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Making an impact: misreading, misunderstanding, and misrepresenting research does nothing to improve the quality of public debate and policy making

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Commentary

Making an impact: misreading, misunderstanding, and misrepresenting research does nothing to improve the quality of public debate and policy making

“I don’t care what they have to say
It makes no difference anyway;
Whatever it is, I’m against it!”
Groucho Marx, *Horse Feathers*

In a recent commentary for this journal, Haughton, Deas, and Hinks (henceforth HDH) discuss the dangers involved when trying to use academic research to influence policy. First, it is argued, there is the danger of co-option by wider (‘neoliberal’) political agendas. Second, and related, is the danger that researchers are “seduced in to providing provocative analyses in order to gain the attention of policy makers” (page 269).

Some of my work, which in turn builds on the research of the Spatial Economics Research Centre (SERC),⁽¹⁾ is used as an example to illustrate these dangers. In particular, HDH focus on work claimed to represent the “orthodoxy that infuses much of contemporary thinking about local and regional economic development in Britain ... what might be described as a mix of agglomeration boosterism and antipathy towards planning” (page 265).⁽²⁾ This commentary is, in part, written as a response to the criticisms raised by HDH. That task is complicated by the fact that these mainly take the form of vague accusations, assertions, or insinuations, while more specific criticisms seem to arise from misreading, misunderstanding, or misrepresenting the research they criticise. I give some examples of these issues below. The commentary also addresses some of the wider, substantive issues, around agglomeration and planning as well as briefly reflecting on the broader impact agenda and the issues this raises.

‘Agglomeration boosterism’

Let me start with the charge of ‘agglomeration boosterism’. As defined by HDH, this is “at heart an approach that seeks to build upon success, targeting assistance at already dynamic local economies” (page 266). The policy solutions are said to focus on the supply side and, in particular, the promotion of high-value knowledge-rich economic activity—education, training, university links, and cultural vibrancy to attract skilled workers. HDH argue that there are, at least, two problems to this approach. First, it involves little consideration of adverse impacts in other struggling areas. Second, it focuses on aggregate economic growth while ignoring consequences for individuals who may not benefit (eg, unemployed workers in Manchester).

⁽¹⁾SERC is an independent research centre, based at the London School of Economics. I helped found the centre and acted as its director from 2008 to 2013. HDH also discuss the work of the LSE Growth Commission. I was not a member of that commission and do not talk about its work (or the criticism of it) in what follows.

⁽²⁾I am slightly surprised to see this position described as representing current ‘orthodoxy’. It is certainly not the consensus view of academics, and probably not of think-tanks either. Equally I am not clear how much it holds sway within UK government—possibly in parts of Her Majesty’s Treasury, and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, but certainly not in large swathes of the Department for Community and Local Government, other government departments, or most local authorities.

Is this a fair characterisation and are these criticisms valid? I will let the reader judge based on the following excerpts from my work for the Manchester Independent Economic Review (MIER):⁽³⁾

“London and the Southeast have a large and significant productivity advantage relative to the rest of Great Britain. *If* policy wants to achieve a more ‘balanced’ spatial structure it is working against strong market forces pulling in the other direction. There are several northern city regions, MCR [Manchester City Region] included, whose productivity disadvantage relative to the Southeast and London is (i) less than that for other Northern city regions; (ii) less than that of their wider region. This suggests that policy interventions focussed on those relatively productive city regions will have less work to do to counter the strong market forces pulling towards London and the Southeast.”

“The evidence base, on average, suggests that the effects [of greater growth in MCR] on individuals are likely to be positive, if such growth came about as a result of reductions in the costs of living or producing in MCR. The effect on specific places will be more mixed. Overall, there is some evidence that growth in MCR (as well as a small number of other city regions) is the most realistic way to raise overall economic growth in the North and, depending on how this was achieved, that such growth would be good for the UK economy.”

“The impact of future growth on economic and social deprivation will depend how it is achieved. The most direct impact will come from policies that specifically target the most deprived individuals. In contrast, policies that achieve MCR growth through attracting or retaining increasing numbers of skilled workers may have some indirect benefits, but they will also generate other costs in terms of, for example, rising housing costs.”

The main body of the report spends fourteen pages considering the implications of such an approach. Five of these pages consider implications for other areas:

“On the basis of what we currently know, however, it is clear that there will be winners and losers, even if the size of any effects remains unknown.”

A further five pages consider the consequences for social and economic deprivation:

“Clearly, the most direct benefits to disadvantaged residents occur when their economic opportunities improve as a result of overall growth in MCR. If our primary concern is economic and social deprivation, then the focus needs to be on maximising the direct benefits to such individuals of increased economic opportunities as the local economy expands.”

