

# A New Politics of Knowledge? Exploring the contested boundaries between science, knowledge and policy.

 [blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2014/05/27/politics-of-knowledge-book-series/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2014/05/27/politics-of-knowledge-book-series/)

5/27/2014

**Kat Smith** and **Richard Freeman** argue it's time to start bringing together the diverse and innovative thinking around the complex relationships between science, knowledge and policy. If we really want to understand how research does, and might, impact on policy and society more broadly, we need to combine the lessons available from sociological studies of knowledge, political science and anthropology as well as those available from more traditional studies of policy and the diffusion of new ideas.



Many of the questions which concern us in our social, political and economic lives are questions of knowledge, whether they concern the extent and consequences of climate change, the efficacy of new drugs, the scope of surveillance technologies or the accreditation and performance of individuals and organizations. In public and in private, in decision making and in service settings, we debate the appropriateness of collecting, storing and distributing information, the possibility of measurement, the use of evidence, the power of ideas, the status of science and the validity of expertise.



This is because what we know – how we acquire and apply knowledge of various kinds – shapes the ways in which problems are identified and understood; how laws, rules and norms are constructed and maintained, and which goods and services offered to whom. *'Who gets what, when, how'*, in Lasswell's phrase, depends very much on who *knows* what, when and how. Some kinds of knowledge are created and held by small numbers of specialists, while others are widely distributed and quickly shared, and the credibility and authority of different kinds of knowledge varies over time. In our personal, professional and public lives, knowledge is a key resource. It matters in policy not only as a guide to decision making but because, in many circumstances, to be knowledgeable is to be powerful.

As many of the posts on this blog make clear, the politics of knowledge are currently undergoing significant and rapid changes. New digital technologies and social media are combining with pressures and opportunities to increase the accessibility and transparency of 'expert' knowledge production, within academia, mass media and policy. These developments, which are often contested, are challenging assumptions about where useful knowledge is located, how it is translated and employed and who constitutes an 'expert'.



**Image credit:** [oscar cesare](#) (Wikimedia, Public Domain)

Multiple different academic genres and studies have useful insights to offer those interested in the changing nature and mediation of knowledge in society. There are, by now, a wealth of studies explicitly examining the relationship between evidence and policy, for example, many of which aim to improve and increase the use of research evidence in policy and practice. Such studies provide some useful suggestions as to the kinds of factors that can enable and support knowledge exchange between research, policy and practice. Researchers who explicitly focus on the relationship between evidence and policy often seem frustrated (even perplexed) by the extent to which policy making continues to be informed by factors other than evidence. Yet, if we turn, instead, to the available literature concerning policy change within the political sciences, sociology and policy studies, the question becomes not, 'why are decisions in policy and practice not evidence-based?' But, 'why would we ever assume it could (or even should) be?' This is because the literature within these disciplines tends to highlight the normative, participatory and interest-driven aspects of politics and policymaking. Sociological studies of science go further, demonstrating that research itself is also a value-laden activity. Scientists bring with them a range of values, experiences, assumptions and expectations which shape the questions they decide to pursue, the methods they choose to apply and the ways in which they interpret and write up their data. Studies specifically employing ethnographic, or anthropological, approaches to knowledge also draw attention to the multiple kinds of knowledge that all of us draw on, including tacit, experiential and practical knowledge, such as the knowledge we draw on when thinking about how to approach writing a research paper, blog or policy statement.

Between them, these various literatures provide a rich source of empirical and theoretical material which can help us understand, and potentially improve, the impact of research (and other kinds of knowledge) on policy, practice and politics. Yet, there appear to be few intellectual spaces which promote dialogue across these different literatures and disciplines, or which support conversations between scholars working on different kinds of policy concerns (e.g. between people who work on climate change and people who work on drugs policy, or scholars interested in migration and those working on health policy). Most people accept that interdisciplinary spaces can be incredibly useful in pushing the boundaries of particular ways of thinking but such spaces aren't always easy to locate or occupy.

In this context, we're hoping [a new Palgrave Macmillan book series](#) might provide an important space for people interested in questions of knowledge, policy, democracy and expertise. We've designed the series to be an interdisciplinary forum in which authors can explore the new politics of knowledge. We want to promote work on

public issues and policy problems which takes knowledge – whether in the form of evidence, ideas, information or experience – as its focus. We are interested in the knowledge produced and used by citizens and civil servants, administrators and managers and scientists and researchers, and in the ways it is communicated and shared, in both traditional and new media and through direct public engagement and participation. We welcome research-based studies which draw on diverse methods and disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, science and technology studies, history and geography as well as policy and politics. Our ambition is for the series to encourage collaboration and conversations across the different theories, methods and topics associated with each of these disciplines and one of the earliest contributions will be an edited collection, developed via a workshop involving authors from a variety of different settings who are all, in different ways, working on questions of knowledge, translation and impact.

*If you are interested in contributing to the series, either by participating in the initial workshop and edited collection or by submitting a book proposal please contact the series editors, Kat Smith ([katherine.smith@ed.ac.uk](mailto:katherine.smith@ed.ac.uk)) or Richard Freeman ([richard.freeman@ed.ac.uk](mailto:richard.freeman@ed.ac.uk)). We welcome suggestions for short Palgrave 'Pivot' books, edited collections or monographs.*

*Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.*

## About the Author

**Kat Smith** is a Reader in the Global Public Health Unit at the University of Edinburgh. Her main research interests centre on the relationships between ideas/evidence and policy/politics, especially in debates concerning public health and inequalities. She is currently undertaking an [ESRC funded project](#) exploring: (i) policy actors' experiences of 'research impact' agendas; (ii) academics as advocates; (iii) the role of 'evidence tools' and non-state actors in knowledge transfer.

**Richard Freeman** teaches theory and method in the Graduate School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh. He is editor, with Steve Sturdy, of *Knowledge in Policy. Embodied, inscribed, enacted* (Policy Press, 2014).

- Copyright © The Author (or The Authors) - Unless otherwise stated, this work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution Unported 3.0 License.