Towards improvisational governance? Jazz improvisation and networked complex governance

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Abstract
In the past decades considerable amounts of power have shifted away from national governments. These shifts have occurred upwards, towards international organisations, sideways due to privatisation and the creation of quasi non-governmental organisations and downwards due to decentralisation of power towards lower tiers of government and other public organisations. This shift is characterised by complex networks in which a host of different actors with public responsibilities must work together to create public goods and values. One of the key questions of Public Administration in such systems is how effective governance is organised (Theisens, 2012).

In this context several authors (e.g. Boutellier, 2011) have pointed at improvisation as one of the key elements that make such systems successful. Just as in jazz, where improvisation of interacting highly skilled musicians leads to beautiful and new music, it is suggested that improvisation between highly skilled public actors may lead to new and effective ways to produce public goods and values.

In this paper we built on our research on improvisation as a metaphor for complex governance systems in order to examine and collect a possible set of competences that may help civil servants. The paper explores the essence and process of jazz improvisation. Jazz improvisation itself is associated with simultaneously composing (planned act) and performing (spontaneous act) without the aid of manuscript, sketches or memory (e.g. Barrett, 1998:283; Berliner, 1994:1; Zografos, 2004). Despite this ‘on the spot’ creating improvisation is described to be a structured ‘thing’, which requires a lot of study (Berliner, 1994:63). Considerable knowledge has been gained over time by dissecting improvisation as a process into consistent steps and characteristics (e.g. Hill, 2005; Dennis & Macaulay, 2007).
We believe improvisation is an interesting conceptual lens to understand governance in complex networks and potentially a power tool for public sector organisations to act more effectively in highly networked environments.

Keywords
Jazz improvisation, civil servants, complex governance, networks

1. Introduction

The process of shifting responsibilities and accountability is well documented within public administration and is perceived as a different way of thinking for governmental influence. New Public Management (NPM) is one of these developments which created many reforms on privatisation, decentralisation, output measurement and control.

The kind of shift of responsibility creates a fundamental change in the way National governments function. In the 1970’s setting priorities, control towards the society largely took place from a central point, whilst on this point accountability is fragmented throughout several actors and networked relations (e.g. Newman, 2004). These developments ‘from government tot governance’ refers to administrative situation in which the government no longer had a monopoly of power but where prioritising, control and accountability occurs in complex networks (Theisens, 2012).

Networks are more flexible compared to traditional hierarchic organisations and can therefore be better fitted in with the 'liquid' modernity. The uncertainty with networks is the organisation of power and control, which systematically is part of hierarchic systems. Finding a structuring principle within networks is not a simple task (Theisens, 2012). How are governments able to establish a normative position in (policy) networks, whilst being part of a large network with relative large experience, knowledge and capacity concerning implementation of policy? (e.g. Pierre & Peters, 2005). As part of dynamic networks with social organisations, market parties, citizens the government has a changed role. Despite the different echelons in which thematic approaches are eminent, it is this role that leads us towards questioning jazz improvisation as possible metaphor for this new complexity.
Boutellier (2011) uses jazz improvisation as a metaphor for the dynamic process of governance within networked systems. He mentions improvisation as one of the key elements that make such systems successful. Just as in jazz, where improvisation of interacting highly skilled musicians leads to beautiful and new music, it is suggested that improvisation between highly skilled public actors may lead to new and effective ways to produce public goods and values.

We choose jazz improvisation as possible rendering of new set of skills which might fit this kind of complexity as an adaptive mechanism. The reason we choose jazz improvisation is due to its apparent nature of being able to adapt as a mechanism and the probability of being an possible rendering instrument in interchangeable and interoperable networked governance systems.

