

The bases of interactive agenda setting

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Introduction

Where do social science research questions come from and how are 'users' involved in defining timely, worthwhile, innovative and relevant lines of enquiry? This was the question with which we began. Five workshops later, we want to revisit the way we have framed the problem.

We have spent a lot of time addressing basically institutional issues to do with the organisation and structure of academic life. For example, when analysing the trajectories of interdisciplinary research programmes, we acknowledged the role of multiple and sometimes competing pressures, pushing agendas this way and that. Managing these pressures requires a specific type of effort, which we may call agenda setting. Activities like those of generating and selecting potential themes, refining calls for proposals and actively positioning topics and projects are demanding tasks in their own right. This kind of work is distinct from but closely related to the practice of doing research on which it builds and which it in turn shapes through constraints generated in the form of funding conditions, research priorities, calls for new initiatives in selected areas, and so forth.

Defined in this way, agenda setting is a form of work which has its own rules and conventions. By implication, *interactive* agenda setting refers to those forms that include, or involve, different communities of researchers and/or users. The further implication is that doing agenda setting interactively is a matter of bringing such groups together. Represented in these terms, interactive agenda setting is a thoroughly institutional challenge, and one that can be solved with the right managerial procedures and skills in communication and brokerage. However, we contend that this conclusion is based on an oversimplified image of the relationships between agenda setting and a variety of practices of which the conduct of research is but one.

Why is bringing people together not enough?

The Said Business School is very successful in deliberately creating opportunities for business people to meet with business academics. These networking events, often taking place in the school's impressive, purpose built foyer surely generate interaction, some of which has very tangible results. What better sign of relevance could there be than on the spot funding for one's research project by an enthusiastic sponsor from the City? The question for us is what kind of interaction is taking place here and what does it mean, cumulatively, for agenda setting in business studies as a whole. The recurrent debate in the literature about the "relevance gap" between management research and management as a professional practice points to a systemic and perhaps endemic failure to really bridge this divide. While aspects of the 'gap' may be more rhetorical than real, our workshop on the private sector nonetheless demonstrated that connections between academic researchers and private sector 'users' were frequently superficial. Even if they met, there was little evidence of much beyond the most token of exchange.

Why is bringing people together not always necessary?

At first sight, political science appears to be a relatively well insulated academic discipline organised around a handful of enduring theoretical concerns. Attention has nonetheless turned from traditional debates regarding the nation state, national politics and diplomacy to a much more internationalised and global menu of topics and issues. International relations has become a central theme, yet the study of international diplomacy, its predecessor, was never more than a topic of specialist interest. At this level, and more specifically, research problems evidently relate to events in the 'real world'. Until recently questions of security and terrorism were only of interest to a handful of experts working at the margins of the discipline. These previously invisible academics are now much in demand within the discipline and the wider world. New courses are being designed, new projects and programmes planned. Exactly how does this come about? Who met whom, when and where? It would be difficult to map the process in any detail, but the point is that this type of interactive agenda setting does not obviously depend on face to face networking in the sense described above.

Why are scientific communities not always receptive to outside opportunities?

In the workshop on disciplines, we discussed the ways in which environmental issues have been taken up across the various social sciences. For example, why did geographers latch on to questions of global environmental change so much faster than anthropologists or sociologists? In response, Rick Wilk suggested that Anthropology was, at the time, busy with a different, but internally compelling set of debates about post-modernism and what it meant for anthropological theory and method. Proponents of the 'finalisation thesis', developed in the 1970s/1980s, make the more general point that disciplines go through phases of development during which they are more and less open to non-academic influence. This idea, which has been discussed at length in the literature, provides a further explanation for why meeting and interaction is not always enough. Even if we do not accept the finalisation thesis in total, (the development of science is described in a rather deterministic way), the basic idea that fields are differentially receptive to outside pressures depending on their internal cognitive and social configuration seems plausible. It is important to take this into account when thinking about the development and formulation of research agendas.

Why does bringing people together sometimes work?

In the course of the five workshops, we identified a handful of situations in which interactive agenda setting seemed to be the norm. Jenny Grey (DfES) described a number of government sponsored research programmes in social work and child protection that were particularly successful in this respect. In this field, researchers and policy advisors had really quite a lot in common, sharing similar commitments, a common knowledge of contemporary problems and familiarity with previous policy initiatives. Research agendas were consequently informed by roughly parallel experiences of understanding and intervention.

