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**The Politics of Media and Cultural Policy**

**Philip Schlesinger**

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# The Politics of Media and Cultural Policy<sup>1</sup>

Philip Schlesinger

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## ABSTRACT

This paper considers the role of academics in current debates on media and cultural policy in the UK. Although theories of the intellectuals differ widely as to what such a role might be, they point to a more general issue: the struggle for social recognition by contending forms of expertise. The policy field is one arena in which such contention occurs. Although the digital revolution is beginning to erode distinct policy regimes, broadcasting policy debate still conserves some long-standing features. Dominated by a few protagonists occupying positions of institutional power and critical, academic influence is at best marginal. For its part, cultural policy is being increasingly displaced by creative economy policy. This has been a New Labour project, initiated and from time to time sustained by a policy generation rooted in think tanks, consultancy and advising, with its academic critics largely unheard. Despite its shaky foundations, creativity policy has achieved a hegemonic position in British debate and is influential internationally. Nearer home, it has been uncritically adopted in Scotland – an illuminating case of policy dependency. The paper concludes with some reflections on policymakers' resistance to academic arguments.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is largely identical to the public lecture delivered in the Sheikh Zayed Theatre at the LSE on 28 October 2009, by invitation of the Department of Media and Communication in its Research Dialogue series. The choice was to write a new piece or to amend the text at hand. I have chosen to do the latter, keeping the flavour of the spoken text while moving it closer to a written form, in the interests of disseminating these arguments without undue delay. In the lively discussion that followed the lecture, some excellent points were made. Where these have required me to clarify the argument, I have done so. In the fast-moving policy scene, there have been some new developments, happily completely in line with my analysis. Rather than alter the general shape of the existing text, I have added some brief footnotes to take account of these.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In this paper, I want to discuss the role of academics in media and cultural policy debates. In many respects, this involves thinking sociologically about how policy is constructed and who gets involved and why. I shall address some issues of theory and also provide illustrations of my argument, some of which are based on my AHRC-funded research on creative industries policies in the United Kingdom and Scotland.

Much of what I have to say is also influenced by my modest engagement in public life. For the past five years, I have sat on the communications regulator Ofcom's Advisory Committee for Scotland. This year I have chaired that body. Undertaking such a role makes you reflect on the scope and limits of the influence you can bring to bear on policy-relevant discussion. It makes you think about what academics can – and perhaps should – do.

When invited to give this lecture, I was asked to consider media policy alongside cultural policy. Although we can readily distinguish between these two policy fields, as the implications of the digital revolution begin increasingly to sink in, not only are we experiencing a far-reaching convergence of technologies but also one in which the domains of policy are converging. To put it differently, policy fields are under particularly far-reaching and rapid challenge. If you take communications regulation, for instance, it is clear that we cannot neatly separate out how the current problems posed by post-credit crunch media economics are impacting on the press, telecoms and broadcasting. Rupert Murdoch's goal of – as we now say - 'monetising' News International's internet-distributed newspaper content, has propelled his commercial interests into a head-on clash with the BBC's publicly funded web presence. This kind of competition brings home the point that beyond its traditional incarnation in print, newspaper content is also distributed by websites. Aside from producing the expected text and stills, newspapers may also be (usually rather limited) audio and video webcasters. The change in distribution systems, therefore, is also a change in cultural form that reshapes the market and consumption.

Or take another example. For more than two centuries museums have been at the heart of traditional nation-building cultural policy, the emphasis being on collection, curation and display, and latterly the active cultivation of audiences. However, the Tate recently announced it was moving into the movie business by teaming up with the animators Aardman. The museum aims to harness children's creativity in making a new animation. This

kind of initiative totally bypasses the established terrain of film production support occupied by the UK Film Council and instead comes out of Legacy Trust funding set up to support the 2012 London Olympics. This shows how the 'fit' between the purposes of public institutions, the market, technological possibility and popular creation is changing rapidly. Inevitably, the political class will once again be rethinking the institutional policy map – a change already under way in the field of British film policy.

## **BROADCASTING POLICY DEBATE**

All of that said, however, the quite traditional form of some debates remains striking. Current battles in the field of British broadcasting offer a pertinent example. The fight is centred more than ever on the BBC, not least because of the deep economic difficulties faced by its competitor terrestrial TV companies and along with this, BSkyB's unceasing campaign to shrink the scope of public service broadcasting.

