are pervasive in the public discourse. Nevertheless, compared with co-production, the reach of social innovation is wider. Indeed, social innovation implies an interweave of processes that can involve promoters, agents of change and social entrepreneurs, as well as the service recipients. Also, these actors all participate 'in different ways and in different compositions' and end-users can be 'citizens and companies or societal organizations' (Bekkers et al., 2011, p. 229). The hybridization of the social and economic dimensions can generate meaningful returns ('wellbeing') for groups, communities or segments of society, and for society as a whole (Voorberg, Bekkers, Timeus, Tonurist, & Tummers, 2017).

Research scholars underscore how co-production can go hand-in-hand with social innovation (Osborne & Strokosch, 2013), especially in the presence of arrangements that are herein defined as non-traditional. The expansion of the scope of action of co-production raises important issues that cannot go unexamined. These include the change in the points of reference for the lay actors, who are asked to change their behaviors in return for specific benefits not limited to the individual sphere, and the fact that the administrations are required to create clear incentives and conditions to promote the engagement of the citizens, unleashing their energy and creativity to generate collective benefits. A further challenge in public-sector organizations is that of overcoming the perception of the professionals that the desired innovation in services is a threat to their own work ethic and standards and to defuse their opposition to enhanced co-production. The simple solution to which is to operationalize a process of learning in which experiential knowledge is shared through frequent interactions among all the professionals involved in co-production. In the words of Torfing, Peters, Pierre, and Sørensen (2013, p. 152), co-production can be said to widen the 'repertoire of possible governance roles'.

The paper by **Giorgia Nesti**: 'Co-production for innovation: the urban living lab experience' is positioned at the intersection of social innovation and co-production. The article analyzes the forms of citizen engagement that go into developing

innovative services in special public spaces (commonly known as urban living laboratories, or ULL for short). The three experiences of Boston ('Housing Innovation Lab'), Amsterdam ('Smart Citizen Project') and Turin ('Turin Living Lab') are compared. The main focus of each ULL is on *co-design*, i.e. the inclusion of citizens' experiences, suggestion and opinion in the creation or redesign of a service or product, and *co-delivery*, which basically consists of testing activities and, unlike the traditional forms of co-production, does not involve a joint activity between public actors and lay people. In particular, the citizens of Amsterdam are asked to materially create a sensor, those of Turin are invited to develop and test ICT-based services in a crowdsourcing logic, and those of Boston to gather and generate affordable housing solutions. The study's findings confirm that co-production in ULLs takes place mostly in the co-design stage of the service cycle and that the co-delivery stage centers on the testing of new services or products. This peculiarity mainly stems from the ULLs' experimental nature based on a 'prototyping' approach to public innovation.

Overall, the three experiences generated a positive return, but also call attention to some of the trickier aspects. First, the ability to maintain a high level of engagement and motivation among the project volunteers, also post-launch. The participants of the Boston and Turin ULLs were lay people (ordinary citizens without a specific demographic or social connotation), while the technical nature of the Amsterdam experiment produced a self-selection of 'geeks'. Second, the civil servants who coordinate the Labs need to have open minds and a flexible approach to problem-solving, particularly in their relations with other public bodies. Third, the temporal sustainability of the projects is uncertain. In each of the three cases, the inputs (also in terms of financial resources) of the local politicians were decisive in the launch stage, but in both Amsterdam and Turin the sponsorship of the administrations was limited in duration. The urban lab of Boston is the exception and, in fact, has become a permanent office in the City's Department of Neighborhood Development. However, as Nesti notes, the paucity of empirical evidence has so far prevented the evaluation of the ULL's outcomes and impacts on the City's housing policy.

In emerging economies where governments have limited resources, there is often no alternative to co-production (Linders, 2012). The article by **Ishani Mukherjee** and **Nilanjana Mukherjee** titled 'Designing for sustainable outcomes: espousing behavioural change into co-production programmes' explores three cases of large-scale civic engagement that demonstrate the value of co-production to promote persistent change not just *for* the citizens but *with* the citizens. The cases of the three densely populated developing countries (Bangladesh, India and Indonesia) analyzed evidence how success in a key policy area such as rural sanitation is equally dependent on individual inputs and community behaviors.

