

4 Publishing Beyond the Academy

4.1 Policy writing: to, for and against

Anthony Bebbington

The pressure on geographers to be ‘relevant’ seems – for good or ill – to be increasing. In the UK, for example, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) asks us to identify the beneficiaries of our research and our plans for ‘user engagement’ when applying for grants. My own university – like others I presume – includes ‘knowledge transfer’ or ‘knowledge exchange’ as one of its measures of staff performance; and more generally our universities are under scrutiny to demonstrate (and if possible generate revenue from) their contributions to society. Engaging policy is but one way of addressing this question of relevance. What follows are thoughts on issues that arise when one writes with a view to ‘policy relevance’ (also see Box 7).

First, not all policy is public policy, and not all public policy is government policy. Governments, NGOs, social movements, businesses, and international agencies all have policies and these are, often, oriented towards the concerns of different groups in society and reflect distinct visions of how things should be. Some are more ‘public’ in orientation, others less so. Indeed, there can be serious disagreements between the policies of different actors, and researchers have to choose which of these positions to support and which to resist. In this sense there is really little difference between engaging policy and engaging advocacy – they are different sides of the same coin.

Second, in being ‘policy relevant’ one can write *for*, *to* and *against* policy. You can be part of a process preparing policy documents; you can write materials with a view to contributing to the preparation of policy statements that other people are writing; and you can write with a view to challenging and disagreeing with policies, again in the hope of influencing them. While the position from which one writes in each of these cases differs, they each share the challenge of writing in ways that will resonate with the ways in which policy framers and makers think and speak.

Third, writing for, to and against policy demands a certain style. Once, when writing one particular piece for a policy influencing NGO, I was told to write something a policy maker could read in the bath in 20 minutes. I don’t actually believe things are this basic. Policy writing can have considerable substance, and can and should involve complex ideas. Long documents (with good executive summaries) can also have an influence. However, the style needs to avoid our discipline’s pet words and terms, needs to be engaging and needs to show links between analysis and action. This does not mean the writing must always say ‘what should be done’ (though you will often be asked that) – but it does mean that the policy framer and maker must be able to see the links between what is written and the range of courses and domains of action that are open to them.

Fourth, the more that one writes *for* policy, and from within policy making bodies, the more likely it is that documents will be produced by teams. It is rare that you will write them alone. Moreover, the more formal the reports, the more they will be subject to review not only on grounds of substance, but also by teams from External Affairs and even Legal Departments. The changes that will be made to the language you initially used, and decisions about what can and cannot be said, can be painful. Often these changes can be negotiated and argued over, but you will lose more of these arguments than you will win. Such experiences make clear the sense in which, when writing in these sorts of institutional domain, you have to let go of what you write in a far more profound sense than when writing for an academic journal.

Engaging policy in these different ways is both frustrating and rewarding (and I suspect it is rarely only one or the other). The frustration comes from being ignored, from having your ideas adapted in ways with which you feel less than comfortable and from having to argue your case without being able to take as given many of the terms and preconceptions one might often take for granted when engaging like-minded geographers. The rewards are also many, and derive from having your writing read, considered and above all taken seriously by policy communities. Two particular rewards stand out. First, one gets to engage on a deeper level the people working in these communities – and many of them are brilliant, incisive and, not least, decent human beings. They have much to say that contributes to our own work and the ways in which we frame our research – their contributions often differ from those made by our academic colleagues. Second, one is given some insight into how particular policy making, framing and advocacy processes work in practice – the lessons are often very subtle and rich.

In everything that geographers write, the risk we run is that once the words are in print, they can be used and interpreted in ways we never intended or anticipated. In this sense writing for policy is much the same as the other writing geographers do. If there is a difference, perhaps it lies in the extent to which such policy writing has to assume a language and style that make it accessible to a wider range of users, which increases both the risks and potential rewards that are at stake.