For this paper we conducted a broad and wide exploratory literature review of the exceedingly expanding usage of improvisation (see Cunha et al., 1999) within several fields and objects of study (e.g. strategic management, marketing and organisational studies). With our research we intend to draw an analogy between the fields of Public Administration and Public Management and jazz improvisation as a metaphor for complex governance systems by explaining what jazz improvisation is, how it works and what it could mean. Are there for instance apparent structural elements which we can use to reflect upon governance. What can we say on hierarchy, specific knowledge, priorities, control and responsibility throughout the network of organised and performing jazz musicians?

2. Jazz improvisation

In search of a definition we found many corresponding but sometimes conflicting descriptions. The definition of jazz improvisation and improvisation alone is a wildly acclaimed and often used in many different fields and objects of study. The claim on the meaning of improvisation and its usage is therefore divers and multi-interpretable. In defining jazz improvisation we explored the different fields and tried to reproduce the best suited definition in relating jazz improvisation to governance.

The word ‘improvisation’ derives from *improvisus*, Latin for “not seen ahead of time”. According to this improvising is explained as playing extemporaneously, without a script.
Music is composed and performed simultaneously with no rehearsal or chance to work out the ideas in advance (Barrett, 1998). But jazz improvisation in principle is associated as achieving creativity within and through the medium of established works and rules (Barrett, 1998 in Wright et al., 2012:653). Insights related to musical metaphors use organizing, in which improvisation and flexibility are often underpinned by more or less codified and standardized forms of musical and conversational convention (Zack, 2000; Barrett, 1998 in Wright et al., 2012:659).

2.1 Creativity and structure, occurring simultaneously

Sabatella (1992) refers to creativity as the most important aspect of improvisation. On the one hand you should be able to hear something interesting in your head and be able to play it immediately. On the other hand understanding music fundamentals is an important ally in this endeavour. Technical proficiency on your instrument is another ally. It can help you accurately execute what you conceive. Inspiration, however, is what enables you to hear interesting ideas to begin with. Of the many conventions for creating solos, learners commonly begin with an approach known as “playing off the melody”. […]. Through this approach, the melody can also provide the conceptual basis for solos […] (Berliner, 1994:172).

Again listening to other musicians can give your ideas you may wish to develop further, and being able to successfully duplicate what they are doing is one step toward being able to express yourself. As trumpet player Clark Terry summarized the creative process as “imitate, assimilate, innovate” (Sabatella, 1992), which is also fully endorsed by Dennis & Macaulay (2007:609).

Similarly, in music, knowledge of theory and fundamentals are the tools of composition and improvisation, but inspiration plays the most important role in determining your success. It is not enough to merely play the “right” notes; you must also play interesting music. Jazz improvisation is often likened to “telling a story”, and, like a good story, should be well structured and also convey something interesting to the listener (Sabatella, 1992).

In expressing this creativity and structure (e.g. forms) jazz improvisation can be simultaneously associated with composing (planned act) and performing (spontaneous act) without the aid of manuscript, sketches or memory (Alperson, 1984:19; Barrett, 1998:283;
It is similar to written composition; the difference being where the writing composer prepares a work by planning it, the improviser doesn’t plan, but can prepare for the spontaneous act through various methods [...] (Zografis, 2004) implying thought has been given to improvisation. Despite this ‘on the spot’ creating, improvisation has been described to be a structured ‘thing’, which requires a lot of study (Berliner, 1994:63; Edberg, 2008). Considerable knowledge has been gained over time by dissecting improvisation as a process into consistent steps and characteristics (e.g. Hill, 2005; Dennis & Macaulay, 2007).

Such definitions reflect the common view that the activity of improvisation comprises neither the faithful re-creation of a composition nor the elaboration of prefigures musical ideas. (Berliner, 1994:1-2). When musicians strive experimental improvisation we see that a set of known model phrases reveals precise transformational processes at play, shedding light on ruminations of the musical imagination and such potentially enigmatic matters in differentiation intention and realisation of an idea (Berliner, 1994:12).

