

*Making and demonstrating
research impact in an era of
austerity*

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It is now more important than ever to demonstrate how social research can make a difference to effective strategy, policy and practice. Arguably the role of social research becomes more important to guide practice in an era of austerity than one of affluence

(SRA 2010).

My agenda

- Challenge of making an impact in an era of austerity
- Implications of increased need to demonstrate that social research is making a difference

Challenge of making an impact
in an era of austerity

What sort of impact?

Assisting policy decisions

Evidence-based policies “more likely to be better informed, more effective and less expensive”

(Campbell et al 2007)

Resisting policy decisions

We should be wary of 'single narratives'. At present, the 'single narrative' that denies public debate and questioning is that we are in an economic 'crisis' so deep as to demand substantial cuts to the welfare state (Saville Kushner 2010)

Assisting decision making: conducive policy environments

The 4 I's

Research more likely to be used when ***information, ideology*** and ***interests*** coincide and ***institutions*** can support developments (Weiss)

Information

- Paucity of research that addresses key policy and practice questions - particularly cost-effectiveness/ cost-benefit questions
- Better at understanding and illuminating problems rather than identifying solutions

Ideology

- Research evidence low in politicians' hierarchy of evidence even before the economic crisis

Policy Makers' Hierarchy of Evidence

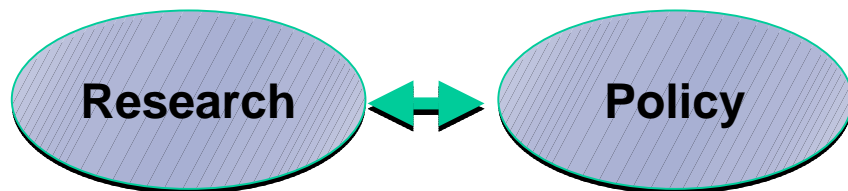
- 'Experts' evidence (incl. consultants and think tanks)
- Opinion-based evidence (incl. pressure groups)
- Ideological 'evidence' (incl. party think tanks)
- Media evidence
- Internet evidence
- Lay evidence (constituents', citizens' experiences)
- 'Street' evidence (urban myths, accepted wisdom)
- Cabbie's evidence
- **Research Evidence**

Source: Phil Davies, 2007

Ideology

- Research evidence low in politicians' hierarchy of evidence even before the economic crisis
- And politicised decision making more likely at times of crisis (Peters 2011)