Box 7: Walking the tight-rope: postgraduate experiences of publishing a policy report

Friederike Ziegler

My doctoral research involved participatory research on daily mobility and social exclusion for older people in County Durham. It was funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council as part of its CASE funding scheme, which involves a partnership with an external funding partner. As part of the initial agreement with

my CASE funding partner (Age Concern), I consented to write a project report with findings of the study. The report was to be a balanced but detailed account of factors that influence older peoples daily mobility from their perspectives. The aim was to improve the understanding of policy-makers and planners of the older peoples' service requirements locally and nationally. After discussions with my supervisors who have experience in writing reports and after having read some other policy reports I developed the structure and form of my own report which was entitled 'Getting Around' (available on www.ageconcern-durham.org.uk). The general contents and layout were discussed with Age Concern, but they had little input into the report at this stage (for later feedback see below).

Writing this report turned out to be quite a challenge for a number of reasons:

- 1 Various audiences:** The potential audiences for the report were policy-makers on a local and national level; voluntary organisations; local service providers; community organisations; older people (including the research participants) and the general public. There were pragmatic considerations to be taken into account. For instance the report provided a brief summary and overview of the findings as well as 'implications for practice'. Many policy-makers and professionals have little time to read a twenty-page report, so the summaries gave those individuals the most important information 'at a glance'. In addition, I provided an appendix with all comments made by participants village by village, in order to provide local service providers with a basis for improvements and action. To make the main part of the report more readable and interesting, participants' quotes were interspersed, adding authentic voices to illustrate the description and analysis. The final report was distributed to all participants, as well as professionals dealing with services that affect older people such as policy-makers and planners on County and District levels (e.g. transport), Primary Care Trusts, Social Services and voluntary organisations.
- 2 The participatory process:** An important part of the participatory approach of this research involved feedback sessions with participants and funding partners in order to give them an opportunity to comment on the draft report and request additions or changes (see Section 4.3 for more on publishing from participatory research). Participants made few changes to the document, except for requesting that the general language and tone of the report be changed from being 'gloomy' about decline in mobility in old age, to being positive about the active and enjoyable lives that most older people have. The resulting changes did not appeal to the funding partner because of their own agenda.

3 Hidden agendas and compromises: The funding partner's intention was to use the research findings to support applications for funding from statutory agencies to provide much-needed services to older people. This agenda required older people to be portrayed as in need of support, which conflicted with participants' own positive portrayal of their lives. As a compromise I agreed to add a special section to the report, which gave an account of the lives and specific needs of participants with physical disabilities or sensory impairments. The report was initially to be about 20 pages long but in the end contained 30 pages with the requested additions and appendices.

Although writing a report from a collaborative and participatory research project can be challenging, I found it a worthwhile and positive experience. The funding partner as well as policy-makers, service providers and planners showed interest in the project findings reported, and some have taken action in line with the recommendations. The report also demonstrated to research participants that their input had been taken seriously and participants themselves told me that they found the report an interesting and enjoyable read.

4.2 Geography and the media: a personal experience

Klaus Dodds

The first time my name and research interests appeared in the national media was in January 1993. I was, at the time, finishing off my PhD thesis at the University of Bristol and working on a geopolitical analysis of Anglo-Argentine competition in the South Atlantic and Antarctic. A member of the organising staff attached to the 1993 IBG annual conference (now the RGS-IBG) informed me that a journalist from *The Times* was interested to hear about my conference presentation. The subject matter was the 1982 Falklands War and he was intrigued in part because of the high level of media interest recently engendered by the 10th anniversary of that conflict (i.e. 1992). The following day a short piece appeared about my talk. It was a salutary experience.

It was instructive for a number of reasons. First, it was extremely flattering as a graduate student to be interviewed by a senior journalist from a well-known newspaper. It helped my self-confidence no end. Second, the actual content of the piece bore limited resemblance to the content of my presentation. The journalist in question was not present in the audience and I had spoken to him a day in advance. Journalists, as I was to learn later, are frequently working against tight deadlines and are eager for a simple but effective story and associated headline. Third, I discovered that there was little point in talking about my

theoretical interests. I was forced to speak concisely and simply without any reference to geopolitical jargon. Finally, I learnt that the media are highly sensitive to anniversaries in general.

