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Proposal for the Third Berlin Forum Innovation in Governance “Shaping innovation in governance? Inducements, opportunities and limitations for engaging with governance in the making”, 31 May – 1 June 2012, Berlin

An innovative design on scientific policy advice in practice
Studying the changing patterns of interaction in German food safety administration.

In the German politico-administrative system, governmental research agencies (GRA) have a long tradition in translating scientific knowledge for political decision-making. As research institutes that are however part of the jurisdiction of one federal ministry and thus under their parent department’s hierarchical control, GRAs simultaneously pursue the logic of scientific and of administrative work.

However, in the Federal food safety administration – the case under study in this paper - the agency level was radically reorganized in the wake of BSE-crisis in 2001/2002 in order to restore consumers’ trust in food safety administration. A strict division of labour between scientific risk assessment/risk communication and risk management was introduced by the creation of two new agencies: The Federal Office of Consumer Protection gained the responsibility for risk management and communication, and scientific risk assessment was assigned to the Federal Institute for Risk Assessment. Hence, the re-organization aimed at re-defining the boundaries between politics and science by establishing single purpose organizations for risk assessment/risk communication and risk management. From this point of view, the introduced separation-model represents clearly an innovation within the German “administrative zoo”.

Against this empirical background we are interested in how organizations at the science-policy-interface deal with the formal demarcation of boundaries between politics and science in practice, and how this influences interaction patterns in scientific policy advice and – in a broader perspective – the division of labour between these organizations. In short, we ask how and under which conditions practices of scientific policy advice within the field of food safety policy have been affected by this re-organization?

In answering this question, the paper studies how a variety of politico-administrative and scientific actors tries to shape this new form of governance and how this, in turn, affects the institutionalization process of the formal re-organization decision. Theoretically, our paper is based on a framework combining a sociological institutionalist perspective in organization theory and the concepts of “boundary work” and “hybrid management” originating in STS. Methodically, our study is based on semi-structured expert interviews with agency and ministerial officials.