Broadcasting debate, historically speaking, has been highly structured because so much of it has been driven by government statements, the setting up and reporting of inquiries and the responses made to these in the public domain. Just compare it to film policy, for instance, to see the difference in the prominence and sustained attention achieved. In broadcasting, there are ritual moments in the annual cycle, during which statements are made by prominent figures, those judged to be the key players in the field, after which noisy position taking ensues.

One such moment is the annual Edinburgh Television Festival. In August 2009, in the set piece annual MacTaggart Lecture, James Murdoch, CEO of News Corporation in Europe and Asia, clearly his father's ideological heir, inveighed against the BBC as having a 'chilling' effect, as threatening media plurality through state-sponsored journalism. He also accused the BBC of making a 'land grab' on the market. This had an extraordinary resonance among the commentariat and the political class and forced the BBC into rebuttal mode. Three weeks after Mr Murdoch's little sally, the BBC's Director General, Mark Thompson replied, using another ritual platform, that of the Royal Television Society's Cambridge Convention, a meeting that without evident irony bills itself as 'the UK's pre-eminent high-level gathering of broadcasting executives'. Message received: this is a much more exclusive talking shop than

Edinburgh - and is routinely addressed by the relevant government minister, the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport.

At this moment, we are in a pre-electoral period in the UK. The deals being made behind the scenes are increasingly evident. In September 2009, Rupert Murdoch's *Sun* shifted from supporting the New Labour government to championing the opposition Conservatives. The Conservative leader, David Cameron, threatened to clip Ofcom's wings, saying it would not continue in its present form, should his party come to power. Mr Murdoch is less than keen on Ofcom's challenge to BSkyB's present dominance of the pay-TV market. In June 2009, the regulator found that the broadcaster should be forced to sell its premium content – Sky Sports and Sky Movies - to its rivals (Virgin Media and BT) at up to one-third less than it presently charges. James Murdoch has denounced the regulator's approach as 'a threat to the climate for investment'. Mr Cameron's menaces have been reiterated by his culture spokesman, Jeremy Hunt, who has said that Ofcom's remit needs to be changed with the aim of returning 'policy-making powers' to ministers.<sup>2</sup>

Now, we can properly debate whether or not Ofcom *makes* policy as well as regulating communications. It is undoubtedly a sensitive question. Furthermore, we may have justifiably critical views about how effectively consumer v citizen interests are addressed by the regulator. However, I think the really interesting issue lies elsewhere. What the Tory leader has identified as a particular threat is Ofcom's unparalleled analytical and research *expertise*. The continuous outpouring of Ofcom reports and their associated consultations has successfully dominated the field of debate ever since the regulator was set up. Peter Lunt and Sonia Livingstone (2007: 153) have argued persuasively that while the regulator has thereby become 'a significant site...for consumer representation and deliberation among stakeholders' that this is heavily skewed in at least two ways. First, the regulatory agenda is fundamentally shaped by the dominance of competitive and consumer considerations. Second, that there is inequality in the resources available to those who seek to influence regulatory policy, disadvantaging relatively poorly resourced civil society interests.

This means that arguments coming from well-resourced commercial and industrial bodies are likely to be more effectively constructed than others and responses to the consultative

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<sup>2</sup> In the few weeks since I delivered this lecture, the Conservatives have increasingly clarified their intention to cut back Ofcom's role. They have also underlined their determination to decrease the BBC's scale and also to reduce the licence fee. The assumed existence of a deal between David Cameron and Rupert Murdoch over the future media landscape has become a matter of widespread media comment.

process will be largely limited to expert circles. Nevertheless the process does open space for at least a range of arguments to be made available for scrutiny in the public domain. What is thereby constituted is a limited, expert sphere, which – whatever its undoubted shortcomings – has a potential value for a general public. Naturally, the frequency of calls for evidence lends itself to satire and frequent complaint and a ghastly new psychological condition widely lamented among the media policy wonks - submission fatigue. But – whatever its excesses - remove this important ideas-factory capacity, and the mobilisation of at least a range of expert opinion, and communications regulation would be seriously weakened. Ofcom's expertise will hardly migrate *en bloc*. Its intended dispersal by an incoming Conservative government is precisely the point, because future struggles about broadcasting policy will depend on who controls the commanding heights of public discourse, as well, of course, as the political power to push policies through. I shall return to the question of expertise shortly, as it is central to my theme.