2.2 Learning process & knowledge, preparation and skills

Before being able to address the creativity a learning programme precedes the actual performance. Key in understanding how it works is acknowledging the fact that improvisers performing is far from a trivial action. According to Alperson (1984:22) even the freest performer improvises against some sort of musical context. Learning to improvise is often, in large part, learning to master that tradition.

“Jazz is not just, Well man, this is what I feel like playing. It’s a very structured thing that comes down from a tradition and requires a lot of thought and study” – Wynton Marsalis (Berliner, 1994:63).

Jazz musicians frequently begin to learn to improvise by listening to and copying, from recordings or live performances, other players' musical phrases (or even whole solos). Jazz players also learn to assimilate musical "rules" concerning certain scalar patterns to certain harmonic progressions, either explicitly, through a study of "music theory" or, less methodically, by developing an "ear" for the accepted idioms. Much like Alperson Barrett
(1998-283) acknowledges that the best players practice relentlessly so that they are prepared to be spontaneous. They imitate the master soloists, repeating patterns and phrases over and over until they become tacit and automatic implying that players must learn various tools and patterns.

Bash mentions that improvisers needs to know the form, chord progression, melody and style of a piece in advance and have a plan on how he or she will construct a meaningful and effective solo within those parameters (1991:3-4), like Newton (2004) who mentions that improvisers prepare for every possible context and situation (2004:86). Bash his notion is in line with Whitmer (1953) and other authors (e.g. Berliner, 1994:174, 186) which explicitly addresses the chief principle of an easy and fluent improvisation as the exhaustive study of the melodic, rhythmic and structural aspects and possibilities of a fractional part of the basic melodic theme selected resulting in an unfolding structure first and last the ideal. Composed pieces or tunes, consisting of a melody and an accompanying harmonic progression, have provided the structure for improvisation throughout most of the history of jazz (Berliner, 1994:63). Berliner also addresses the knowledge needed in mastering the chord progression of each piece as a fundamental guideline because of its roles in suggesting tonal material for the melody’s treatment and in shaping invention to its harmonic-rhythmic scheme (Berliner, 1994:71).

All improvisation is relatively easy if one has studied the endless possible shapes and migration of a given melody. Each beginning and end of the work of a skilful improviser is planned thought: blueprints of action. A good practical rule is: to train the intelligence to take consideration of all possible phases of a theme and the emotion will take care of themselves. In other words, any person must have a digested plan or preconceived design (1953:36).

Another major underexposed aspect is the wide compass of practice and thought that improvisers give to music outside formal performance events. This includes group rehearsals, individual practice routines and imaginative compositional play while away from an instrument showing the unmistaken essence of training and rigorous musical thinking that underlie jazz improvisation (Berliner, 1994:15, 215).

"improvisation is an art that has to be learned [...] The art of improvising is not just a gift. It is acquired and perfected by study [...]." (John Rudin, Jacques Copeau, 1986 in Besseling)
The above-mentioned notions re-occur in various different formats all slightly different expressed. For instance Ferand (1939) describes the process of improvisation as arising out of musical feeling, out of musical sub consciousness, sometimes as a reaction to an actual outward or inward stimulant (1939:337). Others describe improvisation as presented and formed in the moment of presentation, which often are developed into pieces (Albert, 2012:1-2; Alperson, 1984:17).

3. Leadership

You have to sacrifice your own ideas at times. In some organisations a strong leader takes responsibility for regulating such interaction. "Whenever you have a group of people playing together, somebody has to lead and somebody has to follow" – Wynton Marsalis. Everybody has to follow the leader’s concept, but add everything they can to it. From the perspective of some artists, however, the leader’s exercise of power brings the ideals of self-expression and group welfare into conflict and belies commitment to equality and the democratic process. (Berliner, 1994:418).

