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Academics, think tanks and journalists: The trouble with expert opinion, empirical evidence and bilingual education

Lisa Waller

Public servants and journalists have some things in common: for both fields a strong 'evidence base' is a mantra for good professional practice. Both groups look to independent 'experts' including academics to provide or verify the evidence they rely on; however, this evidence-based approach can present challenges. Our project focuses on news media and the policy process, and this has involved investigating the relationships between journalists and their sources, including academics. That relationship is the focus of this essay, but I want to begin by underlining that is not the only uneasy relationship we have encountered along the way. The same kinds of uneasiness that are evident at times between journalists and academics can be seen in the relationship between policymakers and academics, and between policymakers and journalists, as well.

In his discussion of the problems of evidence-based policy, former Productivity Commission head Gary Banks (2009) described cultural differences between public servants and academics. He said there was a perception among senior public servants that academics can be very hard 'to do business with' or that they are too slow, or lack an appreciation of the 'real world'. He said, while there may be some validity in these perceptions, they may also reflect an unrealistic view by public servants of how much time is needed to do good research; and perhaps a lack of planning. Perhaps also a desire for greater 'predictability' in upholding a certain viewpoint than many academics would be willing to countenance.

The literature on journalists and their sources has long emphasised the importance of 'experts' and empirical evidence in the construction of credible news (Lippmann, 1921). Some journalists in our study underlined this. The Australian's Tony Koch, commenting on coverage of bilingual education in the Northern Territory, said:

... [you've] got to include them, the evidenced-based and outcomes based. I mean — you can't waste money and people's time and people's lives on bullshit stuff that's not evidence-based.

Language activists said there is a wealth of international and Australian research that provides evidence of the benefits of bilingual education for Indigenous children who start school only speaking their mother tongues, and this is reflected in the literature (Grimes, 2009). However, academic commentators (Devlin, 2010; Hoogenraad, 2001; Nicholls, 1994; Simpson, Caffery & McConvell, 2009) and some study participants say this substantial body of evidence was largely overlooked by politicians and the news media in 1998–99 and again in 2008–09, when they announced the Northern Territory's bilingual education programs would be set aside, without research or consultation with affected communities. Furthermore, participants said that in 2008 the news media did not probe the evidence for the policy change cited by the government, or seek comment from relevant academic experts. Journalists explained that the government withheld the relevant data. Some participants said editors were not interested in publishing academic experts’ submissions to the opinion pages of leading newspapers. One academic said:

... a number of people tried writing opinion pieces and tried getting them published and they were just knocked back one after the other. OK, some of them may have been badly written, there are all sorts of reasons for rejecting. One of them, I remember I
got one rejected by The Age, saying something like, ‘well, we've had our fill of Aboriginal stories for a while, we just can’t take another opinion piece on it’.

Our participants offered their experiences and observations of policymakers and the news media’s unwillingness, or inability, to grapple with what they admit is complex data and concepts. They said they felt academics were seen as distant from educational and political ‘realities’ and that their potential contribution to the debate was easily dismissed. This group of participants’ media-related practices can be understood to lend weight to Negrine’s (1996) contention that the news media are ultimately unable, unwilling, and often unprepared ‘to confront and make sense of the complexity of causes and effects which surround events and happenings in the contemporary world’ (1996, p. 16).

This essay argues that in 2008 the kinds of ‘politically palatable’ views espoused by think-tank experts, who oppose the use of Indigenous languages in schools, were preferred by policymakers and the news media to those of linguists and Indigenous education experts. Fairfax’s Northern correspondent Lindsay Murdoch said:

And politically it’s an easy thing to sell in the policy ... this is Australia and they will learn English for six (sic) hours of the day. That’s politically ... they get political points for that — being tough on ... ‘we’re not going to have these people not being able to speak English’.