What about specific policy recommendations as characterised by HDH? Should we focus on high-value knowledge-rich activity? Not according to our work for MIER: “Policy should not be overly concerned with the sectoral composition of the local economy.” What about an emphasis on university links? I am not sure I have ever written on this issue (our report for MIER does not mention them). Cultural vibrancy to attract high-skilled workers? In the MIER report we argue the opposite:

“There are plenty of stories about possible benefits [of cultural vibrancy], but almost no systematic evidence. This suggests that decisions on amenities should continue to be made on the basis of their public good aspects not any hypothetical transformational impact in terms of attracting skilled workers.”

Academic articles by others at SERC (eg, Nathan, 2012) make similar arguments.

In short, agglomeration-boosterism, as defined and characterised by HDH, is an inaccurate representation of my position or of specific advice that I have offered to central and local government. Even the most basic reading of the MIER (one of our most high-profile and

⁽³⁾This piece is not referenced by HDH. I find this neglect puzzling, given that the MIER provides a good example of the kind of policy recommendations that flow from our work.

extensive policy-orientated pieces of research) makes this clear, which suggests that either HDH have not read key pieces of our work or that they are (deliberately) misinterpreting it.

The UK planning system

Let us turn now to consider the claim of antiplanning rhetoric where “planning is portrayed as a hindrance to growth ... [with] no acknowledgement of the benefits that are derived from planning” (page 267). Again, some excerpts from my writings allow the reader to judge the validity of this criticism. For example, from the first substantive paragraph of Nathan and Overman (2011):

“Planning systems set rules and guidelines that influence the level, location and pattern of activity. The ultimate role of planning is to promote a balance of environmental, social and economic welfare that meets the needs of current and future generations. Doing so inevitably involves trade-offs, so any planning system has both benefits and costs.”

And from the conclusion:

“Campaigners are also perfectly entitled to argue that these [ie, the costs of the planning system] are prices worth paying to ‘protect the countryside’ or achieve other policy objectives. However, it is not helpful for public debate to pretend that these costs do not exist.”

In a companion piece (Nathan and Overman, 2011) my coauthor and I make it clear that there is considerable debate to be had here—indeed we acknowledge that the two of us do not fully agree:

“for what it is worth, we differ on whether some of these costs outweigh their respective benefits. However, we are both very clear that those involved in the current planning debate need to be aware of all the evidence, and that pretending that the status quo is cost-free is not helpful.”⁽⁴⁾

My personal position on planning is probably best summarised by the following, again taken from Nathan and Overman (2011):

“The overall direction of travel for the planning system is a decision for politicians, held accountable by voters. Clearly voters’ opinions will differ and politicians need to balance these opinions. If, for example, you believe that the costs of the status quo outweigh the benefits, reducing these costs will require more land to be made available for development. ... You would be willing to make this trade-off because you do not believe that the broad social value of the undeveloped land that will end up being used is sufficient to outweigh the broad costs in terms of high house prices, increased house price volatility, high office rents, lower retail productivity etc. This corresponds to the personal position of one of the authors.”⁽⁵⁾

Put simply, planning policies do have implications for growth; it is possible that some of the costs of planning do not outweigh the benefits; and we must be careful not to imply otherwise.

HDH take specific objection to my use of the phrase ‘regulatory tax’ (RT) to talk about some of the costs of planning. This concept draws on the work of my colleagues Paul Cheshire and Christian Hilber and is precisely defined in Cheshire and Hilber (2008, page F188) as follows: “a measure of the total cost of regulatory constraints on the price of office space expressed as a ‘tax’—that is as a percentage of construction costs.” There are also very clear

⁽⁴⁾To be fair to HDH, the SERC piece that they quote from almost exclusively focuses on costs rather than benefits. This is partly because most people have some sense of these benefits, but not of the costs, and partly because there is a companion piece [ignored by HDH, but extensively referenced in Nathan and Overman (2011)] that is more even-handed in coverage.

⁽⁵⁾HDH say that it is important that “unwanted [ie, controversial] developments can be contested in public” (page 268). Despite the loaded language, I basically agree with this sentiment for most planning decisions. The question of major projects is more difficult (the LSE Growth Commission adopts a position on such projects which might be viewed as considerably less democratic).

statements about what the RT does not measure—which include the benefits of planning. After all, if we want a measure of costs to compare with benefits, we do not want the measure of costs to inadvertently pick up those benefits. Are the costs, as captured in the regulatory tax justifiable? That depends on the benefits, as discussed by Cheshire and Hilber, for example, in the context of Conservation Areas in the West End and height protection corridors of St Paul’s: “Such historic conservation regulations undoubtedly generate amenity values, not included in a measure of RT.” It is very difficult to have a discussion of the costs and benefits of planning policies that goes beyond assertion if we do not have some measure of either.