In the round, the paper supports an analytical extension of the concept of co-production ('beyond the co-production of services to the co-production of outcomes and the sustainability of those outcomes'). Interestingly, the experience impacts three levels of policy-making, i.e. agenda setting, program definition and implementation. Specifically, setting up behavioral change objectives in rural sanitation programs also requires the selection of program mechanisms and monitoring indicators to support and track community-wide sanitation practices, which increases the likelihood of

achieving desired outcomes (rather than outputs). In the case of India, it is particularly evident that the achievement of stated policy goals can be challenging if the co-production objectives are not aligned with the desired outcomes and, to the contrary, are only focused on outputs (for example, increasing the number of toilets instead of addressing sanitation behaviors), or are mandated to experts. In essence, the three experiences teach us that in large-scale co-production, it is necessary to define the outcomes and the behaviors of the service receivers holistically and creatively in a logic of 'collaborative problem-solving' (Ansell, 2016).

Co-production and organizational capacities

A common denominator of all the different approaches to and forms of co-production is 'the relationships that allow co-production to happen and the new forms of knowledge, values, and social relations that emerge out of co-productive processes' (Filipe, Renedo, & Marston, 2017, p. 2). Public organizations confront a number of challenges due to the presence on the ground of numerous counterparts with 'different rationales for participation *and* policy agendas' (Filipe, Renedo, & Marston, 2017, p. 2, our emphasis) and the potential tensions these create (Torfing et al., 2013, p. 158), e.g. between the wish to control and the desire to involve the governance networks. Overall co-production 'stretches managerial skills' (Ramírez, 1999, p. 57).

Generally, the thorns in the side of co-production are the wicked nature of social problems, in the informal and experimental nature of most initiatives, and in the difficult scaling up and dissemination of the experiences. The latter indicates that most co-production arrangements are context-dependent; dissimilar service configurations, in turn, 'can complicate efforts to get collaborations off the ground' (Filipe et al., 2017, p. 3). Interestingly, even in those countries (e.g. the UK) where co-production has long been among the tools of government, the problem of sustainability over time during which the challenges are ongoing is ever present (Durose, Needham, Mangan, & Rees, 2016).

According to Howlett and Ramesh (2017), co-production, like other collaborative governance arrangements, discounts the fact that it is often practiced without knowing exactly under what conditions and constraints it is likely to succeed or fail. The authors say that each arrangement has its own prerequisites in terms of governing capabilities and competences from both governments and non-state actors. To take a significant step forward in understanding co-production, it is necessary to clarify what resources are required at the individual, organizational and systemic levels. The conceptual framework developed by Howlett and Ramesh (2017, p. 18) associates each of the above three levels with three interconnected sets of needed resources and capabilities: *analytical* (to ensure technically sound policy action); *operational* (to mobilize and deploy means, to carry out coordinated actions, and engage policy networks, communities and individuals); and *political* (to ensure political legitimacy and two-way communication with non-state actors).

What, then, following the cited framework, are the key requisites to ensure the effective operation and assessment of co-production? In a nutshell: effective administrative structures, processes and coordination. In turn, this stresses the importance of the information systems and ICT platforms to achieve coordinated and consistent

functions, both vertically and horizontally (Sorrentino, Guglielmetti, Gilardi, & Marsilio, 2017). Another key requisite is political support. Furthermore, given that the various actors depend on the capabilities of existing organizations, the 'Achilles heel' of co-production is any possible lack of 'organizational capacity' (Howlett & Ramesh, 2017, p. 18). The conceptual framework is a useful tool for on-the-ground diagnosis and intervention because it identifies the main determinants of the successful performance of co-production and, as a consequence, points to the capacity or competence gaps responsible for any failures.