Some study participants believed Helen Hughes, of the Centre of Independent Studies, and Noel Pearson of the Cape York Institute, exerted a strong influence on public perception of the issue and in the minds of both territory and federal policymakers. Hughes wrote several reports on Indigenous education (Hughes, 2008; Hughes & Hughes, 2009) and Pearson wrote an article in the Quarterly Essay (Pearson, 2009) preceded by a comment piece in The Australian (Pearson, 2007), in which he argued that while respecting and preserving Indigenous languages is crucial, it should not be the remit of schools to teach them. Instead, Indigenous children should be taught their languages in the home. Both Hughes and Pearson’s writings received a considerable amount of public attention and discussion. The literature on the power of think tanks, which is discussed later, says tracing or measuring the impact of think tanks on government policy or news media outputs is difficult but ‘traces’ of their ideas can often be discerned. Bacchi’s (2009) concepts for understanding policymaking can assist in explaining how these ideas became part of the policy conversation. She challenges the idea that governments react to pre-existing problems and instead argues that they are reactive in creating or producing those ‘problems’. In making this claim, Bacchi is not arguing that the issues or experiences to which a policy refers are not real, but rather that calling those conditions ‘problems’ or ‘social problems’ fixes them in ways that need to be interrogated. Arguably, the views espoused by Hughes and Pearson fixed bilingual education as a ‘problem’ that needed to be fixed and their proposed policy ‘solution’ was politically appetising at the time.

**Competing views of the ‘problems’ of remote Indigenous education**

Participants commented that these think-tank experts, who oppose bilingual learning with a simple message that Indigenous children must learn in English, were preferred by the news media to other credible sources on Indigenous education in the Northern Territory, including a detailed report by the Australian Education Union (AEU) (Kronemann, 2007). This review followed up on concerns that the Ampe akelyernemaneme meke mekarle (Little children are sacred) report into child sexual abuse in the Northern Territory (Wild & Anderson, 2007) had raised about the importance of bilingual education and the need for improved English teaching in remote Indigenous
schools. It estimated that $1.7 billion would be needed over five years to put the teaching and infrastructure resources in place to provide a proper education for all the Indigenous children in the Northern Territory (Kronemann, 2007, p. 36).

Despite its significant findings and recommendations, the AEU report attracted little media attention. Far more influential was the monograph written by Hughes for the Centre for Independent Studies (Hughes, 2008). She highlighted the poor results of Indigenous students, and underlined some real problems with Northern Territory education delivery in remote communities. She also claimed teaching in Indigenous languages is a major cause of educational disadvantage, but produced no evidence to support her statements. Ignoring the fact that only nine out of 119 schools had bilingual education programs, and that those programs start teaching English early, she wrote that, 'In the Northern Territory, children are still initially taught in a vernacular language, despite the research that shows that the ability to learn languages recedes with age' (Hughes, 2008, p. 8). Simpson et al. (2009) point out this was also misleading, because the homeland school which prompted her complaint, Yilpara, like other homeland schools, does not have a bilingual education program.

Hughes also claimed, again without providing evidence, that:

… parents … are clamouring for their children to be taught the mainstream curriculum in English from kindergarten onward. They are confident that they can teach their children their language and culture at home and in the community. (2007, p. 9)

Even though Hughes is not a specialist in education or languages, her position attracted media attention and support (Barker, 2008), especially in The Australian.

ANU Professor of Linguistics, Jane Simpson, said the news media preferred to ‘recycle as news’ the opinions of Hughes and Pearson, rather than those of academics who could provide empirical evidence to support their claims:

… they were certainly not coming looking for us, and it was quite understandable that they didn’t come looking for someone like me because I didn’t have a profile, but they didn’t go looking for people like Christine Nicholls, who did have a profile, or Brian Devlin who has been a major bilingual education figure in the Northern Territory.