So far as broadcasting itself is concerned, the interventions of Ben Bradshaw, the current Culture Secretary, have been particularly combative.<sup>3</sup> Less than three years after New Labour set up the BBC Trust in the wake of the Hutton inquiry, Mr Bradshaw has called for it to be dismantled. He is an advocate of using part of the licence fee to fund the market failure of commercial television in the field of news to the exclusion of other possible solutions. The Conservatives oppose this use of public money but instead want to severely reduce the licence fee. Talk of 30 per cent cuts is presently circulating. After a period of increasingly qualified support for the corporation, the Labour government, joined the current BBC-bashing Agreeing with Mr Bradshaw, the Conservatives have already indicated that the BBC Trust's lifespan (and certainly that of its current leadership) is limited, and indeed, Mr Hunt has also threatened to rip up the BBC's Charter. As with Ofcom, with all its shortcomings, relatively autonomous broadcasting regulation appears to present an obstacle to political power – the very power that created it in the first place.

But let me return to the *structure* of the debate. These few protagonists are unquestionably setting the scene. And what is so striking is just how *few* they are: a handful of institutional power positions utterly monopolises the articulation of thinkable futures. Rather than going

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<sup>3</sup> Shortly after I spoke these words – and undoubtedly not as an effect of the lecture! – the penny seemed to have dropped inside the Labour Party. Lord Mandelson, the government's key strategist, began to point to the common agenda espoused by the Conservatives and Mr Murdoch's media empire. Mr Bradshaw also took up the refrain, abruptly changing his tune. This issue has also had a wide airing among the media commentariat. With a general election due in the first half of 2010, the media battleground will loom large.

beyond these parameters, the commentariat is limited largely to moving the pieces around on the board. And while there is certainly an academic network interested in policy issues in the UK, it is very small relative to the size of the research community as a whole, and few of its members are in a position even minimally to affect debate.<sup>4</sup>

## **CULTURAL POLICY, INTELLECTUALS AND THE STATE**

Like broadcasting policy, cultural policy also still exists and faces related challenges, not least because of its continuing displacement by creative economy policy. In most practical respects, the politics of cultural policy still plays itself out within national political systems, within national public spheres – that is, within *states*. The state can be a useful analytical framework but it has its limitations. It is limited because the idea of cultural and communications sovereignty is challenged by global flows and transnational systems of governance.

If states orientate themselves to the extra-territorial demands that shape their policies today, they also cannot avoid addressing their own internal cultural diversity – unless this is ignored or repressed. States, such as the United Kingdom, do not necessarily coincide with their component nations. The UK is a state of nations and therefore of *several* national cultures; at times of intensified identity politics, the UK faces a variety of challenges to an overarching conception of Britishness.

Cultural policy is formed where culture and politics intersect: it brings into relation diverse ways of life and the institutionalised form of the state. Cultural policy is articulated within the economy, polity and society. It is moulded by the tensions between profit and aesthetic value, by the shifting boundaries between the private and the public, by the vagaries of social and cultural inclusion and exclusion, and so forth. It is consequently a key playground for intellectuals, amongst whom we should and do include academics.

In this connection, the distinguished sociologist, Zygmunt Bauman (1992), has argued that modern intellectuals developed with the emergence of culture itself, culture being conceived

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<sup>4</sup> One current response to the extremely narrow elite domination of the scene – is that of Professor Sylvia Harvey, who has brought together a new grouping, the Citizens' Coalition for Public Service Broadcasting – launched in late October 2009 – to articulate public good arguments. If this succeeds in even modestly influencing the shape of the discourse, it will be doing exceptionally well.



as an autonomous space for action. Bauman has described intellectuals as a key expert stratum that developed with the Enlightenment. Their initial role, he argues, was that of 'legislator'. They articulated the ideology of a new order impatient of diversity and backwardness and were in the vanguard of centralising polities and cultures. In post-modernity, where epistemological certainties have collapsed, Bauman suggests, the role of intellectuals has shifted from legislator to 'interpreter', to a more modest role of making sense of cultures. Post-modern intellectuals (who are mostly based in universities and other knowledge-producing institutions) have the wonderful consolation of talking to themselves and their colleagues - on a salary. Yet – and here is the downside according to Bauman - they are largely disconnected from power.

For his part, the literary scholar, Edward Said (1994) also tried to describe 'a specific public role in society' for the intellectual. Where Bauman's argument is sociological Said's is normative. The choice for Said is either one of working inside the power structure or of being powerless. He urges public intellectuals to side with the weak and the dispossessed. His conception of the intellectual is one of 'speaking truth to power'. For Said, to speak within a *national* discourse is to occupy a kind of prison house that limits our discursive independence and our horizons. He therefore celebrates the role of the intellectual as an outsider. To stand outside, he suggests, gives you both epistemological and moral advantages. Consequently, exile – both actual and metaphorical – is the *only* state that fits true intellectual endeavour. Said, of course, was an exile; and so too is Bauman, although he has not argued that this condition confers special advantages everywhere and always.

