



Access to Power

Research in International Policymaking

In 1742 David Hume published a brief essay with the rather remarkable title, *That Politics May Be Reduced To a Science*. Hume offered the possibility that “so great is the Force of Laws, and of particular Forms of Government... that Consequences as general and as certain may be deduced from them, on most Occasions, as any which the Mathematical Sciences can afford us.”

The prospect of predicting political consequences, no less than any other aspect of daily life, was part of the eighteenth-century jumpstart on the human sciences or “the science of human nature,” as Hume called it. The Enlightenment’s hope to see humanity governed by reason and guided by knowledge was a project of such optimism that we might be tempted to dismiss it as hopelessly naïve were not the human sciences today equally dedicated to calculating the consequences of laws and governments.

Whatever the cumulative force of knowledge and reason on international policymaking, Hume’s reduction is about to be tested in new ways in the coming years. While policymakers have not had an easy time obtaining the latest scientific research and scholarship—given time constraints, insufficient staff, and the high price of journal subscriptions—today a small, but growing, body of this literature is showing up on their desktops with a quick Google search. A decade ago, Harvard professor Carol Weiss described the pace at which research made its way into policy as “knowledge creep.” Today, that glacial movement is accelerated by the steady stream of research which policymakers are able to find and read online. They can consult this work without charge or subscription, thanks to the “open access” movement in scholarly publishing. Thousands of journals have found ways to offer readers free access to their content, and hundreds of online archives make work published in traditional journals available at no cost.

The role of this accessible research in international relations will only expand with the increasing reliance on international tribunals to forge new relations and resolve disputes among nations, whether in the World Trade Organization or the International Court of Justice. While high-quality research is only part of the process of drafting briefs and submissions in this new form of international diplomacy, online information access is at a critical juncture. Researchers are quick to ensure open access to the data and research on such hot topics as avian flu. The larger, long-term question, however, is whether the entire academic community will support this incipient open access movement. At this point, with perhaps 15 percent of the annual scholarly output available in open access formats of some kind, a great deal of public access to knowledge is at stake. How the scholarly community responds to this opportunity in the years ahead will certainly affect the role of research and scholarship in international affairs.

Evidence-Based Policymaking

One concept that has done much in recent years to promote the public and political presence of research is “evidence-based policymaking.” It is an off-shoot

JOHN WILLINSKY is Pacific Press Professor of Literacy and Technology in the Department of Language and Literacy Education, as well as director of the Public Knowledge Project, at the University of British Columbia.

of evidence-based medicine, which has, over the last two decades, focused physicians' attention on using clinical research to improve their medical practice. With policymaking, the Campbell Collaboration, an international team of researchers, systematically reviews experimental research. It attempts to answer the questions, "What helps? What harms? Based on what evidence?" Health care is another area where evidence-based policymaking is taking on global dimensions. The Cochrane Collaboration, which coordinates systematic reviews by medical researchers of the research literature, focuses on identifying global priorities for public health initiatives and health promotion policies.

It is still not second nature for policymakers to consult systematic reviews of the relevant research. Still, what is encouraging about evidence-based policy initiatives is that they hold some promise for overcoming the mutual distrust and lack of respect that has defined, up to this point, relations between policymakers and researchers. Systematic reviews, with their tidy sets of conclusions and recommendations, have a way of relating to policy implications that may contribute to more positive relations between policymakers and researchers. In addition, "knowledge brokerage" organizations, such as the WHO's Health Evidence Network, are becoming part of the research-policy flow, leading to research agendas set jointly by scientists and policymakers.