In declining an invitation to participate in this study, Hughes (pers. Comm., 4 April 2011) said ‘I regret that the subject you propose is not an area of my expertise’ This is despite having written two extensive reports on the subject (Hughes, 2008; Hughes & Hughes, 2009) and participated in news media interviews in which she was highly critical of bilingual

### KEY POINTS

- Tracing or measuring the impact of think tanks on government policy or news media outputs is difficult but ‘traces’ of their ideas have been discerned in this study.
- Our research suggests the views of think-tank experts, who oppose the use of Indigenous languages in schools, were preferred by policymakers and the news media to academic sources.
- This observation accords with international studies that show the growing importance of think tanks in the policy process.
- Academics said they felt they were seen as distant from educational and political ‘realities’ and that their potential contribution to the debate was easily dismissed.
- They pointed to a general lack of understanding in their relationship with journalists and the media relations units within universities.
education, accusing the programs of producing students who were ‘non-lingual’ and advocating strongly for English as the language of instruction in all remote Indigenous schools (see for example Barker, 2008; Ferrari, 2008)

Journalists and problems with access to evidence

Several other issues related to the question of expert opinion and empirical evidence emerged from the interviews. Journalists who covered the 2008 decision to dismantle bilingual education programs in the territory revealed the problems they encountered getting access to the relevant government data on school performance. They explained how this tended to skew the coverage. Katrina Bolton, who covered the issue for the ABC in Darwin, said:

And it’s such a shit fight always to get even the statistics from the Education Department. There’s so much lack of clarity in terms of being able to see the data. Like, the length of time between when they were saying that bilingual schools weren’t performing and the length of time between when we then got any kind of quantifiable data was ridiculous. Like months. And so it was repressive lines being fed by politicians, and then other opponents sort of, it was that sort of warfare kind of thing.

Intellectual voices not heard

Several academic participants, including Dr Frances Morphy of the Australian National University and Dr Christine Nicholls of Flinders University, commented on the lack of media attention for intellectuals in Australia generally, as opposed to other western nations, such as Great Britain and France, where they said some scholars enjoyed a celebrity status.

In the Northern Territory context, participants observed that in general there was a lack of local intellectuals and who were available for public comment. Former journalist Chips Macinolty said:

Despite having had a university for 20 years there’s no local commentators you can go to for stuff on politics or history or whatever. I mean, at the moment there’s one former Labor politician who gets asked about things, he’s no intellectual giant and is a failed politician.

A senior Northern Territory health bureaucrat also commented that Northern Territory news outlets tended to seek expert opinion from ‘outside’ institutions from ‘down south’:

… the other contributing factor for the NT is the difficulties it seems to have in constructing a local point of view or perspective.

Inclusion in the news media as a source of information lends prestige and an air of credibility (Soley, 1992), so who and what the news media present as expert sources and knowledge on remote Indigenous education informs public understandings of who are credible education researchers and what is reliable education research (Haas, 2007). Taken together, the news media influence who the public pay attention to as scientific sources of education research, as well as the problems those sources contend are worthy of attention and the solutions they advocate (Koch-Baumgarten & Voltmer, 2010). This often translates into which educational approaches and programs are identified and put forward as deserving of public resources. In this case the Northern Territory’s own Charles Darwin University experts on bilingual education such as Brian Devlin and Michael Christie were not heard, but Sydney-based economist Helen Hughes and North Queensland lawyer Noel Pearson were.

Lack of understanding between fields

Academics who were interviewed pointed to a general lack of understanding in their relationship with journalists and the media relations units within universities. While the field of academia may be close to the journalistic field in terms of the education and social class of their members, there are distinct differences.
This can be understood to relate to differences in professional practices (Bourdieu, 1990). For example, both journalists and academics commented on journalists requiring quick information and easy access to academics. Academics said they wanted time to consider the questions being asked and to carefully craft their responses, as their expert reputations depended upon providing accurate and up-to-date information that was carefully interpreted. They also said their working day meant they were busy teaching, or they may be engaged in research activities in the field, which meant they were not easily contactable. The disconnection between journalists and academics was also revealed to manifest in different ways. This included practices such as journalists using ‘find an expert’ directories on university websites. Linguists who specialise in Indigenous languages said they were contacted regularly by journalists looking for a comment on a subject such as the prime minister’s accent, which they were not qualified to comment on. They said the journalist had simply sought a linguist, without considering their expertise may not be in the area of linguistics in which they wanted an expert opinion.

