

Introduction: Themed section on Knowledge Exchange and Public Engagement

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This themed section on knowledge exchange and public engagement began with a provocation: whose knowledge, whose exchange? The papers included here uncover the dilemmas of the modern academic: who is our work for, how should we communicate it, and what is it meant to achieve? Collaborations between academic researchers and the ‘public’ or ‘real world’ (to use problematic terms that suggest that academia inhabits neither of these) have become increasingly commonplace in recent years. The discourse of co-created research and its impact has challenged the traditional model of the lone scholar, and required academics to think more deeply about who their research is for and what purpose it serves in the world. For researchers interested in the responses of viewers and listeners to live or recorded arts, collaborations with performers, makers, audiences and arts organisations offer fertile ground for the development of new ideas and approaches. However, it can sometimes be difficult to navigate between commercially-driven research goals, aimed at increasing audience numbers or sustaining high quality experience, and the broader notion of making a contribution to academic knowledge.

In an earlier issue of *Participations*, Sarah Price (2015) highlighted some of the differences in the pace and type of research that is of greatest value to academics and practitioners, demonstrating that ‘knowledge exchange’ can quickly become ‘knowledge incompatibility’ if either partner is unsure about the aims of their collective investigation. John Williamson, Martin Cloonan and Simon Frith (2015) have also written about how disputes over methodology, aims and ownership in partnership working can lead all too easily to ‘knowledge resistance’, and have urged academics to defend their role as experts in a climate that often seems discouraging of such a stance. Audience research and audience development can readily become one and the same, with benefits and challenges for all involved: indeed, a recent symposium on ‘Public engagement as method’ held at the University of Sheffield attracted wide-ranging discussions on how methods, findings and applications are intertwined in academic engagement with research participants.

The authors who responded to my call for papers on ‘knowledge exchange’ (or other preferred terms for this shifting area of research practice) were invited to explore some or all of the following topics:

- Case studies of effective knowledge exchange (KE) partnerships in audience research
- Case studies of disastrous KE partnerships, and the lessons learned from them
- Reflections on the changing role of the academic in an ‘impactful’ research environment
- Considerations of the potential communication barriers between researchers, partners and participants – and how to overcome these
- Projections of future directions in audience research, and relationships between researchers, audiences, and organisations

In the resulting collection of essays, the authors have addressed all of these points, and have been generous and honest in their depictions of the lessons learned through experiences of knowledge exchange and partnership working. Each element of the researcher-practitioner-audience knowledge triangle is shown to be contested and multidimensional: researchers might have dual identities as practitioners (see Hield and Price), practitioners will have a variety of views on how to engage with research (see Dunford) and audiences can be simultaneously creators, users and critics of research (see Behr). Two of the articles (Packman, Rutt and Williams; Ryall, Hodson and Strine) make specific reference to the new mediators of research, the ‘blended’ academics or public engagement officers whose particular skills are in translating between the different groups involved in creating and using new knowledge. Others highlight the difficulties that arise when this translation is less effective, whether in the extent to which participants feel their voices have been heard by researchers (Hield and Price), or the ways in which research is taken up by new, unintended publics (Behr) and so assumes a meaning beyond that intended by the author.

The increasing emphasis on knowledge exchange and partnership working brings particular challenges and opportunities for researchers who work with audiences. We readily engage with audiences as we seek to understand their experiences of live arts, online media or other kinds of cultural engagement, and so questions of how they will participate in and interpret our research are often central to the way our studies are designed and reported. However, ‘doing a bit of research with the audience’ is now an expected add-on to public engagement events of all kinds, intended to evidence the way in which the research presented, or the discussions undertaken, have changed the thinking or even the lives of those who have participated. If that ‘bit of research’ is your main focus, however, how do you measure the impact of your already impactful research? Hield and Price’s essay uses the word ‘ouroboric’ to describe this unending circle – the Ouroboros being a snake or serpent that eats its own tail, first observed in Ancient Egyptian

iconography and later in Renaissance alchemy and medieval magic (and for this editorial, in the circular web of knowledge that is Wikipedia). To be ouroboric, therefore, is to be self-reflexive to the point where you are chasing your own tail: we are compelled, through the premise of knowledge exchange, to understand what audiences understand about how we understand them. There are interesting opportunities and discoveries to be found within that circle, but also a risk of spiralling ever inwards, rather than genuinely opening up academic discussion to a wider range of perspectives and people.

This themed section shows that while collectively academics have learned much about how to exchange and co-produce knowledge with a variety of potential publics, we are experiencing a crisis of identity as we move away from the lone scholar role towards something as yet not fully defined. Simultaneously, those publics we engage with might be working with outdated definitions of the academic expert, such that our public engagement activities are presentations not only of our work, but of ourselves. We see the world through academic eyes, and should not be apologetic about this, but our challenge to the 'post-expert' age (see Packman, Rutt and Williams) must be to articulate that expertise with greater insight and sensitivity.

I am grateful to all of the authors who have responded so thoughtfully to the provocation of 'whose knowledge, whose exchange?', and to the reviewers whose insights have supported them in that endeavour: thanks to Martin Barker, Matt Brennan, Paul Long, Simon McKerrell, Kate Pahl, Sarah Price, Judith Rosenbaum, Brendan Stone, Ben Walmsley and John Williamson.

Biographical note:

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