Operational competences at the individual level center on the ability to perform managerial functions, including 'planning, staffing, budgeting, delegating, directing and coordinating' within and across organizations (Wu, Howlett, & Ramesh, 2018, pp. 6–8). These abilities are usually grouped under the 'leadership' label. Interestingly, Wu and colleagues (ibidem) observe that operational competences at individual level are crucial not only to policy implementation, but to *all* stages in policy process. Hence, effective leadership is a collective endeavor, structurally integrated into the flow of policy dynamics within organizations (Capano, 2009).

The thematic issue addresses the relationship between leadership and co-production by including the article by **Sonia Bussu** and **Maria Tullia Galanti** titled 'Facilitating coproduction: The role of leadership in coproduction initiatives in the UK'. The scholars examine how local political leaders work on the ground to address the challenges of co-production and confirm the multifaceted role of local leadership and its nature of complex and collective activity in all those contexts in which uncertainty prevails over stability. By using different relational styles for different contexts, the leader of a co-production project can perform very different activities, such as the promotion of innovation by facilitating citizen involvement and securing resources and lending support to experimental practices. Finally, and most importantly, facilitative leadership seems the most appropriate style to solve problems of priorities, inequality of participation, scarcity of resources and weak accountability in co-production endeavors. In concurrence with the mainstream literature, the article underscores how a lack of community engagement skills and the traditional risk-aversion of bureaucracies hinder the development of co-productive practices.

Till now, the general celebratory approach to co-production (as 'magic concept') has limited the number of studies that investigate and discuss the very real effects of co-production and the conditions under which positive vs negative effects manifest. The thematic issue seeks to help redress that imbalance by illuminating the flip side of co-production. Indeed, the optimism that prevails about the benefits brought by service co-production by applying the concept of *value co-destruction* to public service co-production is challenged by **Rocco Palumbo** and **Rosalba Manna** in the paper titled 'What if things go wrong in co-producing health services? Exploring the implementation problems of health care co-production'. Value co-destruction sees lay actors and state actors work together in the design and delivery of services, adopting conflicting perspectives, bringing incongruent inputs and aiming at the achievement of diverging ends, which tends to destruct instead of create value as expected.

The paper discusses value co-destruction in the healthcare environment, focusing on the concept of health literacy and broadening its application. According to the authors,

both individual and organizational literacy are needed to minimize the risks of impaired patient–provider relationships and the consequent misuse/overuse of available health services, which leads to value co-destruction. If, on the one hand, individual health literacy is needed to educate patients in health-related issues, improve their self-efficacy perception and the awareness of their role during the service encounter, on the other, organizational health literacy must complement individual health literacy. Organizational health literacy serves to make the professionals aware of the patients' contribution in the provision of care.

The aim of the article by **Anka Kekez Koštro** 'Public service reforms and clientelism: explaining variation of service delivery modes in Croatian social policy' is to investigate and compare the different delivery modes of social services available in Croatia following the recent reform waves intended to increase effectiveness, efficiency and inclusivity. A comparative analysis of six social services (accommodation in homes and foster homes for the elderly, home care for the elderly, accommodation in homes and foster homes for children without parental care, supervision of parental care for families at risk, accommodation in homes and foster homes for persons with disabilities, and personal assistance for persons with disabilities) shows the emergence of three rather distinctive modes of services delivery: (1) 'enforcement upgraded by performance'; (2) 'novel and captured co-production'; and (3) 'novel and consistent co-production'.

The first method is characterized by the traditional input-based control complemented by reformist output-based management. Overall, the findings show that in a clientelistic context, such as Croatia, co-production may generate adverse effects when misused by policy-makers to expand their discretionary powers through patronage practices. In particular, co-production is at risk of clientelist capture when the blurring of private and public interests and of accountability channels, due to the involvement of different actors in the design and delivery of services, is not counterbalanced by the presence of well-established implementation settings and empowered or represented beneficiaries.

