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Expertise, the academy and the governance of cultural policy

Philip Schlesinger

University of Glasgow, UK

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My research into British cultural policy-making and the so-called creative economy has led me to consider the role of experts in producing the discourse of creativity (Schlesinger 2007; 2009a).¹ To date, the efforts of critics to deconstruct the creative economy have had little effect on its salience as a focus of policy-making (Bustamante (ed.) 2011). Moreover, research on the topic is growing and it is increasingly institutionalised in learning and teaching. One long-standing advocate of the cause, Stuart Cunningham (2009: 375), sees the depth of opposition to the creative economy amongst critical scholars as ‘a textbook case of the disabling gap between policy and critique’. However, rather than academics constituting two opposed camps – those of ‘policy’ and ‘critique’ – in reality, a much more nuanced situation prevails.

The polemical context that dogs the creative economy makes it a particularly apt case for a discussion of the role of academics in ‘cultural governance’. Tony Bennett (2007: 12) has characterised one key feature of this practice as that of ‘producing work that might have an impact on actually existing cultural policies’. Although favouring such interventions by academics, Bennett emphasises that they not should cease ‘to be critical of such policies’ where criticism is merited.

To be a critic as well as a kind of insider raises hard questions about whether one can actually ride two horses at once. Contemporaneous criticism may be limited by the rules of the game into which one has entered – for instance, by observing official secrecy laws or confidentiality agreements. Or – much more subtly – by accepting the trade-offs that arise between obtaining access and the discretion that keeps the field open.

Bennett does not consider such points but focuses instead on the need to criticise official rhetoric that obscures real intentions or undesirable outcomes. It is not clear, however, *when* such criticism occurs or ought to occur. We should also note the term ‘having an impact’ in Bennett’s account because this has assumed a new potency in my own, British, academic context (Collini 2012: ch9). And as I shall seek to show, the emerging regime for evaluating academic research gives a reductive twist to how we may now and in future think about our involvement in advising cultural bodies. The transformation of positive civic engagement into an obligatory demonstration of accountability was certainly not in Bennett’s mind.

If cultural governance is the descriptor *à la mode* then like Molière’s Monsieur Jourdain - who discovered he’d been speaking prose for 40 years without realising it – it appears that unknowingly I have been long involved in the practice. During the past two decades I have advised government departments, a national research council, a legislature and cultural agencies. I currently chair the UK communications regulator Ofcom’s Advisory Committee on Scotland.

Such uses of academic expertise (in this connection, for purposes of cultural governance) are a special case of a general sociology of how intellectuals use their knowledge. To a great extent, current arguments about how to situate intellectuals derive from structural changes in capitalism since World War II and the emergence of a so-called knowledge economy. The growth of the service sector has changed how social science analyses and values expertise.

Thus, in post-industrial mood, during the 1970s Alvin Gouldner (1979) wrote about the putative emergence of a powerful class of symbol-manipulating intellectuals immersed in a ‘culture of critical discourse’. In a more current take, Richard Florida (2002) has celebrated the rise and flight of the ‘creative class’, which has resonated with governments around the world seeking by all means to install competitive creative

economies. Both Gouldner and Florida – like Daniel Bell (1973) before them – have tried to paint new pictures of class and power as industrial society is left increasingly behind.

There is also a discourse more specifically centred on intellectuals' normative roles. For instance, Zygmunt Bauman (1992) has argued that in post-modernity the role of intellectuals has shifted from 'legislator' to 'interpreter', to making sense of cultures while being largely disconnected from power. For his part, Edward Said (1994) has maintained that the choice is either to work inside the power structure or be powerless, celebrating the role of the intellectual as outsider.

Contrary to Bauman, contemporary intellectuals are not all simply interpreters. There is good empirical evidence that the desire to *legislate* for how culture should be shaped through policy remains very powerful in our times as the intellectual work undertaken in building the case for the creative economy shows. Said's all-or-nothing approach to what intellectual life ought to be polarises intellectuals into the co-opted v the free. This schema distorts the actual complexity of how contemporary intellectuals (academics included) address the world of policy and politics.

As it happens, Theodor Adorno (1991: 89) provided a more nuanced view of the role of expertise in cultural policy. He 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'. He also thought that experts working within institutions to pursue culturally progressive ends could – in Bauman's terms - be *legislators* rather than just interpreters. And that is what my own research suggests. Whether the ends pursued are necessarily or invariably 'progressive' is quite another matter.

The creative economy debate is a pertinent illustration of academics' and other intellectuals' undoubted legislative impulse. It relates instructively to the potentially changing scope for academic autonomy due to shifts in the structure of the research economy, of which the UK is an exemplary case.

