

The value of experts, the importance of partners, and the worth of the people in between

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Abstract:

The call for papers for this themed issue sought considerations of the potential communication barriers between researchers and partners outside higher education institutions and how to overcome these, and reflections on the changing role of the academic in an 'impactful' research environment. In this essay we explore this changing role, particularly in light of current political discourse that reflects a lack of trust in expertise, and of what can loosely be called the 'impact agenda'. We reflect on the issue of 'knowledge resistance' and suggest that we should all examine our own practice in this regard, that resistance is by no means one-sided. We suggest that the best response is not the aggressive promotion of academic expertise but to continue to work in respectful relationships with non-academic partners. We look at the movement towards engaged research and greater inclusivity in the research process, exploring some different approaches. We argue that the role of Professional Services staff or 'blended' academics can contribute to overcoming 'knowledge resistance', and we discuss a particular networking approach as an example of how to bridge the divide.

Keywords: Impact, engagement, knowledge resistance, engaged research, partners, expertise, collaboration

At a time when the then UK Justice Secretary is able to claim, notoriously, that 'We've had enough of experts'¹, the perception that academic researchers, indeed, academia itself, are somewhat under siege is perhaps unsurprising. As Janice Kaye, Provost at the University of Exeter, wrote in the *Times Higher Education* at the end of last year, the 2016 Brexit vote in the UK and the US presidential election victory for Donald Trump have been 'heralded as a

celebration for the average person, the overthrow of the intelligentsia'. While the reality is inevitably complex, this rhetoric has become visible in policy changes and behaviours which appear to ignore research-informed evidence. For example, the move in the US away from committing to sustainable energy sources and reducing carbon emissions, in favour of encouraging the growth of fossil fuel industries and minimising environmental controls, is directly opposed to academically-informed evidence demonstrating the need to respond to climate change. In the UK, Smith (2017) provided evidence that Brexit 'Leave' voters were less likely than 'Remain' voters to trust every type of expert that the market research company YouGov listed, including nurses and doctors. According to YouGov: 'This trust gap was especially pronounced for certain types of experts: Leave voters are 21 percentage points less likely to trust economists than Remain voters, 20 points less likely to trust scientists'.

It seems that both the (voting) public and the elected Governments in the UK and US have lost faith in the value of scholarly research. In the UK there is also a cumulative effect of more than a decade of policies demanding more and more effort towards social and economic benefits from academic research and the assessment of these benefits via a reporting exercise, the Research Excellence Framework.² The centuries-old ideals of knowledge for knowledge's sake, the 'purity' of academic research, and academics as expert leaders (Collins, 2014), appear to be being undermined or even abandoned. No wonder academics are keen to defend the benefits and values of their modes of enquiry, debate and knowledge formation to those who are seemingly seeking to discredit them. However, while we agree that arguing for these benefits is necessary in the current anti-intellectual environment, we also argue that normalising within academia an ethos of engaged research may well be the best form of defence in the longer term, creating more impactful research, and enabling partners and publics to better understand, appreciate and contribute to the value of academic research. It is the latter argument that we focus on for the rest of this essay.

Our approach is from our perspective as Research Managers with a particular focus on impact and engaged research, within a UK Higher Education Institution (HEI). We have a combined total of nearly 30 years' experience working within the sector, as well as prior individual experience working in media and communications, in public engagement with research funders and in research. We therefore bring a range of professional knowledge and skills to our practice, and our experience underpins our argument here.

Knowledge 'resistance' is identified as a problem by Williamson *et al.* (2011): 'Knowledge resistance is often more significant than knowledge transfer and may be expected to frustrate any attempts to have an 'impact'' (p.459). The authors do not, however, define knowledge resistance. Rather, they want 'to examine what happens when academics are keen to transfer their knowledge only to discover that it is rejected by its recipients'. Knowledge resistance for Williamson *et al.* (2011) seems therefore to be a deliberate turning away from research-produced knowledge by certain audiences or recipients whom academics might have assumed would wish to make use of it.

