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Responsive Excellence

JOHN BRAITHWAITE

BEING A RESPONSIVE REGULATOR means being responsive to the regulated community and its community of stakeholders (such as consumers of a regulated product or service). More fundamentally it means being responsive to the entire environment in which the regulator swims. Contemporary debates excessively narrow that definition to responsiveness to the regulator’s risk environment. Risk responsiveness is important. For a regulator aspiring to achieve excellence, however, responsiveness to opportunities is more important than responsiveness to risk. The excellent regulator scans for cases that offer strategic macro-opportunities to create public value, potentially by transforming an entire industry, even an entire economy, or a crucial aspect of freedom in a society. Put another way, risk management goes to the basics of regulation; seizing opportunities for transformation goes to the heart of regulatory excellence.

BOTTOM-OF-THE-CLASS REGULATION

Consider the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). In the theoretical terms of responsive regulation, the FBI is a regulator because its mission is to steer the flow of events. Its history is decidedly not as a best-in-class regulator. One reason is that under J. Edgar Hoover it overreached in its quest to grasp opportunities for a transformative impact. It investigated the sex lives of presidents, Hollywood stars, and civil rights campaigners, for example. Why this
was a regulatory overreach is clear. These were not activities that pursued the principles embodied in the FBI's legal mandate. Worse, they were activities that threatened freedom and increased domination. According to responsive regulatory theory (and republican political theory), the overarching test of regulatory excellence is whether the regulator increases freedom and reduces domination in the world. Put another way, J. Edgar Hoover is the archetypal evil regulator because he sought to be transformative by abusing arbitrary power.

Fast-forward to the twenty-first century. America has an FBI so chastened by the transformative excesses of Hoover that it constrains itself within a narrow criminal law enforcement mandate rather than the pursuit of national security, which is its legal mandate. So when an FBI agent does his job by reporting that trainee pilots had asked to be taught how to fly a plane but not how to land it, his supervisors respond in terms of the narrow ethos, as they did when another FBI agent warned about Osama bin Laden sending students to the United States for flight lessons. Sure, these activities raised suspicions, but where was the collateral? The FBI's priority was to focus on its backlog of more serious criminal files where it had good prospects of putting the criminal in prison for a long time. Or as Condoleezza Rice put it: "The FBI treated the internal terrorism problem as a law enforcement matter. . . . Prevention was secondary to punishing terrorists after they were caught committing a crime."

The FBI in 2001 had its opportunity to honor its legal mandate by putting American history on a better path in the twenty-first century. The "war on terror" that ensued was causally implicated in the difficulties of managing the second major geopolitical crisis of the twenty-first century, the global financial crisis. The war on terror caused the strongest surge yet in the growth of regulatory capitalism. There was a heavy fiscal burden from building the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and other surveillance bureaucracies. For foreigners, doing business with Americans became much more painful, from big regulatory aggravations, like a visa regime in which light-touch government was equivalent to treason, to small ones, like endless shoe removal on each leg of a long journey by plane. So international travelers began to minimize trips to the United States. That was great for carbon emissions, bad for the U.S. economy. It was good for the higher education exports from the Australian university system as international students shifted their enrollments to Australian universities, but at the expense of the export of U.S. higher education services. These regulatory impacts were of course not the main challenge for the U.S. economy. The big item was the trillion-dollar U.S. military bill for the war-on-terror campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq. This fiscal hit was smaller for European allies in Afghanistan and Iraq, but ultimately more consequential for the world economy because the subsequent debt crisis was deeper in Europe. As a result of the FBI's 9/11 regulatory failure, the U.S. economy and its tax base were ill-prepared for the next big crisis.