Both Bauman's and Said's positions are highly questionable. Bauman's valuable insight is that the breakdown of traditional orders turns culture into a distinct sphere of action. Culture suddenly becomes something to be *managed* and is therefore central to intellectuals' self-conceptions, because culture is their living space. But contemporary intellectuals are not all simply interpreters. There is good empirical evidence that the desire to *legislate* for how culture should be shaped and turned to profit remains very powerful in our times. Some intellectuals do indeed find ways of acting as legislators, even if that often means shaping legislation through interpretation. In other words, the ideological struggle over visions of the cultural order is not at all innocent but has major consequences, particularly where those who articulate ideological visions are close to the centres of power.

Said's all-or-nothing approach to what intellectual life ought to be, does have considerable self-dramatising appeal and therein lies its attraction. He wrote eloquently on the consolations of outsider-ness. However, this limiting conception polarises intellectuals into the co-opted v the free, the clean v the corrupt, the principled opponent v the compliant bootlicker and the saint v the sinner. While neat, this schema distorts the actual complexity of how contemporary intellectuals (academics included) address the world of policy and politics.

We may look to yet another exile, the critical theorist Theodor Adorno (1991: 89), for a more grounded view on the role of expertise in cultural policy. Analysing what he disparagingly called 'the culture industry', Adorno thought that intellectuals were mostly 'servile'. He loathed the idea of an administered culture - and cultural policy is nothing if not administered by public authorities. Adorno saw culture as the source of the 'critical impulse'. It was the counterpoint to administration (1991: 100) and an administered society has lost its spontaneity. However, despite the icy grip of administration, Adorno believed that a critically self-aware cultural policy *was* feasible and that expertise could be used 'for the protection of cultural matters from the realm of control by the market' (1991: 112). In short, Adorno thought experts working within institutions to pursue culturally progressive ends could – in Bauman's terms - be *legislators* rather than just interpreters. That is what my own research suggests. Whether the ends pursued are necessarily 'progressive' or not is quite another matter.

## **EXPERTISE AND THE 'KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY'**

What might entitle intellectuals to intervene in policy debate today? Under contemporary conditions, policy-relevant expertise has become a key criterion for credible entry into debate. This has been increasingly the case since the mandarin political commentator, Walter Lippmann (1961 [1922]: 375), writing nearly nine decades ago, astutely noted the strategic advantages enjoyed by experts in influencing decision-making in the increasingly complex structures of US government and administration. Such complexity, Lippmann (1961 [1922]: 378) observed, demonstrated 'the need for interposing some form of expertness between the private citizen and the vast environment in which he is entangled'. In other words, Lippmann endorsed a special place for a particular kind of intellectual elite in policy formation and implementation.

Suitable credentials may be established in numerous ways. In academia, for instance, expertise is built upon research and scholarship, as well as based on the practical experience of advising and engaging in both public and private arenas. But none of this offers a guarantee of making one's voice heard. Rather, the possession of expertise merely establishes a necessary condition for the articulation of relevant perspectives for a debate on policy.

It is a truism that we need resources to research the fields of cultural and communication policies. So we have to decide where our funds are going to come from and what are the costs and benefits that attach to particular funding streams – or sometimes, mere trickles. In our complex research economy, we may and do take on a variety of roles simultaneously. What we decide to do at any time is shaped by the constraints and opportunities we face.

It is a fundamental value for academics to seek the maximum independence of thought in order to produce high quality research. Although that is the gold standard, it cannot always be achieved. The underlying relationship to funding affects the autonomy, framing, pace and scope of what has been done. To oversimplify: receiving a research council award generally ought to give you more autonomy than working as a consultant with a defined brief and an importunate client who is a mere mouse's click away.

But let us not be naïve. In reality, virtually *no* source of funding is utterly neutral in its impact on how we think about policy questions. National research councils, foundations, government departments, public bodies, charities and the European Commission all have their own agendas. How they articulate their 'strategic priorities' will always have effects on what we do and how we think. So too do universities' own research strategies. We have to acknowledge this.