But knowledge resistance, we would argue, is not confined to partners or publics. It can also be a significant barrier where academics are themselves resistant to the knowledge of others. Knowledge resistance, whether a deliberate turning away or simply a failure to take into account the expertise or experiences of others, tends to arise where researchers are not working **with** partners, but instead are 'disseminating' knowledge to audiences (various publics such as businesses, professionals, interest groups or the amorphous 'general public'), according to an old-fashioned model of academic expertise. This model is a continuation of the 1980s version of the role of the academic as articulated in the Royal Society *Public Understanding of Science* report (1985), whereby academics beneficently hand down their knowledge to the public. In this model, not only is no account taken of the needs or objectives of these audiences or of their particular expertise, but there is no thought of partnership working at all, simply a statement of findings. Findings might (or might not) be presented in 'lay' terms, often in glossy reports and brochures, or worse, solely in academic papers, and audiences could take or leave them. While it is unclear whether this approach was ever effective, we argue that in the internet age, where information overload is a greater problem than paucity of information, it is even less likely to work and that there are more valuable and mutually beneficial approaches.

The role of the academic has undoubtedly changed and continues to emerge as the impact agenda becomes ever more prominent. The imperative for research to have impact beyond academia has become increasingly explicit. For example, not only is it written into the funding guidelines of the Research Councils that researchers must ensure the public sharing and public benefit of the research they fund but, since 2009, applicants for Research Councils UK (RCUK) funds must complete an impact summary and provide a 'Pathways to Impact' plan as part of their bid. As has been well documented, however, achieving impact is not necessarily a straightforward process (see for example, Williamson *et al.*, 2011), and the search to lay blame for any failure to demonstrate social or economic benefit from research can set up what we will refer to as an 'Us vs. Them' perspective.

Perhaps part of the breakdown in trust alluded to above can be attributed to high-profile scientific 'scandals'. For example, Collins (2014) discusses 'Climategate' as one particularly damaging example of the degradation of public perceptions of science and therefore of academic 'experts' more broadly. More than 1,000 emails between climate change scientists were stolen and published online, and parts of the emails were used by critics to suggest that scientists had been manipulating or hiding data in order to bolster their own position and in disregard of the evidence. Climategate scientists were, in effect, portrayed as charlatans, with the result that a shadow of doubt was cast over all scientific endeavour, despite investigations by a number of committees, including the House of Commons Science & Technology committee and the US National Science Foundation, which found no evidence of fraud or scientific misconduct.

Cribb and Sari (2014) suggest that part of the blame for the breakdown of trust in experts can be laid at the door of experts themselves: 'The failure of science to consult society is one reason for the growing crisis of public trust in science' (p.53). We would argue

that the word 'consult' is problematic in itself. It hints at a one-way process, where society is asked for an opinion, and not one where a two-way process of mutual listening and benefit prevails. While 'consultation' is an improvement upon 'dissemination', it continues the approach whereby non-academics are viewed as an audience rather than as partners in the research process.

However, in arguing that academics should recognise that some of the blame for poor communication lies with themselves and that resistance is not confined to partners, we emphasise that we do not ascribe all blame to academics and we certainly do not undervalue their expertise. Academic and research expertise is, most assuredly, crucial; the problem lies in solely privileging it. Recognising and respecting the differing expertise and experience of different communities is precisely the way that barriers will be overcome. The challenge of this is not insignificant. As Hart *et al.* (2013) illustrate through examples taken from a Communities of Practice approach in Community-University Partnerships, the conditions for this must be carefully considered and curated to 'enable different knowledge positions [to] begin to recognise each other' (p.286). This includes considering the numbers and make-up of those involved (and it may be that a greater number of those with non-academic backgrounds are needed to ensure a balance of representation) and ensuring the venue is appropriate. It may involve providing training at the start of a project to provide all participants with a similar level of knowledge, and also providing opportunities for those involved to express any anxieties about being in a group made up of a range of 'identities' (academics, practitioner, lay, etc.).

We also acknowledge that the term 'academic' is a very broad one; there are academics who have a dual role as both researchers and stakeholders, while others are community-based, and others may have moved from roles in community or stakeholder organisations into the higher education sector. Again, Hart *et al.* (2013) identify the importance of this for the success of their Communities of Practice. The dual experiences of these boundary-spanning individuals mean they can 'bridge different worlds ... [and] help manage differences positively' (p.286). It was found that they were most useful as boundary spanners when the different roles of any one individual were made explicit to the group at the outset of an engagement activity. That said, Hart *et al.*'s (2013) evidence suggests the role of 'boundary spanners' should not be accepted uncritically; these individuals were not always able to play a bridging role.