With the global financial crisis, as with 9/11, street-level agents again did their job. In 2004, the FBI, to its credit, reported publicly that it had detected an epidemic of home loan mortgage fraud. It could hardly fail to notice such a disturbing tsunami of little frauds. In 2006, the Federal Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (FinCEN) reported a 1,411 percent increase in mortgage-related suspicious activity between 1997 and 2005, 66 percent of which involved material misrepresentation or false documents. Then another 44 percent increase was reported between 2005 and 2006. In 2007, BasePoint Analytics analyzed 3 million loans, concluding that 70 percent of early payment defaults had fraudulent misrepresentations on their original loan applications. Because they were many little frauds, FBI leaders saw them as lower priority matters than other files in their in-trays that might deliver longer prison sentences.

The FBI missed the opportunity to see the big picture created by this large pattern of little frauds. Mortgages were being sliced and diced, securitized by Wall Street, and sold off to naïve European banks, which managed to cripple their economies with the bad debts. Their naiveté is hard to fathom, but the bonus culture of traders who were false fiduciaries for shareholders may have contributed, and perhaps managers wanted to be "state of the art" but were embarrassed to confess that they did not understand the complex derivatives they were trading. Revered former Federal Reserve chair Alan Greenspan characterized his regulatory error as assuming that banks would be competent to rationally assess such risks to their solvency. Packaged bundles of petty frauds enabled financial institutions to make large profits by risk shifting in some cases through major frauds ratcheted upward by the bonus culture of Wall Street.

So the FBI missed the opportunity to save its country from its second major crisis of the twenty-first century. American banks were finding housing loan fraud attractive because derivatives crafted for them by Wall Street changed the paradigm from risk management to risk shifting to other banks, sometimes far away. Yes, there were many other, perhaps more fundamental, root causes of the global financial crisis. Most of these are still present in the world economy, however. The business of crisis prevention involves all regulatory players seizing opportunities to eliminate those they can tackle before all those risks come together in another perfect storm. From 2004, aggressive criminal enforcement action, or the threat of it, was needed against the banks that had the highest percentages of fraudulent loans. The FBI showed no criminal justice system leadership to that end.

America should want an FBI that shuns the abuse of arbitrary power but takes opportunities to transform American national security for the better
within the framework of the legally encoded regulatory principles that guide its work. When it prioritizes the narrowed regulatory imagination of locking up the best collars, it fails its citizens.

TRANSFORMING THE REGULATORY STORYBOOK

How does one go about transforming the regulatory imagination so that regulators cultivate reflective professionalism about the opportunities they should seize? How do regulators develop an over-the-horizon imagination about how to transform their regulatory environments to deliver public value in line with the principles in their enabling statutes? A starting point is Clifford Shearing and Richard Ericson’s insight that regulatory culture is not a rulebook but a storybook.8 Sure, regulatory organizations have thick volumes of rules and procedures they are expected to follow. So do universities. But just as street-level academics rarely read them and do not know their content, the same is true of street-level bureaucrats like police officers and regulatory inspectors. What adept professors and police officers know are stories about how this or that kind of organizational challenge gets managed. If you want to change how a street-level bureaucracy behaves, you cannot achieve that by changing its rulebook.9 You must change its storybook. You must change the stories inspectors swap in the lunchroom about how excellent inspection practice has made a difference.

In an FBI that had been a better custodian of a safe and economically strong America, there would be stories about how an agent in Florida stood up to his supervisors and sent the message right up the line that the trainee pilots were likely planning something that would threaten the country, and then persuaded those supervisors to take action to prevent a major terrorist triumph. The stories would tell of the agent who said that a massive new micro-pattern of street-level mortgage fraud could not make sense unless it connected up to some dangerous new macro-strategy of finance capitalists. Regulatory cultures obsessively wedded to a procedures manual or to risk analytics kill off transformative storytelling. Responsive regulatory organizations need to honor the principles laid down in their enabling statutes but they are not rule-bound automatons. In an ideal world, legal principles that inform a regulatory storybook will transcend unresponsive regulatory rulebooks. Regulatory excellence eschews timidity. Excellent regulators are entrepreneurial risk takers in the cause of creating public value. The regulator sees itself as having a respected role in the separation of powers. Its statute should empower it to be semi-autonomous of executive government, a credible part of a fabric of checks and balances. It checks, and it is checked by, other semi-autonomous separated powers; it balances and it is balanced. Who wants a central bank hemmed in by detailed rules about when and how it can adjust the money supply, about when and how it can seize the opportunity to encourage a well-managed bank to take over a group of teetering banks that pose a systemic risk? Who wants a nuclear regulator like the one the United States had at the time of Three Mile Island,10 one that cultivates an industry compliance culture of rule-following automatons rather than a culture of diagnosticians who transform safety systems responsively, based on systemic wisdom about safety management systems?11