Concluding remarks

The introductory article to the thematic issue overviews how the concept and practices of co-production have developed over the past decades, shedding light on the traditional and non-traditional forms based on two interrelated variables: modes of interaction and expected outcomes. Mapping the relevant literature and drawing on the Osborne and Strokosch (2013) model shows that co-production is considered traditional when the lay actors and the state actors collaborate exclusively in person within the scope of the existing public service delivery framework. The chief objective is to improve the efficiency and/or effectiveness of the services. In the case of non-traditional co-production, the relations between service professionals and service users are mediated and enabled by ICT-based platforms. Non-traditional forms of co-production challenge the existing service paradigm and the outcome is user-led innovation.

Clearly, such an oversimplified picture (e.g. the adjective 'non-traditional' could be misleading given that there has never been a real era of *established* practices of co-production; neither is the statement that the two distinct attributes are interrelated an original one; the distinction cannot be clear-cut in specific empirical cases) is not without its

limitations but it is our view that the exercise has heuristic utility in that it recognizes the differences between traditional and non-traditional forms and thus assists our understanding of the complexity of co-production. Further, applying a governance lens to the analysis of co-production can reveal important clues about what has worked so far to achieve public purposes, as well as about the opportunities and challenges that specific forms will encounter on the ground at the individual, organizational and systemic levels. Interestingly, albeit paradoxically, while co-production is founded on a critique of the hierarchical service delivery models, the government retains a central role as both a resourceful actor that interfaces with the lay actors *and* as a facilitator that orchestrates resources in the various interconnected policy arenas.

The papers presented in this thematic issue speak to the fundamental questions of co-production through empirical cases that cover different domains and different stages of the policy process. And, while it is still too early to identify a 'hot' trend, the studies add another string to the bow of co-production knowledge. Clearly, several issues remain unexplored and, ideally, future research will better clarify the definition of both traditional and non-traditional forms, their respective differences, the enabling conditions of new arrangements, and the frameworks and tools that allow their assessment.

The most pressing research questions yet to be answered center on the enabling conditions of co-production, specifically:

- How do contextual variables (policy area, culture, administrative and social landscape) assist/hamper the emergence of traditional and non-traditional co-production?
- What mechanisms are available to the state actors to foster the willingness of lay actors to work collaboratively?
- What organizational arrangements and managerial tools support the efficient and effective implementation of traditional and non-traditional co-production, and its scaling-up?
- To what extent is co-production facilitated by boundary spanning and the engagement of other actors, for instance, civil society organizations and community volunteers?
- What methods can the policy professionals use to assess the policy capacities needed to accomplish co-production at an organizational level?

We suggest that future research needs to move beyond the celebratory approach to co-production and unpack its very real effects, for which we need a custom set of assessment tools. In this sense, the main lines of enquiry are:

- Identify the dimensions to incorporate in a framework designed to assess the performance of co-production;
- Clarify the critical factors that optimize the practices of traditional and non-traditional co-production;
- Investigate how the tools of policy monitoring and evaluation can be adapted to the expected progressive increase in co-production, bearing in mind that the practice is not generalizable;
- Determine the comparative strategies capable of strengthening the methods used to assess the co-production policies.

Meantime, in the absence of well-trodden roadmaps to the co-production destination and bearing in mind that, going forward, co-production must not only learn to co-exist, but also compete with other governance styles, the decision-makers must necessarily adopt a pragmatic and reflexive approach. First, by supporting the experiences on the ground and, second, by continuously promoting spaces and opportunities for exchange, collaboration and learning.

We conclude this introductory article with sincere and special thanks to the ICPP presenters and contributors for having embraced our project, to the Editorial Board, in particular Giliberto Capano, to Associate Editor Jessica Yom and to the reviewers, all of whom have provided unstinting support, valuable inputs and expert guidance without which we could not have brought this rather long process to fruition. We are therefore confident that the articles and the accompanying considerations that make up this thematic issue will inspire scholars to more fully appreciate the practice of co-production, and that the rich and varied ways in which the contributors have approached this central topic will spur the academic community to pursue the research path charted here.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Maddalena Sorrentino is an Associate Professor in the Department of Economics, Management and Quantitative Methods at University of Milan. Her main research and teaching interests are in organization studies, public management, co-production and public sector innovation.