These different cases are interesting for they imply that extensive networking and contact is not in itself sufficient to generate interactive research agendas: instead what is required is a more ordinary platform of common experience. This helps in making sense of the distance we noticed between business people and business academics. While ideas and language occasionally move between these spheres,

this is of little significance if there is no corresponding bedrock of ordinary practice. Where such commonality exists, as in social work or education, then genuinely interactive agendas can and do emerge.

The practice of academic life

Paul Duguid uses a 'community of practice' perspective to challenge and critique dominant ideas about knowledge transfer and in particular about the relation between tacit and explicit knowledge (Duguid 2005). In essence he suggests that practice – the shared experience of doing – provides a common and necessary platform for exchange. Although he is writing about the possibilities and limits of sharing and circulating knowledge, and not about research agenda setting as such, we can usefully appropriate features of this argument.

When discussing the development of research programmes, and at other points in the workshop series as a whole, we recognised the existence of variously close-knit 'communities'. We have already mentioned the social work community. Another indication of close-knit communities is the extent to which the training of researchers and practitioners overlaps, as it does in areas of psychology, criminology and education. By contrast, and again to give just one example, researchers supported by the 'Cultures of Consumption' programme dealt with a much more varied range of topics and sought to interact with a diverse, unpredictable and relatively unknown population of non-academic users.

Taking these points together, we might suggest that there is a practice based aspect to problem formulation and so to interactive research agenda setting. Others have used the notion of epistemic communities to describe relations between populations of scientists, but there is no reason why non-academics should not be included as well. It is, after all, reasonable to suppose that intellectual priorities are in some way related to the emergent, practical experience of what it is to do and to be an academic, a policy maker or whatever. It would follow that the distance between what academic and non-academic populations actually do is important for interactive agenda setting.

More abstractly, the notion that the potential for interactive agenda setting relates to the extent to which practices intersect is useful because institutional arrangements are likely to affect the homogeneity or diversity of practice between specific academic and non-academic populations. Whitley, for instance, observes that academic life consists of many overlapping 'activity systems' and that associated 'rules of the game' are reproduced through centres, programmes, discipline based research and consultancy. Some such systems resemble those of non-academic life, others are much more specialised. These details are important if we accept the idea that such arrangements are relevant for the capacity to share theories, ideas and associated ways of formulating problems.

A practice-based analysis of the potential for interactive agenda setting would therefore involve identifying and characterising multiple populations - some academic, some non-academic, some hybrid – each of which have more and less in common with each other. However revealing, the result would be a static map of contemporary configurations. We need to go further if we are to understand the dynamics of interactive agenda setting and if we are to figure out how these populations (and relations between them) evolve.

Clustering agendas

So far, we have focused on a rather limited interpretation of what is involved in setting an agenda. If we move away from thinking about this as the considered articulation of formal research questions, and instead attend to the flow of what people take to be interesting topics, or topics that deserve further attention, we need to take a broader view. In particular, we need to acknowledge that academic work is routinely influenced by the social, cultural and political world in which it takes place. In this sense, media debates, fashions and questions of popular concern percolate through academic and non-academic worlds alike. They may even make a difference to seemingly abstract processes of theoretical development. In the first workshop on disciplines, Rick Wilk suggested that although archaeologists and anthropologists deal with distant or different cultures, contemporary experiences have an impact on ways of thinking about the past, a point he made with reference to changing interpretations of Mayan culture. Researchers appeared to exhibit preferences for particular types of explanation, e.g. catastrophic collapse versus gradual decline, depending upon what was going on in their own immediate environment.

It is important to make the point that social scientists are themselves part of the world in which they live and that research is not totally disconnected from 'real life'. At the same time, the resulting field of ongoing debate is not entirely undifferentiated. Within it we find identifiable clusters of discourse that are maintained by and the result of specific communities. For example, widespread debate about genetically modified food has acted as a magnet around which quite different types of expertise have gathered. This has been sustained for a number of years with the result that there is now a recognisable community of genomics scholars within social science, members of which have begun to develop a new agenda of their own. Research centres and programmes are sometimes the result or expression of 'bottom up' interdisciplinary convergence. In other situations, institutional support and research funding helps keep such clusters together.

The Dutch Centre for Society and Genomics, which has a monopoly on the funding for social science genomics research, plays both these roles at once. As well as embodying and reflecting public debate, it facilitates the flow of social science insights back into the more general discourse about genomics. The Oxford Internet Institute (OII) exemplifies a somewhat different style of performing comparable roles. The OII carves out its own distinctive programme of work by selectively homing in on issues picked out from a much wider pool of possibilities. In focusing energies and resources in this way, the OII is itself instrumental in configuring new "nodes of discourse" and in contributing to unfolding debate about the social implications of the internet.

