

Making academic knowledge useful to policy : why “supply” solutions are not the whole story

by Blog Admin

September 26, 2012

When looking at how academic knowledge informs policy there is a heavy emphasis on the need for academics to improve their communication and dissemination of outputs to fit better into the policy framework. [John Parkinson](#) argues that the speed and oversimplification inherent in policy decision-making also need to be re-examined.



I have just read a [blogpost](#) by the inimitable Dragon’s Best Friend (aka [@Puffles2010](#)) in which s/he kindly talked about how much knowledge about policy there is bubbling away in academia but how little of it makes it out of the bubble and into Whitehall.

But DBF – s/he is an ex-civil servant and will appreciate the joys of the three-letter acronym (TLA) — puts too much emphasis on academics putting their thoughts into formats that policy makers can use, as if the problem were simply a supply-side issue. Yes, it’s clear that some academics are too much interested in their internal debates and jargon to connect terribly well with others. But there are a great many who are not – who have had lives outside the academy, or who engage with the so-called ‘real world’ on a daily basis.

So what about the problems of information consumption on the policy side? Why is it that many policy makers are so unable, seemingly, to access the knowledge that is generated?

It strikes me that it is *not* simply a matter of packaging – bundling up the message in a series of tweets and blogs, briefings and policy breakfasts. To stretch the postal metaphor further, it is a matter of the size and shape of the slot we have to push the package through.

There is plenty of academic work to help us understand this. On the policy side, there is work by my friend [Peter John](#) who uses an evolutionary analogy to show how policy ideas must adapt in order not to be rejected by policy systems, often changing out of all recognition along the way. In media studies, there is a long tradition of work by people like [John Street](#) that shows how ideas are transformed by their encounter with the media. Media imperatives (gain an audience, sell advertising) formats (small, narrative, often visual) and audience demand impose certain constraints on what ideas *can* be transmitted.

This is beyond *packaging*; it is more fundamental than that. It is changing the idea itself, changing the product, so that it fits into the packaging that is needed to get through the mail slot in a way that will be accepted by the recipient.

What determines the size and shape of the mail slot in British policy circles today? DBF points to a few, and I can add some more:

- the extremely – ludicrously – short time frames that policy makers work to
- the very narrow ways in which policy problems are identified and framed
- the demand for instant solutions instead of long-term strategies
- the lack of tolerance of doubt and risk in an inherently risky, uncertain world
- the need to present an appearance of competence and confidence in the face of uncertainty
- the deliberate sidelining of public sector experience and expertise
- a cultural fascination with the quick, the new and the young over the slow, the old and experienced.

All of this combines to create an environment in which policy decisions are made by those with bags of

confidence but little experience and little time to read, think, discuss.

This is a state I know well from my decade or so as a public relations and management consultant. It's a highly addictive state: a perpetual adrenaline rush of crisis management, fire-fighting, brain-storming, midnight-oil-burning, high-speed commuting. It's a state that the late management guru Stephen Covey called 'urgency addiction' and it's incredibly damaging both to the people who suffer from it and to the organisations they work for, because it robs those organisations of the long-term view, both of the past and the future.

And that, as well as the packaging, is why academic knowledge can be hard to take up. It challenges standard models, it questions assumptions and narrow definitions, it calls for deliberation and slowness, as in the 'slow policy' movement called for by my friend and soon-to-be-colleague Mike Sward and fellow political philosopher [Sheldon Wolin](#) .

Yes, there are problems with unrealistic day-dreams generated in some quarters of academia. But that is only one of the problems. Other problems are to do with the wildly unrealistic expectations of policy makers for instant and risk-free solutions. And that is why I worry about calls for academics to be more "useful". Perhaps policy makers also need to slow down, retain experience, and think.

Note: This article gives the views of the author(s), and not the position of the Impact of Social Sciences blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

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