How do we evaluate whether a regulator is excellent in these terms? We evaluate it by the best stories of transformation the regulator can offer up. Can it recount how it saved countless lives from domination by terror or from the fallout of a nuclear meltdown? Can it tell inspiring stories of how it seized opportunities to expand the realms of freedom that citizens enjoy? If it cannot, it may be time to change the top management team, transform staff induction and in-service training, remove the constraints its procedures manuals impose, or inspire an opportunity-seizing transformative mentality by redrafting the principles in the agency’s legislative mandate.

STORIES FROM THE AUSTRALIAN STREET

The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) is in various ways an example of an excellent regulator. It is an agency that in U.S. terms combines the functions of the Federal Trade Commission, the Antitrust Division of the Justice Department, and the Consumer Product Safety Commission; it has also embraced some functions in domains such as telecommunications regulation, financial regulation affecting consumers, and state regulation of certain prices. This is a broader brief than that given to U.S. regulators, but of course in a much smaller economy. The ACCC (originally named the Trade Practices Commission) has had a succession of outstanding chairs, deputy chairs, and top management staff who were in the business of creating a more competitive Australian economy in which consumers were not exploited. It has had a good number of unimaginative leaders as well, and in its history has taken steps backward as well as forward.12

The ACCC storybook is rich. The two stories I choose here to illustrate why, on balance, the ACCC should be seen as a regulator that has achieved formidable excellence are not necessarily the most dramatic or compelling ones. They are simply stories of industry transformation that I am familiar with because I had some inside involvement.
The Aboriginal Insurance Scandal

In the early 1990s, widespread frauds were detected by the ACCC (then the Trade Practices Commission) involving major insurance companies, which were systematically ripping off consumers through misrepresentations about policies that in some cases were totally useless. The worst abuses occurred in twenty-two remote Aboriginal communities, and these were tackled first. In an effort to restore the integrity of the regulatory process, top management from insurance companies visited these communities and for days on end met with the victims, the local Aboriginal Community Council, the regulators, and local officials of the Department of Social Security about the deduction of useless policy premiums from welfare checks. Some of the insurance executives went back to the city deeply ashamed of what their company had done.

Back in Canberra, meetings were held about follow-up regulatory reforms with insurance regulators and industry associations and even with the prime minister, who was shocked by the exploitation of disadvantaged consumers. The restorative dialogue led to the adoption of numerous remedies. Colonial Mutual Life (CML) voluntarily compensated two thousand policyholders and also funded an Aboriginal Consumer Education Fund to prevent future abuses. It conducted an internal investigation to discover failings in the company’s compliance program and to identify the officers responsible for the crimes. A press conference was then called to publicly reveal the scope of the problem. No one recognized quite how enormous it was until a police union realized that its own members were being defrauded through the practices of another company (in this case there were 300,000 victims). This case, against the AMP insurance company, which was Australia’s largest corporation at the time, led to more robust law enforcement. Police victims were outstanding witnesses who could account very precisely for the misrepresentations made to them.

After the CML self-investigation, eighty officers and agents of CML were dismissed, including some senior managers and one large corporate agent, Tri-Global. CML also put in place new internal compliance policies. The Department of Social Security changed some of its procedures relating to welfare checks and there were also regulatory and self-regulatory changes to the licensing of agents and changes to the law. This problem solving was accomplished without going to court (except for a couple of individuals who refused to cooperate with the restorative justice process).