As academics, we also have to think what it is to be a *citizen*-researcher. If we work in areas of public policy interest, we simply *cannot* avoid addressing how we engage as experts in the public sphere, in nations, states and internationally. We have obligations to disseminate our work widely. These derive purely from the fact of our having in-depth and wide-ranging knowledge and the need to communicate this. We have been socially privileged to accumulate our expertise over time and in an open society there is a general interest in sharing it as widely as possible. This is not an argument from utility but rather one that

espouses the imperative of intellectual openness. These issues have recently been taken up in the debate about what a public sociology might mean. Michael Burawoy (2009: 197), one of the main protagonists in this discussion argues sociologists are all involved in 'the constitution and defense of civil society', irrespective of whether they see their role as professional, policy, critical or public. Actually, I think this overstates the case and underestimates the extent to which some policy social science is inherently top-down and in the service of ruling elites.

According to Edward Said's exilic ideal – which places him in the critical camp - we should contribute to the public debate as outsiders. This view derives from a classic image of the public intellectual as engaged. It dates from the Dreyfus *affaire* of the 1890s and is still of key normative importance. Of course, public intellectuals are not always outsiders – far from it, in fact. And outsiders' careers may differ enormously over their lifetimes. Some become licensed commentators with their own slots and spots and are garlanded with honours. Others are condemned to obscurity, and if really lucky, a posthumous revival. Even in the mainstream, very few public intellectuals achieve really significant and sustained access to the airwaves and the newspaper columns, or enjoy the status of a blogger or tweeter with influence. As Régis Debray (1979) pointed out some thirty years ago, the post World War II rise of celebrity media intellectuals created a star system for the few. The overall significance of the university as a widespread source of legitimate knowledge consequently diminished. The growing centrality of popular media has changed the rules of access to the public sphere and transformed the performances that occur.

Increasingly, the small corps of celebrity media academics has been joined by a plethora of celebrity problem-solvers, especially on popular television. These folk are cast as 'experts' in everyday life. Whether it is our failures in cooking, bringing up our children, turning our gardens and houses into a domestic paradise, remodelling our bodies, succeeding in business, or just raising our sexual game, there is always a celebrity-expert on hand to advise us, with large helpings of what the sociologist Alfred Schütz once called 'recipe knowledge'.

Just like those miraculous culinary transformations that turn the raw into the cooked, cultural policy is also amenable to various formulaic quick fixes: whether advocating creative cities, cultural clusters, bohemian and industrial quarters, skills development, quotas, tax breaks,

global branding or niche marketing – the recipes (and the cooks – aka the consultants) abound to help governments and nations in their quest for global economic success.

There have been repeated attempts to characterise the changing nature of expertise and intellectual life. Frequently, the rise of a new specially endowed class is hailed. In the late 1970s, the sociologist Alvin Gouldner (1979) wrote about the emergence of a new powerful class of symbol-manipulating intellectuals immersed in the 'culture of critical discourse'. In very similar vein, at the start of the century, the economist Richard Florida (2002; 2005) celebrated the rise and flight of the creative class, this time to admiring gasps of official credulity as governments around the world sought to install competitive economies. Here, at last, was a sellable vision.

Such arguments about how to situate intellectuals relate to structural changes in capitalism since World War II and the emergence of a so-called knowledge economy. Economic restructuring has changed how we think about and value expertise. Gouldner and Florida – like Daniel Bell (1973) before them - have been part of a tradition of trying to paint new pictures of class and power as industrial society is left increasingly behind.

If class power has come academics' way, I can only observe that – as elsewhere – it is unequally distributed. With very few exceptions, it is very hard to be heard in the world of media and cultural policy formation and harder still to have effects. Sonia Livingstone and Peter Lunt (2009) have drawn a similar conclusion in their recent reflections on policy and audience research – although, like me, they do urge academics to put arguments into the public domain, noting a relative success in the field of 'media literacy'.

Influencing the terms of debate is difficult because the shaping of policy has become both more competitive and more complex. The multiplication of cultural and communication management consultancies, the expansion of special advisers in government, the growth of in-house research teams inside communications regulators, the development of specialist media and communications business journalism - all of these have recast the space available to the academy to make its views known and be taken seriously. They have reshaped the

public sphere and the intellectual fields within it. And in truth, we academics have often not helped ourselves by making policy-relevant research into a minority pursuit.<sup>5</sup>

The value placed on such engagement is rising precipitously in the UK, as there is ever-growing pressure from public funding bodies for academics to satisfy the interests of so-called 'users' and 'stakeholders' – or in the latest lingo, to have an 'impact'. The pursuit of 'knowledge transfer' (KT) or increasingly fashionably, 'knowledge exchange' (KE), has become a key value for governments and universities operating in the culture of accountability and of accounting that is our common lot.

