Connecting social science and startups to tackle important problems

Last year, more than 45,000 tech startups were launched across the UK. The world of startups has, over the last decade, attracted an extraordinary amount of talent and resources. Today's startups are increasingly focused on tackling major social and environmental challenges — from food waste, to mental ill health, to unemployment. Many aspiring entrepreneurs are seeing ventures as a way to achieve impact on issues they care about, as well as secure commercial returns.

The problems being tackled by these mission-driven ventures are not new. For most of them, there are decades of relevant research that can help us to understand their causes, consequences, and potential solutions. This is particularly the case for the social and behavioural sciences, which can inform our understanding of people's thoughts, feelings and behaviours. For example, founders building a new digital health product (e.g. focused on a domain like physical activity, diet, or sleep) should be guided by an existing body of knowledge about the intervention approaches that are most likely to lead to sustained change.

Infusing new ventures with the rigour and ethics of good quality social science, without detracting from their creativity and pace, can maximise their potential to meet people's needs in meaningful and measurable ways.

And this is not a one-way street. New startups are essentially a series of experiments, and provide a real-world testbed for rapid experimentation — about not just 'what works' but also 'what sticks'. As they progress, ventures' insights, failures, challenges, pivots and successes provide a valuable trail of breadcrumbs. This learning, if synthesised and shared, could usefully contribute to scientific knowledge. A number of well-known ventures have embraced this mission-driven, science-rich approach (e.g. Omada and Sleepio) — collaborating with academics and publishing their findings.

Connecting 'R' with 'D'

The value of connecting social science and business is well recognised. It is evidenced, for example, by the level of demand from big tech companies, who are among the largest recruiters of social science PhDs, and whose products and business models have been heavily influenced by resident economists, anthropologists and behavioural scientists. Uber, Amazon, Google, Facebook, and other tech giants, have embraced a labs-based approach (e.g. see here) to optimising product development and customer experience. Some have in-house research teams that rival the world's best university research groups, attracting talented researchers with the kind of data, pace, and freedom to experiment that is often lacking in academia.

The argument that successful ventures are built on a systematic understanding of human behaviour, afforded by the social sciences, no longer needs to be won. But we still have a long way to go in connecting these two worlds together.

Social science research — even when it has clear and immediate practical implications — is often not translated into digestible recommendations that can be drawn upon by those developing new products and services. On the other hand, if you're a founder wanting to maximise the scientific rigour and output of your venture, there is no blueprint or roadmap for what 'good' looks like. What does it mean for a venture to be evidence-based? How should ventures evaluate their impact in the early stages, when their product is still changing rapidly? And how should they go about communicating scientific unknowns when 'hype' is so deeply woven into the fabric of the startup world?

Research and innovation at Zinc

After a postdoc at UCL, I stepped away from the well-worn academic career path. My love for research had been strengthened during my time in UCL's Centre for Behaviour Change, but I felt disillusioned by the definition of 'impact', and the culture surrounding it, that seemed core to a successful academic career. I spent a year working in Bupa's new behavioural science team, leading a programme of collaboration with UCL, before joining Zinc's early team in 2017.

Zinc's mission is to build and scale a new way to tackle important societal problems. We run a venture-builder programme where 50 entrepreneurs come together in London, full-time, with the aim of creating new, mission-driven businesses from scratch. We are also soon to launch a new Academy programme, for those who want to have impact through, or alongside, their existing roles. Each of our programmes is centred on a singular 'mission' — our most recent one, for example, focused on improving the quality of later life.

My role at Zinc has been twofold: (a) to ground Zinc ventures in a scientific approach to understanding problems and developing, testing and evaluating solutions, and (b) to maximise opportunities for our ventures to create and share new research. The programme of R&D that I lead reflects Zinc's commitment to maximising the impact of the social sciences, and bridging the gap with academia. Zinc's main financial backer to date has been the London School of Economics, and we are also part of the LSE-led ASPECT consortium.

For a social scientist, Zinc's approach to venture-building is interesting for a number of reasons: Being mission-led allows us to be properly interdisciplinary, combining resources that would otherwise sit in silos (researchers and entrepreneurs, technologists and social scientists, venture capital and research funding); building new ventures from scratch allows us to shape the earliest stages of the journey, including defining the right problem; and, since our ventures are testing new solutions in applied ways from an early stage, they provide an opportunity to engage with users as co-creators, makers and evaluators — moving beyond traditional data collection and research participation.