As a commissioner, I was on the wrong side of the debate on the first case. I argued initially that the conduct was so serious that formal criminal charges should be brought. What would have happened had the commission prosecuted this case criminally? At best, the company would have been fined a fraction of what it ultimately paid out, and perhaps there would have been a handful of follow-up civil claims by victims. At worst, illiterate Aboriginal witnesses who had not kept a copy of their policy would have been humiliated and discredited by uproned lawyers, the case lost, and no further cases in this sequence of insurance frauds taken. Worse still, the case might have sat in the in-tray of the director of public prosecutions. A bad feature of Australian regulatory design (unlike that of many U.S. regulatory institutions, which have their own criminal enforcement units) is that regulators settle for civil enforcement because persuading the director of public prosecutions to fight legal battles in complex corporate cases is too difficult.

The industrywide pattern of fraudulent practices might never have been uncovered had the criminal referral approach I advocated been followed. Its revelation was only accomplished by engaging many locally knowledgeable actors in a more conversational process in which Aboriginal victims and their representatives sat in a circle with the insurers’ top management. From that engagement there was a dawning of disgrace among the insurers’ top management for the conduct of their organizations. The CEOs’ sense of shame, communicated through apologies at press conferences convened by the regulator, catalyzed a transformation in the compliance culture and the ethical culture of an important industry. More generally, while the ACCC has not been the principal financial regulator in Australia, the catalytic role it has played across the decades has helped build a culture of somewhat greater prudence in the finance sector than exists in many other countries. The culture of Australian finance continues to have deep ethical flaws, but its comparatively greater prudence has helped Australia avoid banking bailouts and bankruptcies in this century and steered the economy through the 2008–2012 period of financial crisis with no recession and the highest growth rate of developed economies.

Passive Smoking

Robert McComas was chairman of the Trade Practices Commission (now the ACCC) from 1985 to 1987. Although many see his actions as setting back the commission, he was a distinguished legal practitioner, and his positive contribution was to tighten the legal rigor of the commission’s deliberations. Before he was appointed chair, he was a director of Australia’s largest tobacco company, and after his term ended he became chairman of the board of that same company. He made an error of judgment that made his minister, the attorney general, and the deputy prime minister determined not to reappoint him. This is not so much a story of his error as it is of the strengths of the regulatory culture and the regulatory community in which the commission was embedded.
McComas negotiated a remedial advertisement with the Tobacco Institute that was a statutory breach similar to the initial advertisement complained about by Action Against Smoking and Health, a nongovernmental organization. The initial Tobacco Institute advertisement claimed that passive smoking was not proven to be a danger to health. The Australian Federation of Consumer Organizations (AFCO) appealed the commission’s remedial advertisement for persisting with claims about the safety of passive smoking that were false and misleading. The federal court hearing the appeal found the advertisement that had been approved by the regulator to be in breach of its own statute because the evidence was clear that passive smoking was a danger to health. It was the first time anywhere that a court had made this finding. As soon as it did, risk managers across the globe started to advise restaurants, workplaces, discos, and even sports arenas to prohibit smoking for fear of passive smoking suits. Such suits commenced quickly in Australia, citing that federal court decision, and then spread globally. Surprisingly, even in the open air of baseball stadiums throughout North America, after new passive smoking laws were enacted, consumer self-enforcement through raised eyebrows quickly achieved 100 percent compliance with these bans. It is hard to think of a case of responsive tripartism in Australian regulatory enforcement that could have saved more lives. It was a case where the potency of regulated self-regulation came from the consumer movement, but also from within the commission itself, from staff who asserted sympathies with the consumer movement view (which they saw as the rule-of-law view) against their chair. Robin Brown, the young CEO of AFCO, played a courageous hand in supporting litigation which, had it failed, would have bankrupted the consumer movement through an order to pay the tobacco industry’s costs. Brown was well networked with commission insiders. At that time, the ethos of the commission and the government was infused with a philosophy of tripartism, which values the full engagement of public interest groups in the regulatory process. The commission was an independent statutory authority run by regulatory professionals but balanced by representatives from business and consumer backgrounds and expertise. At that time I was the only commissioner with a background in consumer expertise and engagement by civil society, and only part-time; there had been, and is again, more than one part-time or full-time commissioner with a consumer background, and indeed for two decades there was a tradition of a deputy chair with a consumer background. Brown’s view was that McComas had cut a deal for a remedial advertisement with the tobacco industry in a “smoke-filled room.” (McComas was formidable as a smoker, as well as a tobacco industry crony!) Especially in light of his background with that industry, Brown’s view was that a meeting of the Tobacco Institute with the chair to negotiate the text of a controversial remedial advertisement should not have occurred in the absence of the consumer-oriented commissioner also in the room. That was my view as well, and I confronted the chair with the view that the matter should have gone to a meeting of the full commission. Other staff also dissented robustly to the chair. The level of angst within the commission over both these procedural concerns and the fear that the chair had approved a remedial advertisement that was in breach of his commission’s own statute hit the front page of the Canberra Times. Public airing of this contestation of the decision delivered to Brown the confidence of his nervous board to risk AFCO’s financial future on the case.