A number of academics also said they had never been approached by the university’s media relations team to discuss the kinds of expert opinion they could provide. Nor had they been offered any kind of media training. They said this meant universities, governments and the public were not benefitting from their expertise.

Journalists who were interviewed described the bilingual education debate as ‘good academic argy-bargy’ and said this made it a topic that was difficult to present well as a broadcast news story because it was too abstract and difficult to narrate visually. Print journalists said space limitations made it difficult to explain the context and complexity of the academic arguments about which educational approaches work best. In other words, the production requirements of news affected whether it was an issue that would be given coverage or how the issue was represented (Cottle, 2003; Dreher, 2010).

Journalists were criticised by some participants as lacking adequate knowledge about education generally, not having the time or skill to comprehend academic research and of poor numeracy skills that are necessary to interpret quantitative data on school performance. Poor numeracy among journalists has been documented as a widespread problem internationally, and a barrier to good reporting (Maier, 2002).

Academics also expressed disappointment that governments, which fund their research, often ignore their expert advice and their study findings. This emergent theme requires further research, which is beyond the scope of this project. It is important because, as participants commented, their research is federally funded and in their opinion the nation should benefit from academic research that informs public policy.

**The rise of think tanks**

Think tanks are defined generally as organisations that have significant autonomy from governmental interests and that disseminate, synthesise or create information, research, ideas, or advice to the public, policymakers, other organisations (both private and governmental), and the news media (Haas, 2007). Openly political conservative think tanks, such as the Centre for Independent Studies, outnumber and outspend both liberal advocacy-focused think tanks and nonpartisan research-focused think tanks (Reese, 2002).

As a group, think tanks are a challenge to long-standing practices of scientific knowledge production. They are not bound by either tradition or professional affiliation to adhere to university or other guidelines of professional conduct for education research (Weaver & McGann, 2002). The extent to which they conform to these standards and procedures—such as national ethical research standards and
blind, peer review—is voluntary. Think tanks can present themselves as researchers and research institutions that produce and disseminate research studies regardless of how they actually conduct their activities (Howe, 2002).

Simpson said think tank experts were popular with policymakers and the news media because:

They write accessibly, they write to the point, they write in a place [policymakers] can get access to easily. [They] don’t have to fish around and they understand confidentiality.

She contrasted this relationship with traditional academics:

... it’s a feeling that academics are distant, that we have vested interests. We’re too theoretical or whatever. It seems to me absurd given the taxpayer is paying us a lot to think about these issues ... and the media and the policymakers aren’t actually interested in hearing what they’re paying us to do.

The observation think-tank experts’ opinions were of more interest to, and had more influence on, policymakers and the news media in relation to bilingual education accords with international studies that show the growing importance of think tanks in the policy process (Ahmad, 2008; Haas, 2007). In their study of the power of think tanks in British politics, Ball and Exley (2010) say:

There is a sense that academics remain unhelpfully out of touch with real and practical policy problems; that they are detached, cynical and more concerned with peer review, the Research Assessment Exercise and spending time thinking than with getting on and doing (author’s italics). (Ball & Exley, 2010)

They argue that there has been an overall shift in the types of knowledge that are regarded as valuable in relation to policy, away from academic expertise and towards simple messages that can easily be understood by politicians, policymakers and the public via the news media.

Tess Lea of Charles Darwin University spoke of the challenges of making academic research accessible to a lay audience and not offending funding bodies:

If you’re going into the public domain you are very conscious of translating the stuff so that it sounds relatively interesting ... you’re trying to actually be definitive when what you’ve actually done usually, is made the definitions problematic. So there’s that translation stuff that kicks in, but that’s just a real side thing. The serious disincentive is how these days all academics are having to scrub for money, and if we alienate ... you get in trouble very quickly.