Mariafrancesca Sicilia is Associate Professor at the University of Bergamo, Italy and visiting fellow in the Department of Public Leadership and Social Enterprise at The Open University, United Kingdom. Her research covers public sector accounting and accountability and models of public service delivery.

Michael Howlett is Burnaby Mountain Chair in the Department of Political Science at Simon Fraser University and Professor in the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore. He specializes in public policy analysis, political economy, and resource and environmental policy.

ORCID

Maddalena Sorrentino 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7222-6338
Mariafrancesca Sicilia 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9186-5496
Michael Howlett 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4689-740X

References

Agranoff, R., & McGuire, M. (2003). Inside the matrix: Integrating the paradigms of intergovernmental and network management. *International Journal of Public Administration*, *26*(12), 1401–1422.

Alford, J. (2002). Why do public sector clients co-produce? Towards a contingency theory. *Administration & Society*, *34*(1), 32–56.

Alford, J. (2009). *Engaging public sector clients: From service-delivery to co-production*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Alford, J. (2014). The multiple facets of co-production: Building on the work of Elinor Ostrom. *Public Management Review*, 16(3), 299–316.

Ansell, C. K. (2016). Collaborative governance as creative problem solving. In J. Torfing & P. Triantafillou (Eds.), *Enhancing public innovation by transforming public governance* (pp. 35–53). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Baker, A. (2010). Co-Production: A Series of Commissioned Reports. Local Authorities and Research Councils' Initiative. Retrieved from http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/documents/innovation/larci/LarciCoproductionSummary.pdf

Bekkers, V., Edelenbos, J., Nederhand, J., Steijn, B., Tummers, L. G., & Voorberg, W. (2011). The social innovation perspective in the public sector: Co-creation, self-organization and meta-governance. In V. Bekkers, J. Edelenbos, & B. Steijn (Eds.), *Innovation in the public sector* (pp. 223–243). Bakingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Benington, J., & Hartley, J. (2001). *Pilots, paradigms and paradoxes: Changes in public sector governance and management in the UK*. Paper presented at the International Research Symposium on Public Sector Management. Barcelona, Spain.

BEPA - Bureau of European Policy Advisers. (2011). *Empowering people, driving change: Social innovation in the European Union*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

Bingham, L. B., Nabatchi, T., & O'Leary, R. (2005). The new governance: Practices and processes for stakeholder and citizen participation in the work of government. *Public Administration Review*, 65(5), 547–558.

Bopp, K. D. (2000). Information services that make patients co-producers of quality health care. In E. A. Balas, S. A. Boren, & G. D. Brown (Eds.), *Information technology strategies from the United States and the European Union* (pp. 93–106). Amsterdam: IOS Press.

Bovaird, T. (2005). Public governance: Balancing stakeholder power in a network society. *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 71(2), 217–228.

Bovaird, T. (2007). Beyond engagement and participation: User and community coproduction of public services. *Public Administration Review*, 67(5), 846–860.

Bovaird, T., & Loeffler, E. (2013). We're all in this together: Harnessing user and community co-production of public outcomes. *Birmingham: Institute of Local Government Studies: University of Birmingham*, 1(2013), 15.

Bovaird, T., Van Ryzin, G. G., Löffler, E., & Parrado, S. (2015). Activating citizens to participate in collective co-production of public services. *Journal of Social Policy*, 44(01), 1–23.

Brudney, J. L., & England, R. E. (1983). Toward a definition of the coproduction concept. *Public Administration Review*, 43(1), 59–65.

Capano, G. (2009). Tra leadership e tempo. Le dimensioni sfuggenti del cambiamento delle politiche. *Rivista Italiana di Politiche Pubbliche*, (3), 5–30. doi:10.1483/31129

Clark, B. Y., Brudney, J. L., & Jang, S.-G. (2013). Coproduction of government services and the new information technology: Investigating the distributional biases. *Public Administration Review*, 73(5), 687–701.