Some years following the AFCO victory in court, Brent Fisse initiated a meeting at Australian National University’s University House to discuss crafting statutory provisions for enforceable undertakings that were susceptible to public checks and balances ratified or modified by a court to replace the kind of deals in “smoke-filled rooms” exemplified by the initial passive smoking decision. This meeting had been preceded by years of advocacy of the need for such provisions, both by Brent Fisse and by many ACCC insiders. So again, this was an example of the larger regulatory community being responsive as a network, even as the government of the day was unmoved to legislate for many years. Some of the best regulatory minds from the bureaucracy, the ACCC, and the academy were in attendance at the meeting at University House that day. Today, most of Australia’s important regulatory agencies have incorporated into their statutes the enforceable undertaking provisions discussed at that meeting. The journey toward more meaningful metaregulation in Australia continues to take steps backward and forward. “Regulatory capture” would be the best way to characterize a great many enforceable undertakings that have been negotiated in Australia. At the same time, the enforceable undertaking laws created following the University House meeting were a creative and powerful option in the hands of the entrepreneurially excellent regulator, a “soft option” in the hands of the captured regulator, and simply a different intermediate option in the middle of the regulatory pyramid for others. Yet the strengths of Australian metaregulation are encapsulated by this story of greater engagement of the street level of regulatory bureaucrats, greater publicness, and potent third-party contestation and engagement with metaregulation than can usually be seen with U.S. prosecutors negotiating deferred prosecutions or corporate integrity agreements.

NUPTURING TRANSFORMATIVE EXCELLENCE

Through the lens of these stories of transformative responsiveness, what attributes can be discerned to distinguish the truly excellent regulator?
Excellent regulators are those with the most impressive stories about the opportunities their staffs have seized to advance their statutory objectives.

These stories reveal that the risk management orientation of the agency is complemented by an opportunity orientation for advancing its statutory objectives.

The stories reveal a culture of leadership from below in seizing innovative opportunities to advance the agency’s objectives.

The stories reveal innovative networking, outside-in rather than inside-out regulatory design, to advance the regulator’s statutory objectives.

Excellent regulators seize opportunities to transform ethical cultures and cultures of compliance, engaging the kind of self-enforcement that the American public executes against passive smoking in open-air sports stadiums.

How should regulators measure and improve their performance in these terms? According to the view of excellence articulated here, key performance indicators (KPIs) and risk-reduction metrics can be highly dangerous things. They have a place but must be kept in their place. In a May 2015 Australian Senate committee hearing on human rights abuses in immigration detention centers for asylum seekers who arrive in Australian waters on boats, a senator asked if it was true that women were being sexually assaulted by staff when they walked to the washroom, as had been widely alleged? The private operator of the detention center replied that he did not know whether this was the case, but what was important to say in reply was that his company had consistently met all the KPIs for the detention center set by the government! Of course there was no KPI about making it safe for women to walk to the washroom.