What we've done so far

Our in-house R&D team, funded by grants from ASPECT and the Wellcome Trust's Public Engagement Scheme, have backgrounds in behavioural science, psychology / cognitive neuroscience, sociology / gerontology, and data science. We support founders to identify opportunities from existing research, develop lines of enquiry, undertake rapid problem-led reviews of research, design and test new products and services, work closely with users to co-create solutions, and identify gaps that need to be targeted by researchers, innovators and/or funders.

Over the last three years, Zinc has supported 150 founders and created 35 ventures, mobilised a community of >300 expert 'Visiting Fellows', and facilitated a range of new collaborative academic partnerships.

Our ventures cover a diverse range of problem areas, business models, sectors, technologies and scientific disciplines. They include, for example:

- *Wakey!*, a breakfast show on your phone, designed to make mental health content more accessible and engaging — delivered by a former Love Island contestant and a comedy drag queen and designed by a team of psychological scientists and creatives.
- *Tandem*, a transport solution for small towns and cities, who have partnered with academics at the University of Aberdeen and Glasgow to understand their users' needs.

- ***[Ferly](#),*** a digital platform that aims to transform women's relationship with sex, co-founded by a social scientist and built on a deep understanding of the biology and psychology of sexual wellbeing.

Scaling up

Zinc is about to enter a new growth phase. Over the next 4 years, we will run 7 venture-builder programmes, working with 500 founders to build ~200 new ventures, and backing 100. Our programmes will focus on four missions: improving mental and emotional health; unlocking opportunities in areas hard hit by automation and globalisation; improving the quality of later life; and reducing the harm people do to the environment.

This next phase provides a unique platform to scale-up, in parallel, our research and innovation activities. These include:

- Working closely with founders to build and scale **science-rich ventures**, to ground them in a robust evidence base and maximise their potential to generate new empirical knowledge;
- Building a sustainable **research funding strategy** for Zinc and our ventures to attract, incentivise and resource good quality research and researchers;
- Scaling up, and sharing, our approach to **user research** and public engagement, to bring users alongside founders as co-creators and makers;
- Attracting postdoc researchers to work with Zinc and our ventures, through our **Research Fellowship Programme**, to provide opportunities for early career researchers to do research differently;
- Facilitating **collaborations** between ventures and university partners, to minimise the misaligned incentives and institutional bureaucracy that often hinder partnerships;
- Continuing to develop our **methodology** for social science innovation, to provide a roadmap for founders similar to the [IDEO Design Guide](#);
- Joining up with **complementary initiatives** around the world, including working closely with partners in the US and Asia, to learn from good practice internationally;
- **Disseminating** our learning through an open science approach to knowledge exchange and public engagement, to ensure that we have impact beyond our immediate networks.

Having piloted each of these activities over the last few years, I think they represent a set of ingredients that, if scaled, could lead to vibrant new pathways to impact for the social sciences.

UKRI Future Leaders Fellowship

Scaling up our R&D activities will now be possible with the support of a 4-year, £1.2m [Future Leaders Fellowship](#), which I'm fortunate to have received from UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). Zinc will be the host institution for this fellowship, with the LSE as a project partner. The goal of my fellowship is to create, scale and share a new approach to social science-based innovation: one that amplifies the visibility and impact of research, creates a more systematic approach to embedding that research in commercial products and services, and maximises the potential for new knowledge generation from these ventures.

For this to succeed, it will require a significant cultural shift — not just from founders, but also from researchers and funders.

In particular, it will require us to:

1. Direct founders' energy towards neglected, complex and thorny problems, moving beyond low-hanging fruit;
2. Make existing, published research and data more accessible and digestible, in order to accelerate founders' learning and minimise the number of unnecessary new surveys and experiments;
3. Empower users to play a meaningful role in shaping new solutions, moving beyond research participation to proper co-creation;
4. Reduce the gap between what's popular, and what's effective, by making the evidence upon which products are grounded more accessible to users, and by giving investors the right tools to sieve out the snake oil;
5. Develop tailored methods of evaluation for new ventures, moving away from traditional RCTs to more rapid research designs, and embracing citizen science approaches;
6. Incentivise and motivate ventures to share their learning, and create better platforms for dissemination, to maximise the efficiency with which we accumulate knowledge.

None of this will happen overnight. But if we can make progress in these areas, we will be closer to a more efficient and effective system for tackling important problems, and de-siloing the knowledge and skills that can work towards solving them.

Author's note: If you're interested in getting involved, you'll find job openings, research collaboration opportunities, and more here.

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Notes:

- *This blog post appeared originally on Medium.*
- *The post expresses the views of its author(s), not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.*
- *Featured image by Matias Malka on Unsplash*
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