Nearly a century ago, in his broad-ranging conception of how expertise might be mobilised for the public good, Walter Lippmann (1961 [1922]: 375, 382, 397), argued for an ideal of intellectual disinterest. One World War later, the sociologist Robert K. Merton, when reflecting on the role of social research in the formation of policy, shifted Lippmann's stance towards the ideal of professionalism. 'The role of the expert', he wrote, 'always includes an important fiduciary component.' This entails 'the responsible exercise of specialized competence by experts' (Merton 1949: 167).

## **TWO MODELS OF ENGAGEMENT**

Against this longstanding background of debate, we should distinguish between two quite different kinds of rationale for expert engagement.

First, there is the normative view of the academic as a member of a class of experts with a public role to play in influencing and shaping debates on matters of public policy. But this is not simply about opposing established orders everywhere, *à la* Said. It is more complex. It has a profoundly social and collective dimension based in academic cultural practices that lead us, as a matter of course, to contribute to discussion and deliberation through various forms of public engagement. Oppositional critique is only *one* of the available options. Public engagement may and does involve the production and publication of research. But it can also entail academics joining boards and commissions, supplying expert advice to

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<sup>5</sup> The exceptions prove the rule. In due course, it would be fascinating to hear from Professors Steven Barnett and Richard Collins what impact they think they have had as advisors to the House of Lords Communications Committee's recent inquiries

governments and agencies, advising parliamentary committees, making submissions to public inquiries, contributing to media and so forth. Because, in practice, the social organisation of policy expertise is heavily concentrated in elite circles, there is also the much more basic democratic role in working with, and advising, civil society groups of all kinds. This significantly extends the limited scope of the so-called policy community and expands activity in the public sphere.

All engagement is complex because we each have values and beliefs and may be linked to political projects of various kinds. It is a matter of choice and principle whether we avoid institutional capture by the policy world of government departments, state agencies and commercial interests. Because universities give them space, academics are particularly well placed to make a *disinterested* contribution to public policy. Disinterest does not imply a lack of commitment to values and ideals. It concerns whether or not we seek benefits from our advice and whether or not that is a prime motivating force. This autonomous form of engagement is based on a *pro-active, supply-led model*. You develop ideas yourself and you freely offer them to others (Boulton and Lucas 2008).

Second, there is another quite distinct driving force that shapes contemporary policy analysis (as indeed it shapes the production of academic knowledge as a whole). This results from the pressure that shapes the audit culture in which we now all work. In economic and political terms, our funding and our public validation come from being seen to meet increasingly refined performance indicators. These criteria include the assessment of the frequency, volume and influence of our publications and also our universities' standing in the world and national league tables. There is, furthermore, increasing official emphasis on how we might help public agencies, commerce, business and industry, and the 'third sector' of voluntary and charitable bodies, to operate knowledgeably in a democratic society. As opposed to the first model of an internalised culture that supplies the public sphere with spontaneously generated intellectual work, this is a *necessity-driven, demand-led model*. You produce research to prove that you exist and often that is in line with what is requested. Public intellectuality, therefore, is wanted but only on certain terms.

Today, therefore, the normative model of autonomous intellectuality – the ideal of freedom of thought - coexists with the dominant system- and market-driven model of the knowledge class. The demands of necessity have become normative: they are in our very bones. The first model (that of freedom) is often overshadowed by the second (that of necessity). And

we often shift unknowingly between the two, uncertain which imperatives we are obeying. Are we thinking for ourselves or for someone else? Or both? It is against these general considerations about the production of policy thinking that I shall draw on my research into creative industries policy to illustrate how cultural policy may be a political project. This makes the policy process into a competition for attention and also into a marketing exercise.

Contrary to Bauman, therefore, I wish to argue that intellectuals still desire – and some have the capacity – to 'legislate', although most are indeed relegated to the role of 'interpreter'. To illustrate my argument, I shall focus on some current developments in cultural policy in the UK and Scotland – those concerning the so-called creative economy.

## **FROM CREATIVE INDUSTRIES TO CREATIVE ECONOMY**

In 1998, shortly after Tony Blair's New Labour first took up office, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport promoted the idea of the creative industries. Ostensibly, these had their 'origin in individual creativity, skill and talent...which have a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property' (DCMS 1998). This policy emphasised *individuals* as creators and it subordinated culture to economics. In short, this vision fell completely in line with the neo-liberal thinking that has dominated the UK since the days of Margaret Thatcher's governments. The creative industries do not constitute a concept; they are made up of an arbitrary grouping of diverse cultural, communicative and technological practices. The mystical 13 are these: advertising, architecture, art and the antiques market, crafts, design, designer fashion, film, interactive leisure software, music, the performing arts, publishing, software and television and radio. There have been various reformulations but this simple enumeration remains astonishingly durable.