KPIs risk the more measurable driving out the more important. If that contractor and its regulator had had a storytelling culture, the regulatory culture they share would be abuzz with dialogue about what its biggest problems were. This would allow them to do well at Malcolm Sparrow’s regulatory craft, to “pick important problems and fix them.” The output would be a story about how well problems were fixed and what wider learnings were applied as a result. This is Eugene Bardach and Bob Kagan’s old story of the virtues of “diagnostic inspectorates.”

The best regulators tell the best stories about how they pick the most important problems from an ever-changing regulatory landscape, how they diagnose them, fix them, and apply wider lessons from the experience. Strategically selected single cases can acquire the profile to ripple out widely, as illustrated by an advertisement in an Australian newspaper that catalyzed bans on passive smoking in the northern hemisphere. Excellent regulators have a record of plucking twenty dollar bills from the sidewalk that others walk past. Who could have seen in 2001 the huge opportunities to make America safer and stronger by responding to suspicious flight training and minor mortgage frauds? Who could have foreseen the opportunity an Australian environmental regulator had in 2009 to respond to an oil spill caused by Halliburton’s cementing of a drilling rig that spilled oil into the Timor Sea for seventy-four days? The answer is that an excellent regulator might have foreseen an opportunity that could have prevented the Deepwater Horizon spill for eighty-six days in the Gulf of Mexico a year later. The transformative response that was missed would have required Halliburton, as part of the Australian regulatory settlement, to retain engineering consultants to report on what the company had done to initiate remedies for this problem on the dozens of rigs it had cemented around the world in a defective fashion. Excellence is about over-the-horizon vision and seizing such strategic opportunities.

A limitation of the transformative vision may be that it expects a regulator or an observer of regulation to foresee more than is possible. On the positive side, a regulatory decision on passive smoking in Australia made Americans attending sporting events safer; on the negative side, a regulatory response to an Australian oil spill missed an opportunity to prevent an American spill. We do, however, expect public health officials and street-level physicians to distinguish one-off treatments for patients from responses that might identify a new virus and contain its spread. In fact, it is a core competency of health professionals to improve their ability to distinguish routine one-off treatments from opportunities to prevent an urban contagion or a global epidemic. My hypothesis is that this could and should also become part of our imaginary of regulatory excellence.

In addition, the globalization of disease has moved health professionalism toward a cosmopolitan imaginary of transformation. This means health professionals in all countries are on the lookout for opportunities to transform global food and medicine in positive ways, and to disrupt global epidemics. A cosmopolitan regulatory imagination was what was lacking in Australia’s response to the Timor Sea oil rig catastrophe. The regulators felt no responsibility beyond their national horizon. Both a transformative imagination and a cosmopolitan regulatory imagination are virtues regulatory communities can cultivate just as well as health professionals, although also with many false positives and false negatives in their judgments about transformation. Social movement actors—the consumer movement and Action Against Smoking and Health in the passive smoking case—are the yeast in the dough of regulatory cosmopolitanism. Social movement actors can be critical friends.
of regulators who relish the role of firing the imagination in their quest for transformational opportunities.

We want environmental regulators who foster transformative technologies and collaborations to make energy renewable, regulators who transform the stewardship of a powerful industry to benefit disadvantaged consumers, regulators who transform the lives of children previously afflicted with cancer caused by passive smoking. Methodologically, excellent regulators tell transformative stories that social scientists would call causal process tracing. They are stories of a sequence of regulatory dialogues, diagnoses, and networked regulatory responses that credibly account for a transformation that enhances safety, justice, and a better future for our children.

NOTES


5. Ibid.


10. After the partial meltdown at the Three Mile Island nuclear plant in 1979, U.S. nuclear safety regulation became more responsive and effective, SCRAMS (automatic shutdowns for safety reasons) today in the U.S. industry run at least one-tenth their rate before the time of Three Mile Island. For a diagnosis of the nuclear regulatory pathologies before the disaster and improvement after, see Joseph V.