Such forms of concentration can come about in other ways as well. As we noticed more than once, technological developments can spawn new agendas and questions for research, permit new methodologies and prompt new forms of interdisciplinary association. For example, the arrival of brain imaging technologies opened new fields of enquiry and brought together people from previously disconnected communities including computing, psychology, clinical medicine and neuroscience. Computational linguistics is another good example in which technology provided the occasion for a new clustering of research effort. Developments of this kind not only reshape relations between scientific and technological communities, they also engender new and different links between academic experts and specific communities of professional practice. For example academic psychologists

specialising in computer-assisted face recognition find themselves working closely with the police. Similarly, the development of Geographical Information Systems technologies has implications that are just beginning to be explored across fields like epidemiology, preventative vaccination programmes, bird watching and personal mobility.

These concentrations of attention necessarily result in a redistribution of energy and intellectual effort. As some topics move up the agenda, others fall by the wayside. Similar observations have been made by those studying the formation and deformation of social networks and it is likely that the two processes connect. In the workshop on disciplines, Vicki Bruce noted that younger generations of researchers were quick to exploit the possibilities afforded by rapid and massive increases in computing power, resulting in a break between their priorities and those of the older generation. Inter-generational dynamics also figured more than once when discussing the emergence of new research questions, the disappearance of previously important topics and the construction and collapse of links between specific academic and non-academic communities.

The dynamics of interactive agenda setting

In *The Chaos of Disciplines*, Abbott (2001) comments on the role of people – and specifically of practicing academics – as carriers of traditions, ideas, methods and research priorities. As he explains, generational cohorts frequently come into conflict. ‘Young Turks’ oppose the ideas of those who went before them but as the ‘young Turks’ themselves grow old, they become subject to the same process: their ideas are in turn challenged by the next generation.

Taking this notion seriously, and perhaps taking it to the extreme, we might argue that researchers are the medium through which concepts develop, evolve and decay. It is, after all, clear that ideas depend upon people to keep them alive. New fields like that of science studies only make headway when sufficient numbers of academics are willing to lend their energies and careers to the cause. As Abbot observes, individual and collective career trajectories are of real significance for the waxing and waning of competing conceptual traditions and methodological strategies.

Given our interest in agenda setting, the question of ‘how problems recruit researchers and/or research funders’ is interesting and important especially since it can be asked simultaneously of both. The notion that the “careers” of research problems and of those who treat them as such intersect again, allows us to move between institutionally and epistemologically-based ways of thinking about research agenda setting.

One result of attention clustering is that certain problems are given status, energy and significance. As already noticed, in attracting interest they almost certainly divert it from elsewhere, thereby keeping research agendas in a constant state of flux. In learning about how research centres formulate and refresh their own research agendas, we learned about mechanisms and dynamic processes of feedback, adjustment, self-monitoring and reflexive review. In all of this, abandoning previously interesting topics, jettisoning ‘old’ lines of enquiry and simply saying ‘no’ was as important as the work that went into crafting persuasive and distinctive lines of enquiry. As these observations indicate, research problems appear to capture recruits and followers in rather different ways as they hunt for support and legitimacy across the different settings (or ecosystems) of academic life – (e.g. in disciplines, programmes, centres). Following Abbott, generation-based ‘fractal’ divisions

(splitting and specialisation) appear to be especially important in shaping the trajectories of research priorities within disciplines. By contrast, problems achieve status within programmes and centres when they secure multiple sources of support (convergence and incremental accumulation).

In thinking about how, and how far, research agendas travel it is important to notice that Duguid's argument about the practice based 'art of knowing' (2005) implies that there are certain limits to knowledge sharing. While he suggests that the boundaries of knowledge relate to those of practice, he does not conclude that all practice (and with it, all knowledge) is irredeemably localised. His observations about the geographical independence of practice-based knowledge are consequently relevant when thinking about the circulation of research problems and agendas. Echoing Disco and van der Meulen's (1998) work on processes of abstraction (i.e. how generally relevant knowledge is abstracted from specific situations) and reversal (i.e. how generally relevant knowledge is appropriated and made to work in specific situations), Duguid underlines the point that although explicit knowledge (or in our case abstracted research problems) can circulate, it has to be re-embedded in specific situations if it is to have any meaning. He goes on to argue that processes of re-embedding are prevented or made possible by and within specific communities of practice.

Again these ideas help in thinking about the limits and possibilities of interactive agenda setting. More specifically, the suggestion here would be that candidate topics for enquiry can be abstracted and can circulate widely between academic and non-academic communities. However, they will only 'take root' and develop effectively when they land in a conducive environment, i.e. one which is characterised by sufficient commonality of experience and practice. This has immediate implications for what it means to develop productive and viable research policy with respect to interactive agenda setting.

