

There are no easy answers to the problem of determining impact but blogging is here to help

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2011/06/21/there-are-no-easy-answers-to-the-problem-of-determining-impact-but-blogging-is-here/

6/21/2011

*The growth of academic blogging is an important new outlet for demonstrating impact, writes **Professor Stephen Curry**, who has found his [Reciprocal Space](#) blog to be a valuable resource for talking to the general public and raising his voice in national debates.*

Faced with the imminent arrival of the Research Excellence Framework ([REF](#)), the new system being put in place to measure the quality of the research funded from the public purse and which now incorporates assessments of impact, we academics need to get our heads around what impact assessment means.

It makes great, good sense. It is entirely reasonable that the research community should give a fair account of the use it makes of the money provided, through government, by our fellow citizens. Scientists and engineers [readily reach](#) for the argument that investment in these areas underpins the economic well-being of UK PLC and it is our responsibility to gather the data to support and sustain that case.

But the scientific community — in its broadest sense — has expressed uneasiness at this prospect, fearing that a focus on economic impact would skew funding to more targeted, applied areas of research and starve the curiosity-driven work believed by many to be the seed corn of the technological harvests that have transformed our society. The research councils have attempted to address these fears and now clearly embrace a much broader definition of impact — one that includes “increasing the effectiveness of public services and policy and enhancing the quality of life, health and creative output” (to quote the BBSRC – [pdf](#)).

This expansion of the definition of impact is a good move, not least because it should now include academic blogging. I have learnt from personal experience the ways in which science blogging can be used to generate this broader type of impact, forming novel channels both to engage the public in the scientific enterprise and to engage scientists more in the concerns of society. You can hear my talk at the recent [LSE Impact Conference](#) and follow the slides in the video below. (The audio podcast of the morning sessions can be found [here](#)).

Blogging is just one way of making that broader impact. As I learned at the conference there are many varied ideas that are endeavoring to pick apart the notion of impact and ‘capture’ it for the purposes of the assessments that will be made as part of the REF.

The principal difficulty is one of assessment, of *measurement*. You might think measurement would be second nature to scientists but the problem is defining what is to be measured, especially after the meaning of impact has been deliberately (and sensibly) blurred. Even where the impact might be quantifiable, such as in company profits, how does one track from the outputs to the inputs? The problem is more severe when the outcomes are more diffuse. What is the precise value of knowledge transfer that is mediated through meetings or consultancies? How much impact is there in a talk given to a class of schoolchildren? The BBSRC has committed itself to “develop methods and approaches for capturing, managing and sharing the outputs and outcomes from research”. Methods *and* approaches? The commitment *sounds* impressively thorough but what does it actually mean?

As I sat there, trying to absorb all this new information, I could not escape the feeling that there is a thread of madness running through the whole process, one that Lewis Carroll would have immediately tugged. Upon that thought I found myself tumbling down the dark tunnel of a daydream. I suddenly stood up in the conference hall and shouted “Listen to me! I have a solution to all this craziness. It is radical, shocking even, but hear me out. I propose

that we cut all funding for research in the UK for ten years — every penny. Let us close the doors of our universities and cease teaching. For a whole decade let the enterprise of investigation in the UK lie fallow.”

“Then, at the end of the ten years the impact of the experiment can easily be determined (we will need to retain a small band of scientists to do this). We can measure our GDP. We can count the companies that are still operating in the technological sector and add up the number of their employees. We can quantify the change in the health and life expectancy of our population. We can even evaluate the *happiness* of a populace that has been deprived of the professionalization of curiosity.”

“I predict that at the end of this bold experiment, each and every citizen will have a deep-seated and indelible appreciation of the impact of the UK research enterprise. Thereafter — once the economy recovers — the lightest of touches will be needed to maintain government and public support for research spending.”

And then I woke up and came to my senses.

OK, so that might have been a daydream — but there is truth buried within it: that we must not get too obsessed by the business of measurement; that the very process of measurement may not only distract us from the core business of research but could even perturb the research enterprise in unhelpful ways by focusing too much on metrics. There has to be the chance to establish trust that public funding of research is a public good, however unquantifiable it may be.

That is not to say that the research community should hold itself aloof, banking on its reputation. In fact I think the opposite is true — and this takes me back to blogging.

It is our job, as the research community to make that case for the work that we do, as energetically and imaginatively as we can, and blogging is a good way to do that.

The impact from such activity is, to a degree, self-serving. It allows scientists to create or shape public debate, and even political reactions, as was seen in the [Science is Vital](#) campaign.

But it cuts both ways. Researchers who make themselves accessible through blogging are, I would argue, better exposed to the concerns and interests of the general public. This is a healthy development since it can give a revitalising sense of mission. Exposure to ideas and questions from the public can help us to think more deeply about our work and what potential it has to impact on the problems that our society is now facing.

I still don't know how you measure these things but public engagement seems to me a win-win situation. At the very least it has got to be better than the crazy notion of starving ourselves of innovation and research for a decade, just to prove a point. Hasn't it?

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