

The Wicked Problem of Documenting Armed Conflict: An Analysis of US Advisor Province Reports in the Vietnam War

ELIOT WILCZEK

Abstract: This presentation proposes that the concept of wicked problems can serve as a framework for examining institutional recordkeeping behavior. In particular, wicked problems are a useful lens for understanding how institutions that attempt to address broad, complex societal problems are documenting the environments and communities with which they are engaged. Wicked problems are characterized as societal challenges that are complex, vitally important, ill defined, and “rely upon elusive political judgment for resolution.”[1] Poverty, crime, and climate change are frequently considered types of wicked problems. Understanding and describing wicked problems is closely tied to conceptualizing solutions to these broad issues. This understanding shapes how organizations document complex environments as they are prompted to measure indicators that are closely linked with what they perceive as meaningful sources of problems and solutions.

This conceptual discussion is driven by a case study of province reports produced by US advisors during the Vietnam War. Understanding counterinsurgencies as a wicked problem helps to illustrate how civil and military leaders’ conceptualization of an insurgency shapes what they measure and how they measure it. Using content analysis to examine a selection of province reports and the rules that governed these reports, this study examines the recordkeeping behavior factors that shaped these reports using the frame of wicked problems.

The presentation reviews these conceptual frameworks, the case study methodology, and preliminary results of the project. The goal of this case study is to generate observations that may serve as transferrable lessons for understanding how organizations document complex environments today.

[1] Horst W. J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber, “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning,” *Policy Sciences* 4 (1973): 155–169.

About the author:

Eliot Wilczek is the University Records Manager in the Digital Collections and Archives at Tufts University. He is also enrolled in the doctoral program at the Graduate School of

Library and Information Science at Simmons College. He previously worked as an archivist at Brandeis University and Bowdoin College.