Implications for research policy

Our first conclusion is straightforward: interactivity cannot be forced. Given that sufficient commonality of practice is a precondition for the emergence of genuinely shared agendas, merely bringing people together is not in itself enough.

Having said that, there might yet be ways of intervening in the formation of clusters of attention – or agendas - in which academics and non-academics *both* have a stake. Framed in this way, the task of promoting interactive agenda setting is one of cultivating particular fields of practice and influencing the way in which people – academics and non-academics alike – go about their work. Decisions about forms of funding, and hence about the kinds of inter-activities that are thereby sustained, may well be more important than determining which substantive areas deserve support. CASE studentships represent a move in this direction, as do other forms of academic-non-academic secondment, twinning and dual-career development.

By way of caution, and before getting too enthusiastic about these possibilities, we note that cosy community building, practice sharing, strategies of this kind have drawbacks of their own.

One is that the specification of social issues and problems as topics for research is an inherently contested, politically loaded move. Howard Becker (2003) puts it very clearly. "Many different people have ideas about what in society needs fixing". If the relevance of sociology is in "solving, or contributing to the solution of, the problem as

someone has defined it”, sociologists need to be extremely sensitive to such fundamental issues as whose problem are they addressing, how it comes to be a problem, and what other definitions of the situation also exist. For example, interactive agenda setting in the field of drugs research would take radically different form if the relevant community of practice was that of the law enforcement agency or of the drugs ‘users’ themselves. Becker’s own solution is to be reflexively aware of the inevitability of this kind of positioning and at the same time do what one can to engage with as many practice-based paradigms and versions of problem formulation as possible.

In making this latter point he addresses a second risk of practice-based interactivity which has to do with closure. When researchers “go native” they lose their critical faculties. Too much interactivity might well be bad for social scientists *and* for the non-academic communities with which they interact. One effect of close academic and non-academic ties in the field of social work was to focus attention around a limited number of problems of common concern. These themes captured resources and monopolised intellectual energy in what might prove to be self-sustaining, and in the long run, problematically stultifying ways. This suggests that mechanisms to promote interactivity should be balanced by those that favour fragmentation, fleeting encounters, and shallow rather than deep exchange of ideas.

To finish, we return to the opening question with which we began. Where do social science research questions come from and how are ‘users’ involved in defining timely, worthwhile, innovative and relevant lines of enquiry? In phrasing the question this way, we took the problem to be one of engagement between academics on the one hand and non-academics on the other. We now conclude that interactive agendas are better seen as essentially emerging phenomena, only ever arising from strongly interacting communities (consisting of academics and non-academics alike).

Opening up academic agendas is still a high policy priority, but we argue that for this to result in interactive agenda setting, there needs to be a bedrock of shared practice. This leads to the conclusion that research communities should not be (and are not) exclusively populated by academics. Rather, they should be thought of as hybrid entities, always in a state of flux, always partly open and partly closed, and always seeking to attract attention and draw resources away from others and toward themselves. If these constellations are to be effective – particularly in research terms – one implication is that non-academic participants should work harder to systematically define their interests and see where these map onto existing preoccupations within corresponding communities of academic expertise. They should not rely on social scientists to do this work. This observation has further implications for the way social scientists prioritize their work and, equally important, for their involvement in multiple communities of practice, work related or not. In addition, it prompts us to think again about how formal research priorities are set in the form of calls for centres and programmes, and about how human resources are managed in academia. Finally, it has far reaching implications for the criteria in terms of which social scientific careers are judged. After all, interactivity, whether diffuse or organised, takes time and energy. Just as important, it takes time and energy away from other currently important aspects of academic life.

The bases of interactive agenda setting: Comments

Chris Caswill¹

This is an interesting and very stimulating paper, nicely argued. Important aspects of our discussion have been brought together in a skilful way, and some challenging new ideas have been introduced. That said, I think there are some underlying issues to be unpacked, and some important gaps to be addressed. Some of the most important conclusions also seem to be only lightly connected to the evidence of the papers we have seen and heard, and by the content of our discussions.