During collective improvising, the activities of creating, listening and evaluating become integral parts of the same process. Outside of their performances, to refine their grasp of the abilities upon which improvisation depends, players constantly hone their skills as critics and experts listeners (Berliner, 1994:387). The configuration of musical personalities and talents within each band establishes its fundamental framework and determines its unique possibilities for invention. For those reasons, the leader’s initial selection of personnel is itself a compositional act, requiring a special kind of sensitivity. Precise musical vision, knowledge of performance, styles of prospective players, and prescient judgement of their potential as interacting improvisers profoundly affect the group’s chances for success as an artistic enterprise (Berliner, 1994:416).
3.1 Group dynamics

Arrangements represent varied degrees of planning and impose different compositional constraints upon improvisers. They introduce stable pre-composed elements to group interplay, providing overall shape to performances and reducing some of the risks associated with collective improvisation. Performers attention to the artful regulation of their interaction expresses itself most formally in the creation of musical arrangements, details of presentation worked out for each piece in advance of music events (Berliner, 1994:289).

Significantly the initial decision a leader makes about a band’s instrumentation determines the collective palette of sounds. Models for these and other decisive group features commonly originate with historic bands whose sheer excellence of musicianship, forceful musical personalities and innovative concepts exert a disproportionate influence on the contemporaries (Berliner, 1994:291).

Beyond the issue of group instrumentation, arrangements can differ markedly. [...] In between these extremes, arrangers typically design a particular treatment for every pieces’ melody and harmony, and decide upon the larger performance sequence of events. Within this framework, they designate each part’s opportunity for improvisation in relation to the performance of pre-composed material. In addition, by determining which instruments play together and when they establish a balance between events featuring soloists and events featuring the ensemble. The regulation of these matters offers artists musical guidelines with differing degrees of specification (Berliner, 1994:292-293). As Wynton Marsalis urges group improvising teaches the individual to adjust circumstances beyond her control and use her portion of influence to create something cohesive (in Miles & Carter, 2008:7; also see Newton, 2004:98)

3.2 Diversity of options

Within the larger formal design of renditions, musicians exploit their group’s sound palette by varying the use and roles of instruments from one musical episode to another (Berliner, 1994:296). Bands usually arrange and teach their material during formal rehearsals. Consequently, the amount of time they allow for rehearsing, usually a function of the particular circumstances surrounding performances, strongly influences the nature of arrangements. Groups that work as stable units have the opportunity to rehearse regularly and arrange their repertory formally (Berliner, 1994:301).
The processes underlying the creation of arrangements vary according to the skills of band members and social structure of individual bands (Berliner, 1994:302). In general the principal dialogue of artists remain the language of music itself. One performer proposes a piece’s as idea by performing a melody and in response other musicians compose alternatives complementary patterns (Berliner, 1994:304-305).

Duke Ellington details his orchestra’s varied approach to arrangements: “You’ve got to write with certain men in mind. You write for their abilities and natural tendencies and give them places where they do their best [...] My band is my instrument” (Berliner, 1994:305).

In contemporary jazz groups, as well, musicians explore various ways of rendering pieces throughout rehearsals, starting and stopping their performances at whim, and evaluating the outcomes. Eventually, in a give-and-take process, they settle on those that are mutually satisfactory and incorporate the most successful elements into the evolving designs of arrangements (Berliner, 1994:306).

3.3 Framework, phasing subject to change

Many musicians, although benefiting from the guidance of arrangements, alter them over time. As the frameworks of compositions serve as inspiring vehicles for improvisation, new arrangements provide comparable inspiration, challenging group members to negotiate fresh musical models in performance and stimulating the conception of ideas in the process. Performing a piece thousands of times over a career you’re always going deeper and deeper into its possibilities, discovering new ways of doing things (Berliner, 1994:307-308).

