

We need our scientists to build models that frame our policies, not to tell stories that shape them



*One of the principal ways in which research can be said to have had an impact on society is when it is judged to have shaped public policy. Storytelling is increasingly presented as an effective way of doing this, with researchers encouraged to construct narratives that point towards a clear “moral”, something to be done. **Thomas Basbøll** argues that researchers should resist this temptation to craft an arresting story, to simplify matters and present policymakers with an obvious solution. Instead, researchers should focus on using the methods they have to build models correlating possible courses of action with likely real-world outcomes; not telling us what should be done, but showing us what can be done.*

Scientists are increasingly encouraged to think of the “impact” of their research on society in terms of its ability to “shape” social policy. That is, on a given topic, a researcher is supposed to have a policy outcome in mind, and a successful researcher is one whose favoured policy is adopted by the relevant stakeholders. A climate scientist, for example, should be trying to influence climate policy; a health scientist should be trying to influence health policy. The researcher is rewarded, not for discovering the causes of particular effects, but for affecting policy in the service of a particular cause.

This way of evaluating research has consequences for how we think about science-based policy. Instead of providing policymakers with causal models, linking a range of possible interventions to a range of probable outcomes, and therefore projected costs to their predictable benefits, scientists are now being encouraged to tell gripping stories that link benefits to heroes that want to improve society or save the planet, and links harms to villains who are interested only in private gain. Instead of building models to frame policy debates, scientists are being advised to tell stories to shape policy outcomes.

For a recent example, consider [a post here](#) at the Impact Blog by Michael Jones and Deserai Crow. The authors provide scientists with advice on how to “manipulate” what they call “the narrative” with the “selective use of information”, constructing stories with “victims that are harmed, villains that cause the harm, and heroes that promise aid to the victims”. The trick, they tell us, is to outline a plot that “establishes cause and effect, which allows blame, which in turn facilitates solutions”. The “moral” of the story always has to be “something to be done”. That is, researchers are not just there to describe the problem; their role is to provide policymakers with a solution.

Jones and Crow present storytelling as an entirely “human” expedience. Human existence, the whole of the nature and culture we try to order through science and politics, is simply too complex for all but a few to comprehend. The public, in particular, is driven largely by emotions, by instinct if you will, and needs to be steered in the right direction by well-meaning “narrators”. Scientists, we are told, are qualified to take this job upon themselves, and must therefore manipulate policymakers to think of themselves as heroes striving to protect victims against harms caused by villains. This is certainly how public discourse feels these days.

In their post, Jones and Crow cite Obamacare as an example of a policy that was shaped by narrative. “The US Affordable Care Act was nearly one-thousand pages,” they tell us,

“loaded with legal jargon and packed with information. How do you make sense of something like that? The truth is only a very few will understand it in depth. Most of us, including policymakers who eventually voted on the bill, will prioritise some of the information within and ignore or downplay other parts. This is done by telling a story that includes assertions about what causes what, who the victims are, who is causing the harm, and what should be done.”

Interestingly, recent Republican efforts to reform Obamacare were also framed in narrative terms. In [a notable speech](#), Democratic senator Elizabeth Warren described the plan as providing “blood money” to the rich by cutting healthcare to the poor. “People will die”, she said, an expression that was quickly lampooned by Reason’s satirical songwriter [Remy in a rap](#). The point, of course, is that “people will die” under any policy, and serious political discussion is always about the costs (in both money and freedom) of preventing any particular class of deaths. Now, perhaps satire is the most effective pushback against a narrative appeal to emotion in pursuit of policy. But it’s important to keep in mind that Remy was here ridiculing a politician, not a scientist. Manipulating the policy narrative is arguably a politician’s job. Ridiculing the story’s bathos, in turn, is the job of our poets.

What, then, is the proper job of our scientists? Actually, Remy puts it very succinctly at the end of his rap.

“Why not weigh all the costs, the effects, the results
Empathize with each other as if we were adults
Use our brains to craft arguments—not vilify
See that freedom’s a trade-off...”

He rightly imagines that such a plea, if made by a politician, will likely be shouted down in the language of the dominant narrative. When someone has said “People will die”, it seems callous, even inhuman, to ask, “How many? And what will it cost to save them?” But can’t scientists remain aloof to this clamour of emotion? What, after all, gives a scientist the competence, the mandate, to manipulate our emotions? Our politicians seek our consent to wield the levers of power through elections. Our artists are given a different kind of license, but no sticks or stones to hurt us with. What gives a scientist the right to tell me what to do?

Scientists have no such mandate, but they do have methods to help them build increasingly realistic models of the problems we face. These models correlate possible courses of action with probable real-world outcomes. They are never certain enough to suggest any particular policy, nor should any particular scientist or research group have the power to shape our laws. While they may accurately predict the result of a policy intervention, they cannot legitimately determine its value to the polity. There are strong incentives for scientists to “craft” a story, as Jones and Crow put it — one that simplifies matters and leaves policymakers with only one solution. But it’s a temptation they should resist.

In his [2005 Nobel lecture](#), Harold Pinter suggested that art allows “a whole range of options to operate in a dense forest of possibility before finally focussing on an act of subjugation”. Why not let our poets and politicians, rogues and orators, struggle over how that last scene plays out, and let our scientists confine themselves to clarifying our sense of the possible? We need science, not to tell us what must be done, but to show us what can. We need our scientists to build models that frame our policies, not to tell stories that shape them.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

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About the author

Thomas Basbøll is the resident writing consultant at the Copenhagen Business School Library, where he maintains a blog about research practices called [Inframethodology](#).