Academics are, understandably, keen to defend their role and value as experts. Williamson *et al.* (2011) conclude that this is best done by 'assert[ing] more aggressively that as academics we have ... on the whole, more knowledge of our specialist field than its practitioners – we understand its broader context, we can draw on comparative international and institutional material, we have a longer historical perspective, we have the advantages of disinterest... Academic researchers should have the arrogance of their expertise'. This harks back to the 1980s 'public understanding' model referred to previously. It is this very language of 'defending' academia, 'asserting...[with] arrogance' that draws

academia further into the 'Us vs Them' narrative which, we argue, is in itself a significant barrier to communication between researchers and their partners.

It is a language that unhelpfully persists, even where views appear to have moved on. For example, a November 2016 article (Bayley, 2016) in *Research Fortnight* (a key source of sector news in the UK) about achieving impact uses the 'real world' trope, i.e. that academics do not work in the 'real world'. But repeating this dichotomy risks creating a dangerous strawman; dangerous because it plays into the hands of those attacking the experts, such as Glyn Davies MP who tweeted in October 2016: 'Personally, never thought of academics as "experts". No experience of the real world'. Rather than acceding to the view that academia is somehow separate from the 'real world' - a view that academics themselves firmly rebuff if the responses to Davies' tweet are taken as evidence - what is needed, we suggest, is a shift in the language we use and a shift in perspective. We believe the academic and non-academic aspects can and should be more fully integrated in research practice, by acknowledging and including the issues and perspectives of non-academic partners through partnership working at all relevant stages of the research process, and without falling back on the very terminology that encourages a separation of the two.

In practice, this means that academics may need to reconceptualise what they consider to be their professional community and consequently to reconceptualise their role as an academic. Academics are one part of a much wider and collaborative professional community which comprises differing stakeholders from a range of sectors, which is likely to include 'publics' with differing expertise and differing experience of the problem or question at hand. And while we would suggest that the academic world has moved on since the Williamson *et al.* (2011) paper was published, such is the speed at which the impact agenda has developed, there is still much to be learned from the movement towards 'engaged research', of which Public Engagement with research is a part. As highlighted by Bastow, Dunleavy and Tinkler (2014), 'citizens are no longer seen as simply deficient in knowledge, but rather as having working models of their own for handling information, models that scientists need to take far more seriously and connect with more effectively' (p. 212).

Cribb and Sari (2014) write that 'In communicating science, nothing is more important than the ability to understand one's public, to listen to their views and values', adding that, 'In the 21st century the old 'we know what's best for you' model of knowledge delivery is no longer acceptable' (p.51). Genuine partnership relies on respect and will produce mutual benefit. In their systematic review of barriers to and facilitators of the use of evidence by policymakers, Oliver *et al.* (2014) found the quality of the relationship and collaboration between researchers and policymakers to be the single most mentioned facilitator of the use of research evidence.

In an evaluation of the Ningaloo Research Program, Cvitanovic, McDonald and Hobday (2016) identified barriers to effective communication, including 'cultural differences among the groups, institutional barriers within decision-making agencies, scientific outputs that were not translated for decision-makers and poor alignment between research design and actual knowledge needs' (p.864). The barriers are not entirely on one side or the other.

But acknowledgement and identification of the barriers enables the researchers to identify solutions: ‘including; (i) stakeholder mapping prior to the commencement of research programs to identify all stakeholders, (ii) research questions to be co-developed with stakeholders, (iii) implementation of participatory research approaches, (iv) use of a knowledge broker’ (p.864).

We note the very sensible words of Judith Rosenbaum in the May 2016 issue of *Participations*: ‘We argue, we explain, we do additional research, we cajole, and all of that work makes *both parties* gain a deeper understanding of the topic at hand. This kind of dialogue is what helps push the field forward, one that we as scholars should try to have as often as possible’ (our emphasis). She is writing about journal articles in particular, but the meaning is equally applicable to partnerships between academics and non-academics – dialogue is what drives knowledge and understanding.

