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Peter Evans

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From nerd to herd: research uptake, impact and ‘policy entrepreneurs’

*I seem to be spending more and more time with **Peter Evans**, talking to UK universities and others about the thorny issue of ‘research for impact’. Most recently, we headed off down to the Institute of Development Studies, for the first of two sessions with their International Centre on Tax and Development.*

*For once, I did not do that much talking, not least because I had a cold and could only manage a whisper/croak. It didn’t matter because Peter had plenty to say – he’s smart and whimsical, has huge experience in the research machine and thinks visually (which I do not). As an example here is **a recent post from his excellent substack**, which summarizes one of his main messages: that the bridge between researchers and policy/practice is getting wider and stronger, but we undervalue the importance of human agency in getting from ‘nerd to herd’.*

‘There are common complaints in- and about- social and political research in public policy and development (particularly in governance, accountability, institutions, politics, corruption).

First, there is too little of it about (it is grossly underfunded compared with the sector biggies such as health, agriculture, education. Don’t start me on this....)

Second, ‘the system’ (research funding, academia, journals) tends to incentivise and reward the novel over the useful. Researchers can have a brilliant career focusing on the weird and the wonderful rather than the yawning evidence gaps in policy and practice where more research could greatly increase the effectiveness of massive sector investments (to borrow a phrase from Mushtaq Khan and Pallavi Roy – help to **‘to stop wasting money and start making progress’**).

Third, some potentially impactful research is written in arcane language, lodged in unread journals, and paywalled, so that few outside that small intellectual bubble can grip its relevance to real life – or act on it.

Overall, a wide range of 'big stucks' and 'frontier challenges' in policy and practice remain undisturbed by practical research – either because it does not exist, or relevant research lies unknown and unloved.

There is not a pathway, no bridge ... 'from nerd to herd'. (sorry!)

what does better look like?

This is less of an issue in traditional physical science-led areas such as health, energy and agriculture. Resources are vast. Pathways to impact, long termism and diverse 'portfolio' strategies are clear and well understood. And the potential for commercial exploitation super-charges the system. It invests big on discovery, with a side bet on systems and policy relevant research.

I am the child of medical researchers who worked on frontier discovery (mouse model cytogenetics) funded by government and charity (cancer research) and within years their labs' work contributed to therapies, commercial exploitation, and changed and saved lives. This ambition to change the world, not just describe it, is what motivates me and makes me restless.

A clear pathway from nerd to herd...

So what are we doing in social and political research, and what more can we do?

Bridging the research-to-practice gap has been my bread and butter for a decade and I see it as a mixture of well known components but also one key (undervalued) aspect.

First the well known:

- If you control research funds, be selective if you aspire to contribute to better policy and practice in a relatively limited time. Have a clear strategy which could be 'bet the farm on a sure fire success' or could be 'spread your bets on a decent portfolio; and then throw funds/energy/time at emerging winners'.
- Clearer research communication and diverse channels (plain language, demystified, less jargon, policy briefs, social media etc etc). We all know this, but it is a noisesome marketplace with some risk that we all use the same creative tools and advice. And so may churn out spangly porridge.
- Clearer strategy (pathways to impact, theories of change, theories of victory etc); I use the phrase 'nose to tail policy engagement' which means being alert and active from the very start to the very end of the research cycle. Of course, being alert does not mean all research has immediate policy relevance or a potential policy maker partner – but we should actively decide this and keep testing. It should not be the simple consequence of neglect.
- Bigger and better 'carrots' for researchers to pursue relevance, engagement uptake, and 'impact' (the focus on, and rewarding, 'impact' is work in progress, and controversial, but has definitely shaken things up).

Anything missing? *Policy entrepreneurship*

A neglected part of this is what I call 'policy entrepreneurship' – the human agency and endeavour to spot potential in research, amplify it, and network like crazy with potential 'uptakers' and use time, energy, favours (and money if you are luckily enough to have it) to match-make, connect, pitch, and help push research along that pathway to impact, and pull practitioners and policy makers towards it.

(Doing it well probably needs eight arms, a flexible brain, and the ability to change colour according to mood and scenery).



This can be a passion project, a hidden effort, in the margins. Unplanned, unheralded, unfunded, often thankless. High risk, low return, and when you do strike gold... Success has many parents etc...

No robots

The very human nature of this effort also means that it will remain relatively protected from the march of AI. I've been exploring how AI will affect research synthesis, summarising, and 'helpdesk' style services and think that change is on the way. This means that people should be doing what AI can't, even in 10 years (thanks to **Nic Cheeseman** for this phrase) , and 'policy entrepreneurship' is a very human endeavour. The robots will struggle...

Dark arts

The 'dark arts' have a place, but there is also real need to keep them in check. From experience I think policy entrepreneurship in our field probably needs 'subject expertise' and experience. It is

hard to discharge the responsibility to someone with strong skills in public relations or communications but who does not know the field, as a lot of the content is quite nerdy. I think about this when some poor charity collector stops me in the street and tries to tell me (glancing at a script) about the 'terrible poverty in country x'.

Nerd to herd: where can I get me an entrepreneur?

I think that 'policy engagement' is often neglected in 'governance' research projects.

Traditional research funding is not geared to the longer timescales or the budget for this. From experience this might need a longer tail of a project (a few years added to the '3 to 5 years') with a small budget that can be used if/when opportunity arises. This is a nightmare for project officers and accountants, but hey, if that is what it takes....

Planning for 'policy entrepreneurship' is challenging – it is amorphous, opportunistic, individual. Formalising it risks echoing the menu of a Greek Taverna I went to that said 'at 7PM every evening the staff will perform a spontaneous dance'.

Logframing it might kill it.

But a first step would be to chew on the idea, consider whether it may be 'a thing', consider who in your team or network is or could or may want to do it, and put some money and time and thought aside to help it to happen. You might need to collectively identify who has the interest/motivation/skills/personality...**priors**.

It's also worth asking people what they have been most proud of in their careers, and their memories of how success really happened. I think this often throws up the marginal stories of personal effort and agency, to complement the more mechanical accounts that are on the record.

And get in touch! I love this stuff! It can change the world*!

(*someone sensible restrain me please).

About the author

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Peter J Evans is a governance and political economy person who likes to turn words into pictures. He is co-instigator of the Practical Politics Platform at the University of Oxford which aims to take 'political economy analysis' out of the shadows and into the mainstream of growth and development via open access, plain language, policy relevant, propositional PEA products (PEA for all!). He writes as 'Not That Peter Evans'
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