Durose, C., Needham, C., Mangan, C., & Rees, J. (2016). Generating 'good enough' evidence for co-production. *Evidence & Policy, Early Access*, 1–17. doi:10.1332/174426415X14440619792955

Emerson, K., Nabatchi, T., & Balogh, S. (2012). An integrative framework for collaborative governance. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 22(1), 1–29.

Ferlie, E., Ashburner, L., Pettigrew, A., & Fitzgerald, L. (1996). *The new public management in action*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Filipe, A., Renedo, A., & Marston, C. (2017). The co-production of what? Knowledge, values, and social relations in health care. *PLoS Biology*, 15(5), e2001403.

Frissen, V., van Staden, M., Huijboom, N., Kotterink, B., Huveneers, S., Kuipers, M., . . . En Koninkrijksrelaties, M. V. B. Z. (2008). *Naar eenUser Generated State? De impact van nieuwe media voor overheid en openbaar bestuur*. Delft: TNO.

Fugini, M. G., Bracci, E., & Sicilia, M. (Eds.). (2016). *Co-production in the Public Sector. Experiences and challenges*. Heidelberg: Springer.

Hartley, J. (2005). Innovation in governance and public services: Past and present. *Public Money & Management*, *7*(1), 27–34.

Holmes, B. (2011). Citizens' engagement in policymaking and the design of public services. *Research Paper*. Retrieved from http://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp1112/12rp0

Hood, C. (1991). A public management for all seasons? *Public Administration*, *69*(Spring), 3–19.

Hood, C. (1995, August 2021). The 'new public management' in the 1980s: Variations on a theme. *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, *20*(2–3), 93–109.

Howlett, M., & Ramesh, M. (2017). *The achilles heels of collaboration: Overcoming critical capacity deficits in collaborative governance arrangements?* Paper presented at the NUS-FPZG UNESCO Chair Workshop on The Governance of Collaboration: Co-Production, Contracting, Commissioning and Certification, Dubrovnik, Croatia.

Huxham, C., & Vangen, S. (2013). *Managing to collaborate: The theory and practice of collaborative advantage*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

Jakobsen, M. (2013). Can government initiatives increase citizen coproduction? Results of a randomized field experiment. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, *23*(1), 27–54.

Kickert, W. J., Klijn, E.-H., & Koppenjan, J. F. (1997). *Managing complex networks: Strategies for the public sector*. London: Sage.

Levine, C. H., & Fisher, G. (1984, March). Citizenship and service delivery: The promise of coproduction. *Public Administration Review*, *44*, 178–189.

Linders, D. (2012). From e-government to we-government: Defining a typology for citizen coproduction in the age of social media. *Government Information Quarterly*, *29*(4), 446–454.

Maino, F., & Ferrera, M. (Eds.). (2017). *Terzo Rapporto sul secondo welfare in Italia 2017*. Torino: Centro di Ricerca e Documentazione Luigi Einaudi.

Margetts, H. (2010). Modernization dereams and public policy reform. In H. Margetts P. 6 & C. Hood (Eds.), *Paradoxes of modernization. Unintended consequences of public policy reforms* (pp. 17–43). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Meijer, A. J. (2011). Networked coproduction of public services in virtual communities: From a government-centric to a community approach to public service support. *Public Administration Review*, *71*(4), 598–607.

Meijer, A. J. (2012). Co-production in an information age: Individual and community engagement supported by new media. *Voluntas*, *23*(4), 1156–1172.

Meijer, A. J. (2014). New media and the coproduction of safety: An empirical analysis of Dutch practices. *The American Review of Public Administration*, *44*(1), 17–34.

Nabatchi, T., Sancino, A., & Sicilia, M. (2017). Varieties of participation in public services: The who, when, and what of coproduction. *Public Administration Review*. doi:10.1111/puar.12765

Osborne, S. P., Radnor, Z., & Strokosch, K. (2016). Co-production and the co-creation of value in public services: A suitable case for treatment? *Public Management Review*, *18*(5), 639–653.