Engaged research has become a more common term within UK HEIs, used to describe a mode of scholarship that actively seeks to embed engagement with those outside HEIs throughout the research lifecycle. Holliman *et al.* define engaged research as ‘...the different ways that researchers meaningfully interact with various stakeholders over any or all stages of a research process, from issue formulation, the production or co-creation of new knowledge, to knowledge evaluation and dissemination’ (as cited in Holliman and Warren, 2017, p.169).

Holliman and Warren (2017) go on to clarify that engaged research should involve ‘holistic, upstream planning, combined with participatory forms of downstream project management and governance’ (p.169). This relatively new approach is more comprehensive than other forms of engagement such as public engagement, knowledge transfer partnerships, or community based participatory research. We use the concept of engaged research to frame our discussion in this paper, asserting that meaningful interactions with stakeholders of all types throughout the research lifecycle are of mutual benefit.

So how do we operate in this co-operative, collaborative research world? How do we break down some of the barriers that reinforce the Us v Them strawman? As stated above, we believe that engaged research provides a framework to overcome this unhelpful dichotomy. The language of engaged research encompasses terms such as ‘partnership’, ‘collaboration’, ‘co-creation’, ‘co-production’, ‘co-development’, ‘(active) listening’, and ‘respect’. By working from this vocabulary, researchers are provided with a starting point from which to access a host of tools with which practically to address the barriers to communication by carefully and deliberately creating situations conducive to communication.

Researchers certainly take the issue seriously. Ward (2016) cites Davies and colleagues, who in 2014 found 71 reviews of research literature on ‘knowledge mobilisation’, and sets out a framework designed to ‘increase clarity and understanding across the field of knowledge mobilisation and act as a starting point for new knowledge mobilisers to think more clearly about their role’ (p.14) – just one example of a researcher actively working to overcome communication barriers. Last November Katherine Mathieson,

the chief executive of the British Science Association, wrote in *The Guardian*: ‘We at the British Science Association envision a world where everyone can learn, use and question the knowledge created by our institutions and contribute their ideas and findings. We want everyone to feel united in the aim of scientific and societal progress’ (Mathieson, 2016).

It is clear that in recent years there has been an expansion of engaged research, partly, no doubt, in response to the strong reputational and financial drivers of impact, such as the REF – engaged research optimises pathways to impact and can maximise opportunities to create impact. HEIs have responded to these drivers by appointing increasing numbers of Professional Services (PS) staff (categorised and contracted as non-academic staff) with the expertise to broker powerful, collaborative relationships with external partners and thus to support academics to deliver impactful research. We argue that these staff are often ideally placed to bridge any perceived divide between academic and non-academic stakeholders, and to consider ways to dismantle some of the barriers that we have identified to effective communication – though this is not, of course, the only approach.

Reed (2016) writes in the *Research Fortnight* blog:

‘The initial rush to appoint impact officers, charged with producing killer case studies, is giving way. There is now recognition that we need academic champions, who can understand and empathise with other researchers who, like them, face the challenge of balancing impact with research, teaching and administration.’

And Jessani *et al.* (2016) state that some knowledge brokers take the form of ““hybrid” or “blended” professionals who are connected to both worlds’ as they are knowledge generators and knowledge brokers in one. We would argue that PS staff and ‘blended’ academics, people with their own portfolios of experiences and expertise, can play an equally important role in supporting and facilitating engaged research (for ease we will hereafter use the term PS staff to encompass both).

In his *Research Impact Handbook* Reed (2016) discusses the importance of working with knowledge brokers, or intermediaries. One benefit of working with well-connected knowledge brokers is that ‘Because they are known and trusted by many of the stakeholders you want to work with, if you are introduced or recommended by this intermediary, people are much more likely to trust you’ (p.48). Staff undertaking these intermediary roles will have a responsibility to understand the communication barriers that exist on all sides of collaborative working, and can help explore and address any issues that arise from any of the parties. The benefits of PS roles are at least threefold. An intermediary may be better placed to see a situation from both the academic and the non-academic perspective, and be able to ‘translate’ and mediate. As they are less invested in the research, they may be better able to distil its essence – academics are, not unnaturally, sometimes resistant to what they

may see as reductive simplification. Time is a crucial issue for academics, and PS staff can help to free them from some impact or engagement tasks, enabling them to prioritise.