Over the next fifteen years, I have written and presented on Radio 3 and 4, appeared on national television and radio in the UK and beyond, written a regular column for the *Geographical Magazine* and appeared, often without my consent and knowledge, on a host of internet sites, some media-related and some not. From my own experience there are a number of ways in which you can engage with the media. One of the most important things to understand is that radio, television and newspaper journalists are working with very different kinds of mediums with corresponding institutional and professional constraints.

There are at least three ways of developing your engagement with the media. First, with the help of a media professional (and all universities have a press office of some sort, as do learned societies such as the RGS-IBG), you can develop a series of press briefings, which are short summary pieces of your research. They are usually never more than one side of A4 in length and attempts to summarise in an interesting and accessible manner the subject in question. They have to be 'eye-catching' in terms of a dramatic finding, a striking quote, or perhaps something that is simply counter-intuitive. In other words, you thought you knew everything about said topic but my research completely reverses or overturns received wisdom. Timing can also be critical – a major anniversary is always helpful in raising public interest in general. The briefing must be accessible and at the bottom of the summary correct contact details are clearly essential. In my experience, journalists send a quick email or phone directly and then will make a judgement as to whether to pursue the potential story.

Another way of raising your media profile and subject matter is simply to write a letter to a national newspaper about a topical subject, that you have some claim to knowledge or insight. Recently, I wrote a letter to the *Guardian* about a piece about the Antarctic, which they headlined 'Icy imperialism'. After the letter was published, Canadian, German and Scottish radio broadcasters contacted me about the story and I was later invited to participate on a television show put out by the Iranian government funded Press TV. There was a downside, as a representative from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office was less pleased with me for my contribution to a debate that s/he thought was unduly 'sensationalised'. From my point of view, the original letter presented me with a surprising opportunity to talk more widely about the Antarctic from a geopolitical and geographical viewpoint.

The final way, which I recommend, is making sure you liaise with your university's press office and ensure that you feature in any experts' directory that exists. This is a great way to ensure that interested journalists can see quickly who might be able to comment or participate in a particular feature. Journalists are always up against it in terms of deadlines and you need to be accessible and capable of responding to short deadlines.

Media exposure is fun and occasionally financially rewarding as well. But like most things in life can also be double-edged – it might well jar with a more academic manner of speaking and writing. And you might not even be described as a geographer – according to BBC radio staff I am a geopolitical historian.

Box 8: For your eyes only... not any more! Writing for different readerships

Alasdair Pinkerton

For almost twenty years of my formal education, from primary school to PhD, the act and art of 'writing' was consistently emphasised as the key means of expressing scholarly thoughts, opinions and critical reflections. And yet besides the occasional schoolboy treatise or student newspaper article these creative expressions were locked into a private dialogue between student and teacher. Writing was safe, secure, and absolutely not in the public domain. This was writing with a safety net...and it doesn't last forever.

For me, the safety net was removed in late 2005 when, as part of an ESRC initiative, I was awarded a placement within the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST). The aim was to intensively research the lively issue of 'pervasive computing' – an active subject within Information Technology, with significant privacy, safety and environmental implications – and produce a four-page briefing document highlighting all the major policy areas affected. The audience could, in theory, be any interested party, but 'POSTnote' briefings were aimed at busy politicians who wanted a brief overview of contemporary science and technology issues. Sentences were to be short and punchy. "Think *Daily Mail*", I was told, "maximum fourteen words per sentence". The information had to be clear, removed of technical jargon, and grounded with case studies. And yet it also had to reflect the complexities of the subject matter, and the viewpoints of multiple – often diametrically opposed – stakeholders. The challenge was enormous, and the learning curve was greater still. These early lessons, though, have proved invaluable.