What has happened subsequently is not just of parochial interest because creative industries policy made in London is circling the globe and has been imported into many countries, as though it were a ready-made conceptual toolkit with which you can solve the problem of how to make creativity profitable. In fact, it is not. The policy has been repeatedly revised and at the very start was based on questionable data – as conceded by one of its key architects in a private seminar at Glasgow University. But this has not prevented the rampant process of diffusion of ideas – for instance, to China and the European Union (KEA 2006) and worldwide through the United Nations (UNCTAD 2008).



The UK is therefore of particular interest because it has been one of the key ideas factories for the creative industries and creative economy discourses now being distributed throughout Europe and globally – and these ideas are not only sweeping up enthusiastic adherents but also provoking increasing intellectual opposition and critique both in Europe and in north America.

Creative industries policy in the UK has been a political project closely related to the ‘policy generation’ at the heart of New Labour in government. Think tanks – and other forms of expertise, such as that coming from policy advisers and industry figures – have contributed significantly to shaping the policy process. In the UK, key individuals have moved from advocacy in think tanks into positions of strategic influence in the Prime Minister’s office, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and other ministries, the communications regulator, Ofcom, and the BBC. They have shaped the policy framework in practice. Just think of the careers within the New Labour project of Patricia Hewitt, David Miliband, James Purnell, Geoff Mulgan, Matthew Taylor, Andy Burnham, Stephen Carter and Ed Richards. We certainly clearly need a renewed focus in our research into the struggle for power and influence of ideas-producers in the policy marketplace (Schlesinger 2007).<sup>6</sup>

In the UK, those who have become key players through think tanks, mutating into policy advisers or consultants, operate within elite circles where the costs of entry to knowledgeable policy discussion are high. Early association with the Labour Party’s ‘modernising’ drive, time spent in the worlds of policy advice and/or management consultancy, and extensive exposure to cultural and communications policy and strategy issues have been this group’s common characteristics (Schlesinger 2009a).

The terms of British policy discourse on the creative industries and the creative economy have become compelling. *Not* to buy into these frameworks is tantamount to self-exclusion from policy influence. Cultural and communications industries designated ‘creative’ have been hailed as the driving force of a new economy and a rival in importance to the financial sector (DCMS 2008; Work Foundation 2007). The evidence for claims made about the scale of the creative sector is open to question (Elliott and Atkinson 2007). That said, the sheer pervasiveness of creativity discourse as a liquid synonym for dynamism, growth, talent

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<sup>6</sup> Should the Conservatives take power in Westminster in 2010, we shall be able to research the workings of a new policy generation – some of whom are already in place.

formation and national renewal is quite remarkable. Herein lies its attractiveness. It resonates with the 'new spirit of capitalism' analysed by Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello (2005). It is rooted in beliefs about how to manage cultural labour in conditions of global economic competitiveness. These notions are widely diffused, as I can attest from attending recent international conferences in Latin America and in Europe. Academic agendas show that ideas about creative industries and the creative economy are being taken increasingly seriously.

One of the issues for our research agenda, therefore, is better to understand the sources of such policy arguments and the perspectives of those who advocate them. Some intellectuals *do* still seek legislative power. They are not just interpreters. They use their expertise in the service of government – not as Michael Burawoy would have it, for civil society. For such actors, know-how is the key to the actual exercise of governmental power. The scramble for intellectual dominance means that at any one time, there are preferred suppliers of ideas and evidence in a policy field. So far as the creative economy is concerned, unless academics are prepared to be largely uncritical advocates of dominant ideas, their ability to influence arguments is severely limited.

## **CALEDONIAN DEPENDENCY**

If creative economy doctrine has been circling the globe, it has also hopped over the border. So last but not least, let me talk about cultural policy in Scotland, not only for its inherent interest but also on the principle that the global is to be discovered in the specific transformations of the local. The Scottish Government is trying to set up a new entity called Creative Scotland. This body will bring together a traditional cultural agency, the Scottish Arts Council, and a moving image development body, Scottish Screen. Creative Scotland has been quite some time in the making, since the idea was first mooted in 2003 (Schlesinger 2009b).