However, with regard to influence on government policy, tracing or measuring the impact of think tanks on government policy or news media outputs is difficult, as others have pointed out (Ahmad, 2008). Stone (2000) has argued that ‘the agenda-setting capacity of a think tank (if any) is intangible’ and ‘think tanks do not have extensive paradigmatic influence over official thinking’ (Stone, 2000, p. 219). Ball and Exley (2010) argue that what occurs is perhaps a process of ‘attrition and infiltration’, with ‘versions or traces of think tank ideas being written into state documents’(Ball & Exley, 2010, p. 158).

Our research suggests this offers the best way of interpreting the influence of think-tank experts Hughes and Pearson on the policy solution put forward by the territory government in 2008, which echoed their position that all teaching must be in English.

The proximity between think-tank experts and the news media can be traced, with the news media giving their position credibility through its coverage of Hughes’s and Pearson’s reports and essays, and the think-tank experts referencing sympathetic news media, as Hughes and Hughes do in their 2009 report:
Nobody disputes the right of Indigenous children to speak their own languages at home. But as The Australian editorialised, ‘Mr Calma and others need to recognise that lack of basic skills, including English language proficiency, is holding his people back from better lives and job opportunities.’ (Hughes & Hughes, 2009, p.10)

Future directions

This essay began with a brief general discussion of the often uneasy relationships between public servants, academics and journalists, then focused on news media, academics and think-tank commentators in the context of bilingual education policy in 2007–08. It has argued that differences in professional cultures and practices in this specific policy constellation helped to shape the public discussion and the policy process as well. This occurred through downplaying some forms of expert knowledge and think tanks representing the policy ‘problem’ in a particular light and proposing a monolingual ‘solution’ (Bacchi, 2009). I return now to the broader issue the essay began with, because it is worth considering that as the digital age evolves new technologies will perhaps transform relationships between public servants, experts and journalists. There are also recent challenges to the study of policy that have the potential to reshape our understanding of policy processes. For example, Bacchi (2009) is critical of the current orthodoxies of evidence-based policy. She sees this paradigm as reliant on positivist, rationalist assumptions, and argues that because it purports to treat policy as a neutral, technical process it is depoliticising and potentially regressive. She seeks to shift the focus from problem-solving to problem questioning — to ask, ‘what is the problem represented to be?’, which has the potential to transform the role of academics and journalists in the process.

Some of our research participants raised questions about future academic engagement in the online policy environment. For example, some policymakers commented that they go directly to academic sources for discussion of policy problems and potential solutions now that they are online, rather than relying on mediated policy information. This could give academics more of a policy agenda-setting role, rather than being consulted once the problem has been defined in other forums. For example, one senior public servant with FaHCSIA said:

> The availability of information over the internet has been the big change. Now we can get a more diverse range of information, rather than just relying on the mainstream newspapers to learn about public discussion of Indigenous issues. For example, I read the publications put out by CAEPR [Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research] that are available online.

However, the general public is less likely to seek out these sources and will therefore continue to rely on mainstream media to provide the perspective. Many participants said the issues are complex and emphasised the need for them to be presented in ways that will raise public awareness, or bring people to an understanding to share the solutions. One senior Northern Territory policymaker said discussion of Indigenous issues tended to be polarised between relatively inaccessible academic channels and sensationalist media coverage. She identified the importance of academic contributions to well-moderated public discussion that contributes to policies that improve the lived experience of Indigenous Australians, thereby enriching the entire nation. However, she was cynical that such an outcome was achievable:

> We need to get everybody on board to participate in the debates, and not just have it thrashed out in university institutes, or ... in an international journal. And then, on the other hand, some trite front page or page 5 story in the NT News ... We’ve been...
laughing about it for some years, but it will be hard for an alternative to emerge.

References