The creative economy and expertise

From the outset, creative industries policy in the UK emphasised individuals as creators and subordinated culture to economics. It was neo-liberal and pragmatic and by using one comprehensive label aggregated an arbitrary grouping of diverse cultural, communicative and technological practices (DCMS 1998).

This policy framework had preconditions. For instance, it could not have come about without a prior focus on cultural industries by left interventionist projects that aimed to make the nation, city or locality more competitive in the global market place (Garnham 1990 [1984]; Miège 2004 [1984]).

Creative industries policy made in London has now circled the globe and is widely seen as offering a solution to the problem of how to make creativity profitable. Doubt about the efficacy of policy implementation and the data on which it is based has not prevented the rampant diffusion of ideas. There are differences in how variants of creative economy thinking play out in different territories but there is a broadly common agenda to which capitalising on the economic value of culture is central.

Creative industries discourse was developed as a political project of the ‘policy generation’ at the heart of British New Labour in government. Think tanks and other forms of expertise - such as that provided by policy advisers and industry figures – contributed significantly to shaping the policy process. Recognised as accredited experts by those in power, key individuals moved from advocacy in think tanks into positions of strategic influence in politics, media and communications regulation. Researching this theme led me to conclude that we clearly need a renewed focus into the struggle for power and influence by ideas-producers in the policy marketplace. And cultural governance is surely one significant instance.

The sheer pervasiveness of creativity discourse as a synonym for dynamism, growth, talent formation and national renewal has been quite remarkable. Herein lies its attractiveness. It resonates with the ‘new spirit of capitalism’ analysed by Luc Boltanski

and Ève Chiapello (2005). Indeed, there is a striking convergence between recent management and creative industries thinking (Thrift 2006; Bilton and Cummings 2010; Schlesinger 2010).

Over the past fifteen years, British academics have become increasingly involved in the creative industries agenda both as advocates and detractors. In a quite fluid scene, some have worked as consultants and subsequently become academics; others have been academics and also worked as consultants or advisers. Some have been both part-time academics and consultants. Some leading figures, authors of major reports to government, have made their way from journalism, media commentary and elite policy circles into university posts. At times, too, there has been close co-operation between some academics and think tanks and government departments. Thus, the role of policy intellectuals in cultural governance is both demonstrable and also quite complex, with some individuals shifting or combining roles over time. These relations are not easily classifiable as ‘policy’ v ‘critique’.

The sustained interest by successive British governments in the topic means that the process of institutionalising the creative economy agenda in British universities has been notable. For instance, there has been an increased commitment by the UK Research Councils to enterprise-oriented research on the creative economy and the ‘digital economy’. This has been coupled with a particular model of investigation that justifies its relevance to the taxpayer by undertaking what is now called ‘knowledge exchange’. According to one typical definition:

Knowledge exchange is the process by which knowledge, expertise and skilled people exchange between research in universities and their user communities to contribute to economic development, effectiveness of public services, policy and quality of life. (Universities Scotland, 2011: 1)

It is no accident that economic development heads the list. A key initiative by the UK Research Councils has been the establishment of five new university-based centres

around the UK. Four of these are so-called ‘knowledge exchange hubs for the creative economy’ and the fifth is a ‘centre for copyright and new business models for the creative economy’. I must declare an interest. I was involved in leading an unsuccessful, but shortlisted, bid for a ‘knowledge exchange hub’ and, at this time of writing, I am highly involved in implementing the successful bid for the copyright centre.²

These initiatives mobilise significant numbers of academic researchers and organise their connections with a range of enterprises, public bodies and governments. The broad programmatic approach does not necessarily exclude any particular project nor does it preclude the possibility of critique. The driving aim, however, is to build up specific sectors of the national economy in conditions of global competitiveness.

To engage in ‘knowledge exchange’ to this end is not always a simple process. The metaphor evokes a frictionless movement of ideas from one party to another, offering an image of reciprocity and mutual edification. This tends to ignore the fact of ‘knowledge resistance’, where some arguments about policy from advisers are simply unwelcome and therefore discounted (Schlesinger 2009b; Williamson et al 2011). Resistance comes about for a number of reasons – for instance, the defence of economic interests, institutional inertia and the obstructive presence of established intellectual orthodoxies. For those engaged in cultural governance having advice rejected or ignored is not unusual. And of course, this kind of rejection is common across the policy space in general.

As it now looms so large, I would suggest that ‘knowledge exchange’ in the cultural policy field is not only an objective to be pursued at the behest of government and research and funding councils. Because it is so inherently problematic, it is also a highly interesting researchable process whose workings may give us many insights into power relations and the effectiveness of state intervention in the field of cultural governance.

Global governance

The British case is not unique and it is instructive to note how related processes of ideas production and advocacy have made major inroads at the supranational and global levels. The pursuit of a creative economy has indeed become globalised and has entered the sphere of global governance, while being addressed in quite distinctive ways in different places.