SERC has also done research on these benefits. For example, Cheshire and Sheppard (2002) is one of the very few examples of any research, anywhere, which makes a serious attempt to quantify both costs and benefits as a net welfare effect of any planning policies. Indeed, HDH highlight the “valuable insight and new evidence on a range of issues, such as the amenity value of nature (eg, Gibbons et al 2011)” (page 266) that have been produced at SERC. So our work on possible benefits of planning in protecting amenities is valuable, but our work on costs is based on a “reductive reading of regulation” (page 268)? One is tempted to conclude that HDH reserve their praise for evidence that concurs with their prior beliefs but dismiss anything that conflicts with them.

My position on the role of the UK planning system is roughly as follows. I think it should take more account of prices in reaching decisions. I would lean towards fewer height restrictions and more residential and commercial development on a very small proportion of green (including greenbelt) land, where that land has low amenity value (as is the case with almost all intensive agricultural land. This would allow for more development in our more economically successful towns and cities. I would support this because I think that, on balance, the social value of these changes would outweigh the social costs. There would be winners and losers, of course, although on balance I think these changes are likely to involve redistribution from rich to poor; we certainly know, courtesy of Cheshire and Sheppard’s work, that the distribution of benefits from greenbelt land is highly skewed towards the rich. Regardless, it is clear that the planning system would need to moderate these conflicts.⁽⁶⁾ HDH portray this as a neoliberal, antiplanning agenda.

As with their discussion of agglomeration-boosterism, this is a very inaccurate representation of my position or of specific advice that I have offered to central and local government. Once again, even the most basic reading of our research (some of it quoted by HDH) makes this clear.

From research to policy

So much for (some of) the substantive arguments around urban policy. What about the dangers of the drive to provide policy advice and analysis? It is certainly the case that short policy-orientated pieces tend to rely more on rhetoric, are less caveated, and thus more amenable to misinterpretation. Overman (2013), for example, is a thousand-word piece aimed at a general audience. It is not, therefore, surprising that it may struggle to bear the rigorous scrutiny of three to four thousand words in an academic journal. As with more substantive writings, however, it will certainly struggle to address the kind of selective and misleading criticism to which it is subjected in HDH.

For example, the article does briefly consider whether urban policies can make a difference to the productivity of a place. I have academic articles that carefully consider this issue—how to define productivity, how one might detect effects, etc. In the policy piece

⁽⁶⁾As should be clear from these comments, the problems as I see them are more about aspects of development control than planning per se. As my colleague Paul Cheshire makes clear in a SERC policy piece (Cheshire, 2009) a master-planning approach as per Germany/Netherlands might well be preferable to our current arrangements.

I take a shortcut by considering the effect on employment. The policies I consider—Local Enterprise Growth Initiative, Single Regeneration Budget, Regional Selective Assistance, transport investment—do partly target employment and productivity (broadly defined). I think this shortcut is defensible in an article which covers these issues in around seventy words and is not misleading in terms of its conclusion—that it is hard for policy to impact on area level productivity. HDH object—on the basis that area-based initiatives may have multiple objectives. This represents a common, but unfair, criticism of impact evaluation. When a policy has multiple objectives, including employment, it is surely acceptable to consider whether the policy had an impact on employment? Supporters of the policy may well counter that the policy helped meet other objectives which an evaluation focused on employment does not study (eg, it delivered important public goods or other social outcomes). But this does not invalidate the findings that the policy had no measurable impact on employment. HDH add an interesting twist to this standard narrative by highlighting a set of policies—the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal—that are not the focus of my original comments (or the underlying evaluations).

And so it goes on. HDH focus on my use of Zipf's law to raise the possibility that our second-tier cities might be too small, rather than London too big. For a general audience, I think Zipf's law is a nice way of getting people to think about the relative size of our cities. But my substantive argument that planning restrictions are 'part of the problem' is based on a wide body of academic evidence (some of it discussed above), not on a mindless application of Zipf's law. HDH imply that my arguments around "jam spreading" (page 268) call for a concentration of resources in more successful areas and ignore the consequences for struggling areas. But my jam spreading rhetoric specifically refers to 'place-based interventions' such as transport and land reclamation. The consequence for 'struggling' areas is a point which I always try to clarify:

"Focusing more on our relatively successful cities would raise very difficult questions about what happens in the places 'left behind'. Of course, they should not be 'abandoned', but the policy mix in these areas needs to be more realistic about their prospects. The balance of spending should be strongly tilted towards ensuring better education and training for local people and away from shiny buildings and expensive new transport infrastructure that will do little, if anything, to turn these places around."

If I am being generous, I suppose that all of this demonstrates that short policy pieces, such as Overman (2013), are open to misinterpretation. Of course, if such misinterpretation can happen in an academic article such as HDH, it can certainly happen in wider policy debates. Does this mean, therefore, that academics should shy away from such debates? Personally, I think not.