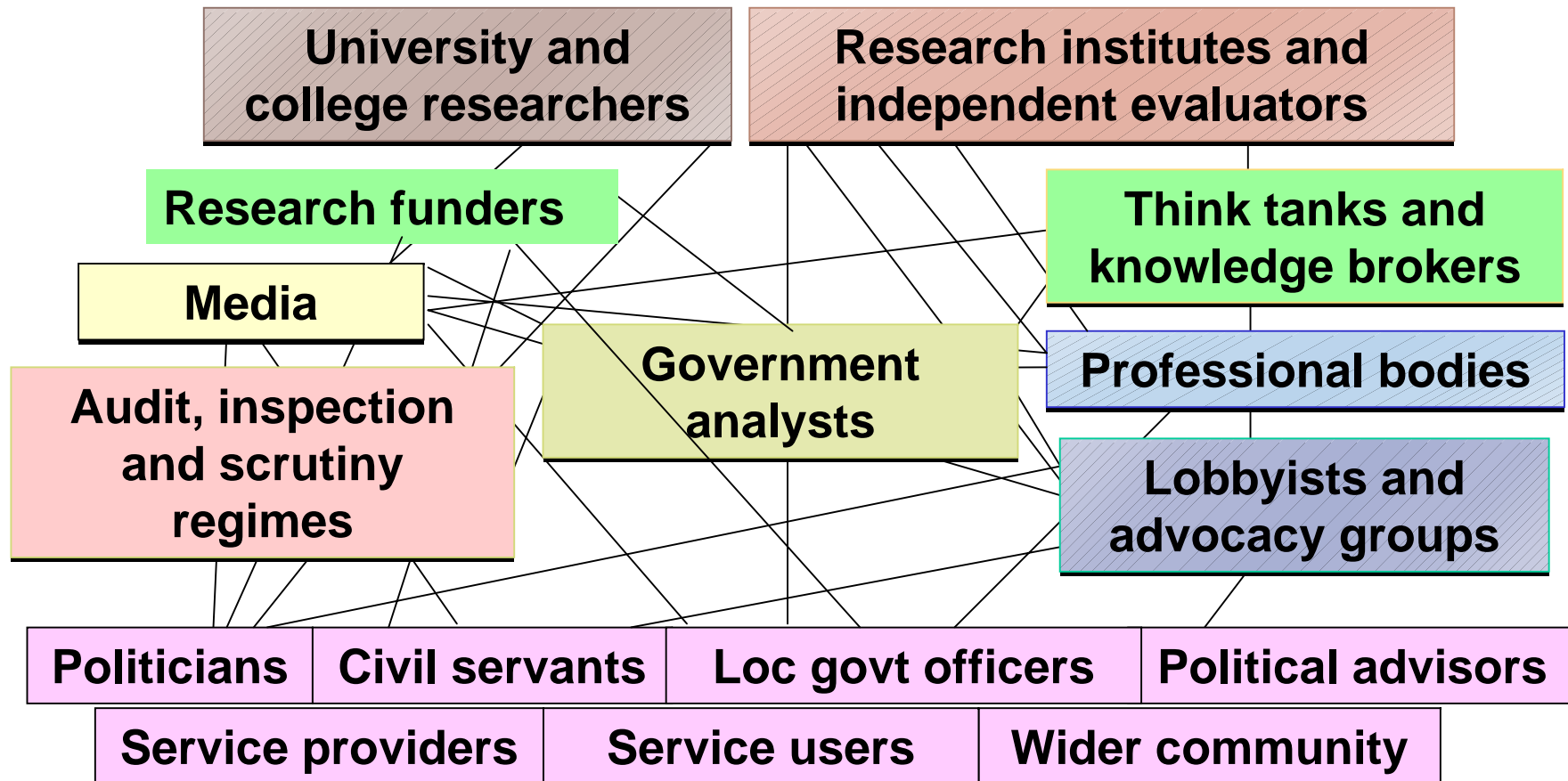
Interests: challenge of linking two worlds?



- **Divergent**
 - interests, priorities, incentives, language, dynamics
 - conceptions of knowledge and time-scales
 - status and power
- **Leading to**
 - communication difficulties
 - mismatch between supply and demand
 - rejection and implementation failure

But many players in research use process

Multiple interests and many connections



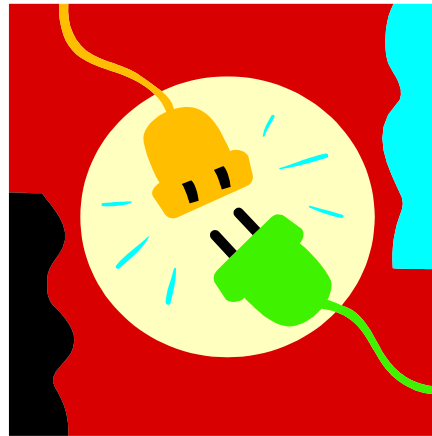
Institutions

- Budget cuts may reduce the capacity of institutions to support research-informed policy and practice

Improving research use: addressing supply, demand, and that in between

Improving stocks or reservoirs of research-based knowledge

Reduction in research and evaluation funds



Reduced time for linkage & exchange

Reduced demand for research-based knowledge?