In 2010 the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) developed an Attributions Framework that describes the core skills and attributes required for university staff and students involved in public engagement. The framework has three areas: communication, reflection and empathy. To develop effective engagement with publics, it is recognised that PS staff and academics need to adapt how they communicate with different partners (likewise, partners may also need to think about adapting their own practice in communicating with academics), that they listen carefully and value other's contributions, they welcome feedback and reflect on their own practice, and that they are sensitive to issues of diversity, inclusions and social and ethical issues. This mix of practice-based approaches and soft skills is, in our view, essential for partnership working.

A common issue in collaborative practice is a lack of clarity about who the stakeholders are or who they could be. While there are often obvious partners, it may be that those who will be most interested in and could benefit most from the research are not, in fact, the usual suspects. Furthermore, academics may be prone to downplay who may benefit – they may be too close to see the full picture. Someone who is less involved may be able to provide a perspective from which new opportunities can be identified. PS staff can use their skills and sector knowledge to help tease this information out, perhaps by using stakeholder mapping techniques (such as the interest-influence matrix (www.managingforimpact.org) or the NCCPE's stakeholder map (www.publicengagement.ac.uk)). Being slightly removed from the research, but familiar with a research environment and having an awareness of and involvement with engaged research activity across an institution, can mean that PS staff are able to provide creative solutions. They are well placed to break research out of its disciplinary silo, sharing best practice across and making connections between other projects, disciplines and even faculties.

One practical example of PS staff working with academics involves consideration of language. One of the authors of this paper worked with researchers to hone written evidence to be submitted to a government select committee. The evidence was 'translated' from the original version, rather like an academic paper, to a lay-friendly piece, which responded to the questions posed by the committee's terms of reference point by point. The lead researcher was subsequently invited to give oral evidence.

In another example, one of the authors was instrumental in bringing together researchers and service users, brokering the initial contact by drawing on her own background knowledge and connections, and facilitating dialogue. Another worked directly with creative industry partners to help them understand the academic funding landscape so they were better able to develop fundable projects with researchers. This included an exploration of organisations, roles, acronyms and vocabulary.

At the University of Exeter, while we recognised the value of providing one-to one support of the kind described above to academics, we were also keen to confront the

service and disciplinary barriers to communication within the University itself. To this end, in 2015 we created the Impact and Engaged Research Network (IERN). The IERN is open to both academics and PS staff across all disciplines. Hosting monthly meetings and with a regular newsletter, the network aims to: bring people together to share best practice; reflect on their own practice; keep members up to date with the latest policy developments in impact and engagement; and network with one another and develop a community of peer support.

The IERN takes a responsive approach to programming, so network members can propose particular types of events or issues that they want to discuss. By bringing together participants from across disciplines and the academic/PS landscape the IERN enables richer and more diverse conversations and discussions between its members, encouraging new perspectives and approaches. The IERN has proved a successful alternative space for the promotion of culture change towards engaged research with impact, and is expanding to offer events more than one a month, targeted towards a range of different participants within the University, such as Early Career Researchers, potential REF case study authors and so on. But mindful of the need to practise what we preach, we include non-academic participants as often as possible. The IERN is an ideal space for this, as research-based impactful solutions to the issues and priorities of our non-academic partners are not always found through work by one discipline alone. This approach has been valuable for our institution; others will have their own examples of creative cross-working and capacity building.

In this essay, we have explored the issue of knowledge resistance, focusing on the recent 'anti-expert' rhetoric. We have acknowledged that the role of the academic has changed dramatically over recent years, driven partly by the impact agenda and the encouragement to work more collaboratively with partners. We argue that discourse needs to move past the notion that there is a 'real world' beyond academia and instead acknowledge and embrace the different forms of expertise and experience that different researchers, partners, publics and stakeholders bring to the research process.

We suggest that open, two-way communication with stakeholders throughout the research process is vital in order to challenge assumptions and diffuse any tensions that may arise. Knowledge brokers skilled in facilitation and partnership development are well placed to enhance this process and way of working. We argue that they possess valuable skills gained from a variety of sources, often outside academia, that help to bring insight and enrich the approach to working in partnership, and we conclude that in order for research to be valuable in terms of making a difference as widely as possible, all those within the research ecosystem need to listen with respect and to work together, building bridges rather than raising barriers.

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Notes:

¹ Michael Gove interviewed on *Sky News*, 3 June 2016.

² www.ref.ac.uk.