My strategy is to use a combination of social media (specifically, Twitter and blog platforms), conventional media, and shorter policy pieces to point policy makers, journalists, and interested members of the public to longer, more technical, academic pieces. The blogs and shorter policy pieces necessarily use more rhetoric and present headline points rather than working through the supporting evidence line by line.

People may take these shorter pieces and either misunderstand them, or represent them in a selective way that helps make their own arguments (or both). That is clearly a problem. In an ideal world we would avoid this intermediate step and have policy directly informed by all of the relevant underlying research. In the real world this does not happen. So those of us who want to inform policy debates have to use shorter pieces as an imperfect means of communicating more careful and robust underlying research. To imply, as HDH do, that this then translates directly into neoliberal changes to policy suggests either deliberate misreading

or a remarkable naivety about the policy making process.^{(7),(8)} In the case of local and central policy makers or elected leaders, trying to ensure that evidence informs policy involves a huge amount of further work in the form of meetings, briefings, and more in-depth reports. That is a long, labour-intensive, and iterative process, where there is plenty of attention given to the complexity of the issues (and where evidence forms only one part of the decision-making process). Equally and oppositely, it would surely be an error to assume that just because an article is long and in an academic journal it would inevitably be more informative than a shorter and readable piece. It is no accident that the word ‘academic’ has two, very different, meanings.

This raises the crucial question of the extent to which we should allow policy debates to influence the research that we undertake; that is, the flow of ideas from policy to research. SERC’s research has always been governed by two key principles that reflect my thinking on this: (1) the centre’s research should provide real help in addressing key policy issues; (2) to achieve this, it should meet the highest academic standards of rigour and independence. The majority of primary research outputs, while policy driven, should be publishable in leading peer-reviewed journals. Translating and transferring the resulting knowledge to stakeholders will be a key objective, but quality is crucial for good evidence-based policy making. Unless the analysis is scrupulously grounded on the evidence, many policy recommendations have little value. There can be no logical difference between, on the one hand, an academic author choosing to do research which is of interest both to themselves and to a ‘policy’ audience and, on the other, choosing to do research which is of interest to themselves but with no policy relevance.

These principles continue to govern my research and that of my colleagues and to underpin my attempts to engage with wider debate. HDH are right to worry if engagement in policy debates leads to “underlying analysis [that] lacks balance and robustness” (page 269), but I reject the insinuation that this is true of the research that myself and colleagues have undertaken at SERC. HDH may disagree with our findings. But that disagreement would carry more weight if it was apparent that they had carefully read our research output, were genuinely seeking to engage with it, and were able to offer some alternative set of policy suggestions that were similarly evidenced based. Misrepresentation of our findings and unpleasant insinuation about our underlying ‘neoliberal’ motives does little to further debate.

Indeed [and further to footnotes (7) and (8)] having reflected on HDH’s criticism of our work, I am left to wonder whether they use the term ‘neoliberal’ as a general term of abuse for ‘stuff written by economists that they don’t agree with’. To the extent that the term means anything, I suspect they are using it here to make an epistemological point (ie, it is a dig at

⁽⁷⁾It is hard to assess the validity of the assertion that SERC research provides (unintentional) support for a ‘neoliberal agenda’ because what is meant by such an agenda is never explained. Interestingly, when it comes to many policies there is no simple division between ‘progressive’ supporters of the planning/development policy status quo and ‘neoliberals’ who advocate a more economics-based policy. For example, Slater (2013) makes a strong attack on mixed communities policy from the left, arguing that it enriches property owners and promotes gentrification while ignoring the structural conditions that impoverish people (a criticism with which I would tend to agree). Similarly, the quote from Harvey used by HDH (page 268) can be read as critiquing a rational planning-based view of the world as much as a market-led one.

⁽⁸⁾Further to footnote (7), HDH further muddy issues around neoliberalism and economics when developing arguments for a straw man ‘economist tax’ on bankers which they dismiss as an example of inappropriate economic thinking. Clearly this is not the case: there are negative externalities from the activities of parts of the financial services sector which policy should arguably seek to reduce. That’s the position of mainstream economic voices like Martin Wolf, John Kay, and Adair Turner. Why this should be portrayed as a tax on economists, rather than bankers is beyond me, but a *banker’s tax* that addressed these externalities is fully consistent with mainstream economic thinking.

economics in general, and the kind of economics that I practise in particular). I would have more time for this if HDH would (a) come off the fence and say it and (b) provide some convincing evidence that there is a competing system of knowledge that offers theoretical or empirical insights that could better inform the development of policy. In the end, one suspects that HDH are locked in the analysis of the world as they wish it to be, rather than the world as it is. If that is the case, is it unsurprising that their influence on policy making is perhaps less than they would clearly like it to be?

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