The paper prompted me to look harder at our core topic than I have done for a while. I began to wonder if we taken this central question rather too much for granted, underestimating both its salience and difficulty.² When we stepped outside the confines of seemingly disembodied 'agenda setting' in intermediary bodies such as research councils, we grappled with the origins of academic agendas within disciplines, research teams and in the minds of individual researchers. In this way, our enquiry came up against issues of huge importance to academic researchers (not least in the social sciences), namely the choices and decisions they make about the research they undertake, and core underpinning values, self-interpretations and beliefs about autonomy and freedom of choice. We have looked at ways in which autonomy in the choice of research directions, projects and conclusions may be modified, influenced or even overridden by other interests and powers. Such enquiries make large demands on the reflexivity of academic participants, and it is certainly possible to argue that academic researchers can never stand fully outside the context which shapes them (Flyvbjerg, 2001).

When thinking about the choices of projects and problems by social science researchers, we might also want to return to the arguments of Charles Lindblom and Daniel Cohen about the interactions between what they call 'professional social inquiry' (PSI) (Lindblom and Cohen, 1979). They discuss the interfaces between PSI and what they term 'ordinary knowledge'. They criticise what they see as the unhelpful pursuit of dominant, authoritative thinking by PSI practitioners. From this they go on to argue that attempts to preserve the choice of research topics from wider social interaction are one of the aspects of PSI which reduces its effect and validity. They also point to the paradox of assuming that PSI has social value while seeking to separate problem choice from social interaction. To quote:

"Just as we have stressed that social problem solving requires understanding adapted to interactive problem solving – thus PSI combined with social interaction – so we also suggest...that solving the problem of which PSI projects should or should not be attempted calls finally for a combination of PSI and social interaction on that very issue" (Lindblom & Cohen, pp100-101).

Prompted to think some more about these questions by the latest paper, I wonder if we would have benefited from an explicit ex-ante debate of these issues, and from building in some encouragement for reflexivity into the structure of the meetings. I recognise that some may think these arguments are of little retrospective use³, except that it may still be helpful to discuss them in advance of our conclusions, and any suggestions we make for the future.⁴

My reactions to the recently-introduced Duguid paper (Duguid, 2005) are probably linked to the questions I have just raised. I was intrigued rather than persuaded by the suggestion that we can draw significant conclusions about research agenda setting from Duguid's quite abstract and theoretical discussion of types and flows of

knowledge. Much of the paper is a full frontal assault on the attempts of economists and others⁵ to dismiss tacit knowledge. Many of us will sympathise with that, not least with the emphasis on the 'how' of everyday practice, and on the capacity to learn from example (which has strong echoes in both Flyvberg and Lindblom and Cohen). However no attempt is made by Duguid to define what is meant by either 'community' or 'practice'⁶, nor does this approach offer any insights into how communities are created or sustained, or what kind of boundaries there might be. Maybe I'm wrong but at its most basic, this part of his paper seems no more novel (or insightful) than that people doing the same kind of work (or sharing other regular practices) have common interests and discourses, and may listen to each other more than people in other 'communities'. Such communities could in any event be institutions, or institutionally shaped. And the relevant literature on culture as cultural practice seems to be overlooked as well.

Thus, we are taking quite a risk in placing weight on Duguid's comment (which he himself only calls a 'suggestion') that ideas may not flow easily across 'communities of practice. Yet the paper infers from this that behaviours and preferences cannot be influenced across community boundaries. Though we might indeed suggest that 'there is a practice based aspect to problem formulation', which is a nice idea, I would argue that we should (a) not put much if any weight on Duguid as the underlying argument, and (b) that we must also recognise other routes to problem formulation and re-formulation, many of which are not as comfortably located within the confines of the academy.

My third general point can be made much more succinctly. I agree that much of our discussion has had a strong institutional flavour, and with the conclusion that we should seek to include other perspectives. However much of the institutionalist thinking has been implicit rather than explicit and I think we would also benefit from more explicit attention to institutional analysis, for example the tension between individual creativity and institutional environments explored by Fritz Scharpf in his work on actor-centred institutionalism (Scharpf, 1997). I hope our report will develop a more explicit institutionalist perspective, alongside others, rather than too quickly setting it aside.

Chris Caswill
23.2.06

Notes

¹ These comments were written in response to a first draft but seem relevant also to the latest version

² Of course I can't speak for others, but that has been my impression.

³ And mea culpa for only making the point in this way at this late stage.

⁴ This analysis would lead us, for example, not to be surprised that we have heard few examples of effective external influence on research agendas and that the dominant discourse had been how external influences have been 'managed away'.

⁵ I was struck by Duguid's simple (and rather dismissive) classification of Herb Simon as an economist, given that Simon's work ranged over AI, cognition, decision making and organisational behaviour, as well as the explication of bounded rationality which I think got him the Nobel prize.

⁶ Though he does allude to the work on 'communities' emerging from studies of apprenticeship.

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