Thelonious Monk for instance emphasis on the artist’s intensive attention to revising arrangements, commonly practicing a single composition for two hours at a sitting; experimenting with chord voicing’s and substitutions, subtly altering the melody’s contour and phrasing. Although arrangers work out fundamental ideas on their own, they depend on rehearsals with other artists and live performances to test and evaluate ideas, especially for elaborate arrangements (Berliner, 1994:308).
Conclusion and discussion
Governments are now subject to horizontal networks within society which means that citizens are more and more able to organise themselves effectuating in a decline of predictability often out of sight for the central government. In addition the networked structure of the society enables swift and organised resilience. This fundamental shift in responsibilities questioning prioritising, control and accountability as central government in a more ‘liquid’, flexible networked society and governance requires a different set of skills and a new steering mechanism. We used jazz improvisation due to its described ability to adapt and probability for networked governance systems.

Jazz improvisation itself is used wildly and transcribed towards various fields and objects of studies throughout the last decade and has been identified extensively addressing the different needs and reflection within each field (e.g. Cunha et al., 1999). In its utmost simplicity improvisation can be divided into two camps. 1) spontaneous act, on the spot composing and 2) a more structured and well planned performance. The most important notion, which is supported by many authors in our paper, concerns the perhaps not so apparent but very often perceived activities before an actual improvisational performance.

In the course towards skill development and competence enhancement of civil servants on improvisation performance the following key elements are distinguished from the literature:

- Knowledge, expertise and skills
  Technical proficiency instrument, tradition, learning and re-create from others, musical theory and practice (harmonics, melody, rhythm, scalar patterns, dynamics, chords et cetera), self-reflection.
- Rehearsal
  Certain solo, practice (routines), personal study and growth, considering all possible phases of a theme, arrange and teach material.
- Quasi-autonomous leadership
  Blueprints of action, create a concept, band’s instrumentation (pallet of sounds), knowledge of performance, styles of prospective players, prescient judgement of potential, initial selection of personnel is itself a compositional act’, opportunities for soloists, framework of melody and harmony, responsibility for regulating interaction.
- Group dynamics
Cohesion and role definition, social structure, open communication, configuration of musical personalities and talents, sacrifice your own ideas at times, self-expression and group welfare.

- Composition and arrangements, musical score
  Structure thought out on beforehand, digested plan or preconceived design, arrangements.

At the spur moment of the performance itself creativity, musical feeling(s), instrumental abilities, interaction, creating, listening and evaluating acts as one whole process. But whilst studying jazz improvisation as such these elements seemed indefinitely subject to extensive exploration and experience. If we look at governance, as a dynamic process with widely shifting structures and concepts, scattered leadership and control could be a result. As more governance occurs in complex networks and as more networks are used as a governance instrument, civil servants are considered to operate effectively. This new role involves a number of challenges. Jazz improvisation showed the possible rendering options of simultaneously expressing creativity through the medium of established works and rules.

The tension of vertical responsibility and horizontal participation within networks means a reoccurring (re-)assessment of considerations, importance and interest of procedures, power and control by the civil servant. Improvisation and flexibility often offer more or less codified and standardized forms of musical and conversational convention creating possibilities for civil servants in this case. Eventually ‘playing off the melody’ and outside regular patterns a civil servants could be able to enhance the conceptual basis for its actions within networks.

With improvisation a complete framework or blueprint is not of main importance, but moreover the qualititative abilities of the musicians, the apparent presence of strong leadership and / or group dynamics. If this translates to governance the rigid structure, hierarchy of leadership is not of main importance but the individual skills of civil servants operating within (complex) networks assessing:

- Capacity of learning (short-term), experience and (systematic) change.
- (Stored) knowledge, routines, skills and associated (group) behaviour.
- Quality of reflection.
We intent to enhance the skills and competences of civil servants by exploring various studies from the fields of organisational improvisation and consider the possibilities for governance. Ultimately creating and testing a conceptual model and findings with improvisational specialists (e.g. jazz musicians, theatre actors) and civil servants of the National government the coming year.

**Literature**


Edberg, E. (2008). "The most impressive part of the music we play is the art of improvisation". Retrieved from http://classicalimprov.blogspot.nl