Lesson number one: Think about *audiences*. Politicians, it was made clear, demand a very different kind of writing than do academic geographers and I had to learn to constrain any discussions of purely theoretical interest. Much like when communicating with journalists, writing for policy-makers demands a brevity and cogency rarely found in academic journals. This is not to say that the ideas and issues under discussion have to be simple and/or simplified; only that the writing has to relay complexities in a straightforward, transparent, and (ideally) eye-catching way. This is especially important when promoting your research in

the form of press briefings/releases. As my university's press officer reminded me recently, these should be no longer than one side of A4 with a clear and logical structure. Most importantly, though, they should be intriguing to the journalistic imagination. When I was drafting a press briefing to promote a conference commemorating seventy-five years of the BBC World Service, for example, it was clear the timeliness of the anniversary would provide instant media appeal. Details of my own conference presentation, meanwhile, keyed into the media's fascination with 'the unexpected' by highlighting the counter-intuitive results of my research.

Lesson number two: *know your publications*. In the course of my writing so far I have found myself developing multiple 'voices' tailored both to discrete audiences (academic, political, professional) and a range of different publications. But really 'getting to know' these publications – especially academic journals – can be an intimidating process. Senior academics tend to talk about Editors like old friends (as often they are), while rarefied discussions over the 'tactics' and 'strategies' of publishing in the 'right' journals can give the impression of intellectual exclusivity and an academic 'clubiness'. In my experience, though, these discussions will very quickly begin to make more sense as your exposure to the 'journal landscape' develops. In the twelve months since passing my PhD I have submitted four papers to journals across a range of academic disciplines – from human geography and South Asian studies, to twentieth century British history. This was in part a considered 'strategy' to try and share my research – itself interdisciplinary in nature – with a wide potential readership. It also reflected rather less lofty, but equally important, concerns over publishing schedules, 'stylistic fit' and (as a new researcher) the opportunity to be considered for essay prizes. With each new submission my understanding of journal processes – particularly the provision of reviewer comments and/or amendments – has been significantly enhanced, which leads me to...

Lesson number three: *have confidence in your own abilities*. It is very easy to feel down heartened when you receive reviewer comments from an academic or parliamentary publication. It may appear that your long-toiled-over work has been picked to the bones, condemning you to months of revisions. From my experience, it is almost never that bad. Reviewer feedback has been, in general, fundamentally positive and constructive, and frequently points to a number of specific areas for improvement. That is not to say that I have agreed with all the 'improvements' suggested, many of which have been – courteously, professionally and with an air of confidence – acknowledged, and put aside for another occasion.

Writing for publication has involved a steep learning curve, while demanding a good dose of self-confidence and a willingness to really think about the audiences and publications involved. It has proved daunting, but also profoundly rewarding. My parliamentary POSTnote, for example, has been used as the basis for a debate in the House of Lords, and I recently heard that one of my papers has been short listed for a journal's essay prize. *For Your Eyes Only?* Not any more!

4.3 Publishing from participatory research

mrs c. kinpaisby-hill

What is participatory and collective writing for publication?

Writing for publication defines academic life and is increasingly the key to success in the academy. Even where scholars collaborate, the prevailing *modus operandi* is for academics to design research, control and administer data collection 'in the field', and then return to their institutes to analyse findings, write papers and manoeuvre over name order.

Increasingly, those working on issues of social and environmental equality and justice find this model inadequate. Critical and feminist geographers have suggested that its extractive, hierarchical procedures bring benefits only to researchers: "a conversation of 'us' with 'us' about 'them'" that can actually reinforce structural and social inequalities (Cahill and Torre, 2007: 196). Moreover, traditional academic publication is a slow and arguably ineffective means to pursue the kind of social changes that radical scholars and their research participants would like to see.

Participatory approaches are gaining popularity in geography as one response to concerns about representation, accountability and power imbalances in research. They shift the usual terms of engagement by facilitating a collaborative process of knowledge production, which empowers participants to orient research towards their own needs and social change. Transformation in the process of conducting research forces a rethink about the audiences, purposes and nature of research products, and unsettles the canon of elite academic publication by asking: who owns the research; who should write/represent the knowledge generated; who is the audience and how might new audiences be engaged; in what language (in all senses) should we write/disseminate; how will the research provoke action? In response to these questions, participatory geographers are experimenting with radically different styles of collective authoring, and producing research products jointly with participants/partners.

Being the change you want to see

All knowledge is collectively produced, whether this is explicitly recognised or not. Participatory writing for publication and collaborative authorship challenge the conventions of academic publishing that celebrate individual authorship and assume that 'lone scholarship' is possible and more meritorious.