Increasing demand in political and professional worlds, and wider society

Improving research use: addressing supply, demand, and that in between

Improving stocks or reservoirs of research-based knowledge

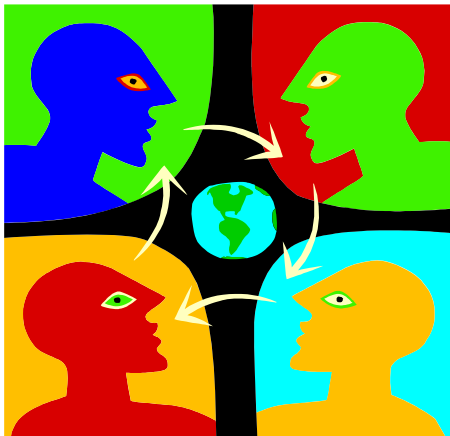
Research translation, knowledge management and knowledge pools, research brokering and boundary spanning, co-location, secondments and role cycling, partnerships of all kinds, sustained interactivity...

Increasing demand in political and professional worlds, and wider society

We need to...



Move away from ideas of 'packaging' knowledge and enabling knowledge transfer – recognise instead:



- The importance of ***context***
- ***Interaction*** with other types of knowledge (tacit; experiential)
- Multi-voiced ***dialogue***
- 'Use' as a ***process*** not an event

Generic features of effective practices to increase research impact

- **Research must be translated** - adaptation of findings to specific policy and practice contexts
- **Enthusiasm**- of key individuals - personal contact is most effective
- **Contextual analysis** - understanding and targeting specific barriers to, and enablers of, change
- **Credibility** - strong evidence from trusted source, inc. endorsement from opinion leaders
- **Leadership** - within research impact settings
- **Support** - ongoing financial, technical & emotional support
- **Integration** - of new activities with existing systems and activities

Conclusions - part 1

- There are increasing challenges facing researchers who wish to make an impact on public policy and practice
- But crisis decision-making also tends to unsettle existing patterns of policy making and create opportunities for innovation and learning
- Researchers need to focus on providing compelling ideas and telling persuasive stories to make use of these opportunities

Implications of increased need to demonstrate
that social research is making a difference

Implications and issues 1

- Who needs to assess research impact?
 - Research funders
 - Government social researchers
 - Research centres/ institutes
 - Individual researchers
- Can/ should they collaborate more on this?

Implications and issues 2

- Will impact assessment have the desired effect on researchers and research?
 - Will better incentives for applied research improve the stock of knowledge provided by universities?
 - Or will research funds increasingly be targeted on short term and low risk projects?
 - How do we safeguard serendipity, critique and paradigm challenging research?

Implications and issues 3

- Are our research impact assessment methods and tools up to the task?
 - Attribution and additionality problems – constructing a convincing impact narrative
 - Receptivity of context – accounting for the difference between actual and potential impacts

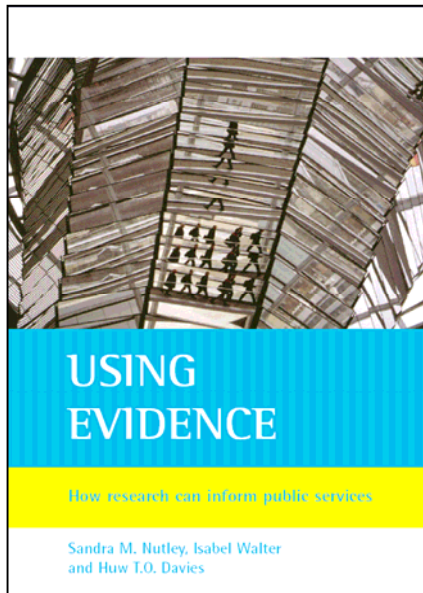
Implications and challenges 4

- Does the need to justify research funding mean that impact boundaries will be drawn too narrowly?
 - What types of use/impacts are of interest - instrumental, conceptual, symbolic impacts?
 - Are we interested in *processes* (extent and nature of research use) as well as *outcomes* (actual consequences of that use)?
 - Will we track *all* impacts: expected/unexpected? (and what about ‘unfortunate uptakes’ and other dysfunctional responses?)

Conclusions – part 2

- The increased emphasis on research impact should be welcomed
- But there are potential dysfunctional consequences that we need to avoid

Want to find out more?



*Using Evidence: How research can inform
public services*
(Nutley, Walter and Davies, Policy Press, 2007)

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