What is striking in Scotland, however, is the extent of policy dependency in the broad field of culture, as well as media and communications, despite the devolved political system and the entry to power of a Nationalist, independence-seeking government in 2007. Moreover, such dependency extends across other policy fields. Scottish cultural policy has been unreflective, suffering from a lack of robust debate and dispassionate analysis. There is nothing to match

the policy infrastructure and expertise available in London, even if we scale things down proportionately. Moreover, setting aside the vociferous producer interests, there is minimal civil society involvement in public debate. That means ideas producers such as ippr, Demos, NESTA, The Work Foundation, Ofcom and others are prime suppliers of ideas north of the border.

You can see the effects of this in the plan to establish Creative Scotland, which is the unloved child of two ill-matched parents: bureaucracy and intellectual dependency. Creative Scotland originated in the so-called bonfire of the quangos.<sup>7</sup> Back in 2003, the then Scottish culture minister proposed one cultural agency to replace two, based on no good grounds. This *idée fixe* has been lodged in the bureaucratic bloodstream of the Scottish Executive ever since and never seriously questioned. Why *Creative Scotland*? Well, creativity was then in the air. So, lacking originality, Scottish Labour, imported New Labour policy and terminology, without altering a comma or full stop. The paternity suit, therefore, needs to be filed against the old coalition Scottish Executive.

However, the reluctant mother of this invention will be the present Scottish Government, should the Public Service Reform Bill 2009 be passed in 2010 by the Scottish Parliament. Why did the Nationalists not think again? Like its predecessor Labour-Liberal coalition, the Nationalist cabinet has simply taken up policy made in London and adopted it without any critical reflection. Creative Scotland's animating blueprint reiterates London's conception of creative industries, 1998 style – not even the reframed creative economy thinking of 2008. Thus, 13 creative industries are designated in Scotland because...that's what London decided was appropriate a decade or more ago. It is bizarre to embrace the neo-liberal assumptions embedded in the New Labour project just as these are challenged by our profound financial and economic crisis.<sup>8</sup>

Can academics make a difference here? Where we have the relevant expertise it is our obligation to contribute to public debate. But sometimes it is difficult to do so, even under seemingly ideal conditions. Here is a pertinent example. At the Centre for Cultural Policy Research, we were invited by the Scottish Arts Council to inform policy thinking on Creative Scotland in the spring and summer of 2007. So we organised seminars aiming to explain

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<sup>7</sup> The Conservatives now threaten another, as the cliché is recycled once more.

<sup>8</sup> A new 'business model' for Creative Scotland was announced on 21 October 2009. The new organisation will have a 'portfolio-based management structure' with a 'flexible pool of development officers working on a project basis' (Creative Scotland 2009).

what creative industries policy was, where it came from and what this implied. We undertook some elementary fact-finding about cultural expenditure in Scotland – which proved very difficult to establish. We particularly underlined the tensions that would be faced by Creative Scotland in managing divergent economic and cultural goals within a single new agency. This was the wrong mood music, it seems, although Creative Scotland's interim board seemed most receptive at the time. We do need to understand why what we are supposed to call evidence-based analysis can be so easily ignored. It is not at all unusual. Nor is it restricted to cultural policy.<sup>9</sup>

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

To conclude: it is pertinent to ask how academics' engagement today with media and cultural policy might be more effective - without our being expected to tell the powerful simply what they want to hear. We are increasingly required by our governments, the funding councils, the research councils and our universities to make our knowledge widely available in the interest, primarily, of economic competitiveness. So today it is both virtuous and necessary to engage in 'knowledge transfer' (KT).

My own experience as one who has sat on boards and occasionally given advice (as well as that reported to me by others with similar kinds of involvement) suggests that knowing the impact of your expertise in the policy domain is actually very difficult. Besides, you may well encounter something the protagonists of impact never face up to, as it would otherwise destroy their belief system. And that is the fact of *knowledge resistance*. In line with the prevailing acronymic order, let us call it KR.<sup>10</sup> To recognise that KR exists raises far-reaching questions about what it is to have an impact and the conditions under which this might occur. If we are really going to be asked to use our knowledge to public benefit, this is surely an honest point of departure for further debate.

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<sup>9</sup> A particularly pertinent *cause célèbre* occurred the day after this lecture was delivered. Professor David Nutt, chairman of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, was dismissed by Alan Johnson, the Home Secretary, because of a difference of view on the classification of drugs. The question of what advisers might say in public was also an issue.

<sup>10</sup> The Nutt Case is an excellent example of this.

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