Janet Townsend (Townsend *et al.*, 1995 – published in English and Spanish) co-authored one of the earliest examples of a geographical book composed with non-academic research partners, and which aimed to address both academic and lay audiences. However, there is an increasing commitment to co-present conference papers and co-author journal articles and book chapters with non-academic research partners (see many chapters in Kindon *et al.*, 2007). Such participatory publications reflect the reciprocity and diverse contributions of research collectives: each contributor provides forms of expertise and access particular media and audiences, which strengthens the quality and reach of the research.

As citation indices rapidly become the new currency and journal prices soar, now is a good moment to make a stand against accepted regimes of publication. In one attempt to 'be the change we want to see' (one of Gandhi's principles), Mrs C. Kinpaisby-Hill draws strength from the feminist traditions that underlie her understandings of participatory approaches, and gains inspiration from the collectivist spirit of the Women and Geography Study Group (1997) and 'J. K. Gibson-Graham' (e.g. 2005). Our adoption of this disarmingly quaint *nom de guerre* is a serious invitation to try and play the citation game in ways that resist its disciplinary effects, while gesturing to the transformative potential of participatory ways of working (see Kesby *et al.*, 2008).

Participatory research productions 'beyond the journal article'

Participatory research can generate so much more than (even collectively authored) journal articles. A range of strategies have been used by participatory geographers such as reports, websites, video, photovoice, art, drama, posters, newsletters and campaign materials, and they inform wider audiences *and* affect change in ways that journal articles rarely do. For example, Rachel Pain and her young research partners co-authored a report for policy-makers and other young people, created a website, developed role plays and a workshop to raise awareness about the issues that affect them, and created a piece of public art. Caitlin Cahill and The Fed Up Honeys created a range of outputs including stickers posted around their neighbourhood to raise awareness and challenge racist and gendered stereotyping. Meanwhile Sara Kindon and Geoff Hume-Cook are working with Ngāti Hauiti, a Māori tribe, to collaboratively edit a documentary for tribal history purposes. In addition, Meghan Cope and Pamela Wridt have written reports *with* children to influence policy. There are many compelling reasons to engage in processes of participatory writing and publication (see Table 3), and perhaps the real challenge of a participatory approach to research is to stretch it to

include publication 'beyond the journal article' (Cahill and Torre, 2007: 196), as well as more traditional academic publications co-authored with research participants (see question 5.10 in Section 5 FAQ on preparing a Memorandum of Understanding or Standards of Engagement with research collaborators).

Table 3: Six reasons for participatory publications

- 1 They can improve academic scholarship, rigour, validity and the 'fit' of theory; outputs become negotiated texts, reflecting a broader range of experiences, voices, expertise and knowledge.

- 2 They involve reciprocity and a re-balancing of the benefits of research (i.e. not only strengthening academic careers, institutions and priorities.) They formally recognise the time and expertise participants contribute to making research projects work.

- 3 They address the political issue of representation, allowing people to self-represent, opening up conferences and academic debate to the informed opinions of a wider range of people, and offering one route for addressing class, race and gender-based inequalities in knowledge construction.

- 4 They explicitly acknowledge that we are never 'lone scholars' and that *all* knowledge is collectively produced.

- 5 They challenge the predominance of competitive and individualistic career paths, and are part of the movement to disrupt academic institutional structures that favour certain types and outputs of scholarship as proxies for quality.

- 6 They can involve alternative output formats which go beyond and/or sideline mainstream publishers who remain profit-driven and far from participatory.

While collective writing and participatory publications are desirable, they remain a difficult and challenging prospect. The process requires genuine alliances and commitment to negotiate differences in priorities, interpretations, use of time and so on, and necessary compromises may not always yield radical results. Undoubtedly there are also risks involved in breaking the rules of the citation game that privilege publication of single-authored articles in elite journals. Nevertheless, with a suitable degree of critical reflexivity, collaborative publishing from participatory research can address some of the issues of representation and accountability that have vexed critical geographers for some time.