Osborne, S. P., & Strokosch, K. (2013). It takes two to tango? Understanding the co-production of public services by integrating the services management and public administration perspectives. *British Journal of Management*, *24*(S1), S31–S47.

Ostrom, E. (1996). Crossing the great divide: Coproduction, synergy, and development. *World Development*, *24*(6), 1073–1087.

Parks, R. B., Baker, P. C., Kiser, L., Oakerson, R., Ostrom, E., Ostrom, V., ... Wilson, R. (1981). Consumers as coproducers of public services: Some economic and institutional considerations. *Policy Studies Journal*, *9*(7), 1001–1011.

Pestoff, V. (2006). Citizens and co-production of welfare services. *Public Management Review*, *8*(4), 503–519.

Pierson, P. (1998). Irresistible forces, immovable objects: Post-industrial welfare states confront permanent austerity. *Journal of European Public Policy*, *5*(4), 539–560.

Pollitt, C. (2016). Managerialism redux? *Financial Accountability & Management*, *32*(4), 429–447.

Pollitt, C., & Bouckaert, G. (2011). *Public management reform. A comparative analysis: New public management, governance, and the neo-Weberian state* (3 ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Pollitt, C., & Hupe, P. (2011). Talking about government: The role of magic concepts. *Public Management Review*, *13*(5), 641–658.

Ramírez, R. (1999). Value co-production: Intellectual origins and implications for practice and research. *Strategic Management Journal*, *20*(1), 49–65.

Rosentraub, M. S., & Sharp, E. B. (1981). Consumers as producers of social services: Coproduction and the level of social services. *Southern Review of Public Administration*, *4*, 502–539.

Rutgers, M. R. (2001). Splitting the universe: On the relevance of dichotomies for the study of public administration. *Administration & Society*, *33*(1), 3–20.

Sharp, E. B. (1980). Toward a new understanding of urban services and citizen participation: The coproduction concept. *Midwest Review of Public Administration*, *14*(2), 105–118.

Sicilia, M., Guarini, E., Sancino, A., Andreani, M., & Ruffini, R. (2016). Public services management and co-production in multi-level governance settings. *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, *82*(1), 8–27.

Sorrentino, M., De Marco, M., & Rossignoli, C. (2016). Health care co-production: Co-creation of value in flexible boundary spheres. In T. Borangiu, M. Dragoicea, & H. Nóvoa (Eds.), *Exploring Services Science: 7th International Conference, IESS 2016* (pp. 649–659). Heidelberg Berlin: Springer.

Sorrentino, M., Guglielmetti, C., Gilardi, S., & Marsilio, M. (2017). Health care services and the coproduction puzzle: Filling in the blanks. *Administration & Society*, *49*(10), 1424–1449.

Stoker, G. (2006). Public value management: A new narrative for networked governance? *The American Review of Public Administration*, *36*(1), 41–56.

Thomas, J. C. (2013). Citizen, customer, partner: Rethinking the place of the public in public management. *Public Administration Review*, *73*(6), 786–796.

Torfing, J., Peters, B. G., Pierre, J., & Sørensen, E. (2013). *Interactive governance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Verschuere, B., Brandsen, T., & Pestoff, V. (2012). Co-production: The state of the art in research and the future agenda. *Voluntas*, *23*(4), 1083–1101.

Voorberg, W., Bekkers, V., Timeus, K., Tonurist, P., & Tummers, L. (2017). Changing public service delivery: Learning in co-creation. *Policy and Society*, *36*(2), 178–194.

Weber, M. (1968). *Economy and society: An outline of interpretative sociology*. New York, NY: Bedminster Press.

Wilson, W. (1887). The study of administration. Political science quarterly. *Political Science Quarterly*, *2*(2), 197–222.

Wu, X., Howlett, M., & Ramesh, M. (Eds.). (2018). *Policy capacity and governance*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Wu, X., Ramesh, M., & Howlett, M. (2015). Policy capacity: A conceptual framework for understanding policy competences and capabilities. *Policy and Society*, *34*(3–4), 165–171.