For instance, the UN standing Conference on Trade and Development's *Creative Economy Report* (UNCTAD 2008) was intended to be an agenda-changing publication that aimed to extend the debate from the advanced capitalist economies to those of developing states. Today's new world cultural order enjoins us to embrace the creative economy as an aspiration for all, irrespective of the stage of development or regime. Intellectual property is at its heart, there to be both protected and ostensibly to incentivise cultural production.

However, given the major conceptual weight of 'culture' in the UN's mapping of the world (UNESCO 2002) it is not surprising that the eventual model combined 'core cultural industries' with the 'creative industries', each presented as related but distinct.

The first behind-the-scenes steps on the road to the *Creative Economy Report 2008* began in 2004 when a specialist panel in which academics played a role - argued that creativity is '*a ubiquitous asset, present in all countries*'. It set out to '*transform[...] cultural industries into creative industries as developmental forces for change and a new growth opportunity*'. The Panel's goal was to establish the conditions for building creative industries in developing countries and to 'identify a set of national and international policy recommendations' to that end (UNCTAD 2004: 4-5; emphases added).

Around the same time, in 2005, WIPO established its Creative Industries Division 'to provide a focal point for related policy and industry discourse' focused on the 'central role that could be played by intellectual property in enhancing the wealth creation potential of the creative industries sector' (WIPO nd: np).

Typical of a networked international body, WIPO's 'key meetings' over several years reveal first, the *mechanisms* whereby ideas transmission takes place – seminars, conferences, round-tables, expert meetings; and second, the *geographical spread* of such activities. This is how a perspective is globalized in routine institutional practice.

As at the national level, the discourse produced inside the world of global governance is frequently the work of experts seeking practical solutions to problems faced by international organisations (Badaró 2011). The expert sphere is not private but nor is it really public. While reports and working papers are often easily accessible from the web, there are steep costs of entry into being able to make good sense of them, and more importantly, being able to develop a critique and enter into a specialist debate with any hope of having an effect.

The expert space – whether at a global or national level - has become the ready substitute for wider democratic engagement. Inviting consultations from all interested parties in response to the publication of policy documents is often a disingenuous process, as only those with the resources – intellectual capital, money and time – can make a serious response.

Academics and expert space

Over the past three decades, as my illustrative case of the creative economy shows, a significant number of academics have contributed to cultural governance, as an integral part of the wider policy intelligentsia. For the most part, how individuals comport themselves does not easily fit a polar opposition between 'policy' and 'critique'. But the continuing tensions between those polarities do need further discussion.

Most of the policy game plays itself out inside states because these have provided the main framework for pursuing contemporary cultural policy – characteristically, a top-down process of formulation and implementation. Not surprisingly, then, it is precisely

here where the bulk of expert effort is directed and expended because that is still the dominant mode of organisation of policy communities.

Even given such processes as European integration or academic collaboration with international bodies, the politics of cultural policy still mainly operates within national political systems and public spheres – that is, within *states*. Consequently, the state can be a useful analytical framework for many purposes, not least for cultural governance. But we must also recognise the limitations of this approach because the idea of cultural and communications sovereignty is challenged by the existence of global cultural flows and transnational systems of governance.

Under contemporary conditions, academics' policy-relevant expertise has become a key criterion for credible entry into debate. There has been a century-long debate in sociological thought on this question. Walter Lippmann, writing shortly after World War I, endorsed a special place for an intellectual elite in policy making (1961 [1922]). This called for new forms of legitimation, not least reasoned analysis. Subsequently, shortly after World War II, Robert K. Merton (1949: 167) shifted the emphasis towards the ideal of professionalism, to 'the responsible exercise of specialized competence by experts'. Public trust in expertise entailed procedural accountability that must be open to inspection and testing.

In our own time, Michael Schudson (2006: 499-501) has characterised experts as — ideally — speaking truth to power, clarifying the grounds of public debate, and offering a diagnostic service. But this ignores the fact that the acquisition of expertise creates barriers between those with know-how and those without. Experts may lose their critical, democratic edge when faced by the seduction of power and influence. Furthermore, even a well-educated public may not be able to muster the requisite arguments in forms capable of counterbalancing insider know-how. In short, being able to take a critical distance from expertise still matters, given the continuing — and indeed, growing — importance of expert knowledge for the policy process.

In the UK, the pressure to become an expert with a public face is growing inside academia. As elsewhere, the framework of research in which we work is currently greatly shaped by the quest for competitive economic growth and this is in turn increasingly shaping the intellectual agenda. I have already noted the flow of funds to support research and knowledge exchange on the creative economy. There is a further contextual factor I should mention – the potential effects of the UK’s new Research Excellence Framework, or REF.

