Analysts, Advocates and Applicators – Understanding and engaging with different actors in the evidence for policy movement

Superficially connecting evidence to policy might seem like singular process that brings together different actors towards a common end. However, drawing on a qualitative study of professionals in the evidence – policy field, **Jasper Montana** *and* **James Wilsdon** *present a new taxonomy for understanding the different groups working at this intersection and advise how researchers might engage with them effectively at different stages of their research.*

Sooner or later, academic researchers who get involved in policy engagement are likely to encounter a quirk of the field. On the one hand, those working to strengthen the uptake of evidence in policy appear part of an 'evidence movement'; on the other, they are often divided by disagreements about terminology, methodology, and the when, how and what of policy impact.

How can we make sense of this concurrent unity and division that characterises the field?

In a new study of these dynamics in the UK research system, we argue that we need to start with a recognition that there are different problem definitions at play. These different perceptions of the evidence and policy problem map onto different roles that are enacted by those working in the field, whether researchers, practitioners or policy professionals. Drawing on work by Maarten Hajer on environmental politics, we describe these as three 'discourse coalitions': the analysts; the advocates; and the applicators.

Meet the analysts

The analytical coalition wants to understand and describe the 'reality' of evidence and policy relations. Through research or personal observations, they are interested in working out what kinds of evidence matter and how this evidence is used in policy making. Analysts are interested in the explanatory power of different conceptualisations of evidence and policy relations. So, for example, they see the difference between the term 'evidence-based policy' and 'evidence-informed policy' as significant, because these describe different sets of relations, only one of which might be considered an accurate depiction of real-world processes.

Meet the advocates

By contrast, the advocacy coalition is more prescriptive in how it engages with evidence and policy relations. Advocates are typically focused on prescribing idealised evidence and policy relations that they want to see in place. Advocates might call for evidence-based policy as an ideal, rather than empirically examine it as an observable fact. They often refine and promote evidence methodologies—such as randomised control trials or evidence synthesis—as trusted products, perhaps within a particular organisation such as the Campbell Collaboration or UK What Works Network. The intention here is both to improve the production of evidence according to standardised procedures and promote its uptake and use in policy making.

Meet the applicators

Finally, the application coalition is largely agnostic about both the merits of different kinds of evidence and how they get into policy making. Instead, the focus of applicators is enabling and facilitating evidence and policy interactions to meet the context required. According to our interviewees, applicators deploy a 'toolbox' of techniques to make evaluative choices about appropriate evidence depending on the policymaking conditions.

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The three discourse coalitions of evidence and policy are not discrete or fixed. They can encompass any professional in the evidence and policy field, from academics to science advisors, and single individuals may be engaged in all three at different times.

Sir Peter Gluckman, for example, – who we interviewed for this study – primarily fulfilled the role of applicator in his role as the former Prime Minister's Chief Science Advisor of New Zealand. However, he is also frequently an analyst making contributions to understanding the workings of the evidence and policy, as well as an advocate through his founding of the International Network for Government Science Advice (INGSA), which refines and promotes knowledge and capacity for scientific advice around the world.

Indeed, it is difficult to fulfil any of these roles without also having some level of experience or understanding in the others. They are interactional and often mutually supporting.

So, what are the implications for researchers looking to engage with policy?

Academic researchers are increasingly expected to conduct policy engagement as part of their work. And there is no shortage of 'how to' guides offering useful tips on how to go about doing so.

What this study hopefully adds are some insights into the roles that one might encounter at different times in engaging research with policy.

For a researcher, getting started in this field may involve reading about how evidence and policy relations work. At this point, drawing a distinction between analysts and advocates is likely to be important. Both are important parts of the evidence and policy field and they often write in the same academic journals. However, recognising the difference between the two can help avoid mistaken assumptions about how evidence uptake happens in practice.

Understanding evidence and policy relations can be greatly aided by reading and listening to the work of analysts who seek to describe the 'reality' of evidence and policy relations. While many analysts are also current academics, it is important to recognise that policy professionals can also be analysts, and can offer many valuable insights from experience that may not feature in the academic literature.

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Researchers might also seek out advocates as useful sources of information and support—particularly in developing outputs according to specific evidence methodologies, such as evidence synthesis. Engaging with the work of advocates who promote particular evidence methodologies, or set out ideals of how evidence should be used in policy, can help researchers apply these approaches in practice. Some advocates also form part of brokerage organisations, such as the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, which offers opportunities to create POSTNotes as a particular form of evidence input to policy.

Finally, researchers may partner with, or even become, an applicator themselves. According to our interviewees, applicators operate on the 'front line' of evidence and policy relations. They typically need to master a wide array of approaches of working with evidence in policy and have the political nous to know when each is appropriate. Researchers working with applicators are likely to require patience and recognise that one's preferred way of doing things is not always the most effective way.

Academics seeking to support the 'evidence movement' need to recognise both a common purpose to improve the uptake and use of evidence in policy, but also accept the inevitable difference in approaches that will help in achieving this aim.

Fostering mutual understanding of the roles that people play in the evidence and policy field, and how they can support researchers to do more effective policy engagement in different ways, is an important step in further strengthening the field.

This post draws on the authors' article, Analysts, advocates and applicators: three discourse coalitions of UK evidence and policy, published in Evidence and Policy.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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