This is the latest variant of the five-yearly assessment of British academics’ research. The judgements made have two key consequences for every individual and research group in each university. First, the grades awarded for the quality of research have financial implications – the higher the rating, the greater the flow of research funds. Second, and at least as important, the grades received are markers of prestige and crucial both to external marketing and internal morale. A new refinement in 2014 will be to require research groups to submit case studies of the ‘impact’ of their research. This plays a new and significant role in how research is legitimised. ‘Impact’ is defined as ‘an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, *beyond academia...*’ (REF2014, 2011: 48; emphasis added)

This new requirement is already having interesting normative consequences. Academics asked to produce case studies of their work have re-evaluated their own past findings in new ways to fit the criteria. A new cadre of persuaders has found employment as the rhetoricians of impact. Moreover, as the impact agenda will figure in future assessments, we can be quite sure that a significant proportion of projects being designed now and in the future will factor in the new obligation to account for impact in according to the new requirements with consequences for risk and innovation in research yet to be understood.

Conclusion

We should distinguish between two quite different kinds of rationale for expert engagement as a form of cultural governance.

First, under ideal, unconstrained conditions, our research practice would lead us, as a matter of course, to contribute to discussion and deliberation through various forms of public engagement. This might and does include the production and publication of independent research. It might also entail academics joining boards and commissions, supplying expert advice to governments and agencies, advising parliamentary committees, making submissions to public inquiries, offering assistance to civil society organisations, contributing to media and so forth. The key matter in question is the *legitimation* invoked for doing this. Why we might act in such ways has nothing whatsoever to do with the new ‘impact’ agenda. This novel bureaucratic imperative has added a distinctive calculation to activities that have never before been expressly and principally driven by the need to increase university research funding or to secure collective prestige. Rather, for the kinds of public engagement I have already described, the actions taken derive from an interest in the dissemination of knowledge and a commitment – as citizen-academics - to use our knowledge for the general benefit. No-one can guarantee that such activity will have a demonstrable impact. Nor should we have to do so.

Because at least some universities continue to give us the requisite 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 to secure direct or indirect benefits from our advice and especially whether or not material or symbolic reward is a prime motivation for action. This relatively autonomous form of engagement is based on a *pro-active, supply-led model*. Ideal-typically, you develop ideas yourself and you freely offer them to others.

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. That is the pressure that originates in the audit society in which we now all work. In economic and political terms, our funding and public validation come from being seen to hit targets set by increasingly detailed performance indicators. These criteria include the assessment

of the frequency, volume and influence of our publications as well as our universities' international standing and where we sit in national league tables. There is, furthermore, in the shape of the impact agenda, an intensifying officially-policed obligation to help public agencies, commerce, business and industry, and also 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*. Ideal-typically, you produce research and engage in knowledge exchange in line with what is requested in order to justify your existence. Public intellectuality, therefore, is wanted but only on certain, quite instrumental, terms.

Today, therefore, the normative model of autonomous intellectuality – the ideal of freedom of thought – is in increasing tension with the dominant system- and market-driven model of the knowledge class. The first model (that of freedom) is increasingly being displaced by the second (that of necessity). Indeed, the demands of necessity have become normative: they're settled in our very bones. Can we at various times be certain which norms we're obeying? Are we thinking for ourselves or for someone else? Or – more likely – doing both, sometimes simultaneously and sometimes sequentially?

It is clear – contrary to Zygmunt Bauman – that some academics *do* still seek legislative power. They aren't just interpreters. And, if the impact agenda becomes more widespread, we can be confident that many more will be driven by bureaucratic necessity rather than by intellectual or civic conviction into attempts at cultural governance.

It is plain that our paymasters' demand to justify the impact of what we do will intensify, rather than slacken. But this pressure occurs under rather paradoxical conditions. My own experience – and that of others - suggests that being able to demonstrate the impact of your expertise in any given policy domain is actually very difficult. Ignoring this, the dominant discourse celebrates only efficacious knowledge exchange. This banishes any serious consideration of knowledge resistance. Consequently, a major challenge will be

to find novel ways of ensuring that inconvenient truths circulate with significant effect in the public domain.

Corresponding author:

Philip Schlesinger, Centre for Cultural Policy Research, University of Glasgow, 9 University Avenue,
Glasgow G12 8QQ, Scotland, UK.
Email: philip.schlesinger@glasgow.ac.uk

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Notes

¹ This is a highly abridged version of a central session paper presented at the VII International Conference on Cultural Policy Research, Barcelona, 9-12 July 2012. I have picked up from and developed earlier reflections in Schlesinger 2001 and 2009b.

² This is called CREATE, the Centre for Creativity, Regulation, Enterprise and Technology. Established in October 2012, it is a consortium of seven UK universities, headquartered at the University of Glasgow.