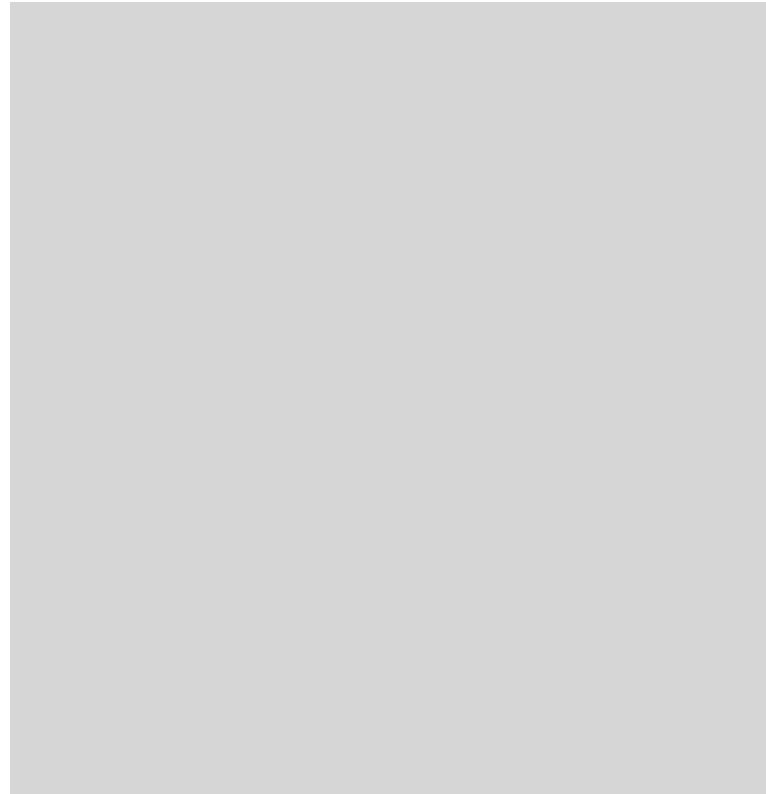
There are still grounds for caution, however, in using systematic reviews of evidence to make policy. A recent study by Annette Boaz and Ray Pawson, for example, indicates that systematic reviews of randomized, controlled trial research, which form the gold standard of evidence-based initiatives, can arrive at "unequivocal policy verdicts" when the evidence does not warrant such certainty. The authors also explained how reviews of the same topic could take on "different judgmental tangents." When it comes to a critical decision for policymakers, there would be real value in free access to the details of the original studies in order to check the recommendations of systematic reviews. Would policymakers consult the original research, given the chance? My work with researchers suggests that they already are—when they have open access.

Policymakers' Use of Research

My studies with policymakers in Canada found that open access to the literature is becoming increasingly important to policymakers. The interviews we conducted with Canadian policymakers and analysts in Ottawa, including members of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Canadian International Development Agency, made it clear how frequently policymakers turn to the Internet for open access research. As the Canadian government embraced the ethos of a "knowledge-based organization," as one policymaker

put it, officials spoke of how this use of the Internet was bringing a range of new academic work to their attention, supplementing the traditional phone calls to old contacts and cronies in the academy. What also became clear was how the emergence of open access, if still encompassing only a small portion of the research literature, was feeding an interest in policymakers that went well beyond research summaries, reviews, or briefings. Rather, they sought, in one policymaker's words, "the real 'meaty' and interesting material," including the full text of articles. Some expressed an interest in seeing relevant dissertation studies as well as the relevant data sets for the works they consulted.

Policymakers were frustrated by the hefty subscription rates and pay-per-view costs for most of the journals, many of which now have electronic editions. They had no budget for such purposes, apart from the occasional subscription to a key journal. When they were not able to locate open access studies, they had to depend on freely available research from institutes, think tanks, and other government agencies, which did not always reflect the same level of quality or rigor found in peer-reviewed scholarly literature.



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More than one policy analyst described a need to assess the quality of studies they could freely access. Some relied on the author's academic pedigree, while others were interested in identifying the article's "impact factor" and determining how it had been taken up by other researchers. Finally, the analysts participating in the studies I conducted explained that academic research, for all of its cautious review processes, could prove far less timely on topical matters than the work found on NGO sites. One government "knowledge broker" explained that academics are hesitant to draw conclusions when they have only 20 percent of the answer, while 20 percent is often all that policymakers have to act upon.

844 other agricultural journals from leading publishers and scholarly societies.

With a similar program for developing countries in medical research journals, as well as those of the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications, developing countries are increasing their access to important sources of knowledge, especially as their bandwidth and computer access gradually increase. Because of this open access, these countries will gradually be able to increase their participation in discussions on vital international trade issues and improve their local universities and social policies.

“INTERNATIONAL DIPLOMACY IS BECOMING A MORE PUBLIC ENTERPRISE, WITH A GROWING RELIANCE ON PERTINENT FACTS, HISTORIES, AND ANALYSES”

Research and the World Trade Organization

Research is finding its way onto the world stage with the international tribunal model for arriving at agreements and settling disputes among nations. As a result, international diplomacy is becoming a more public enterprise, with a growing reliance on pertinent facts, histories, and analyses. To take a recent and well-publicized case that was heard by the WTO's Dispute Settlement Body, Brazil raised considerable objections to the United States' cotton subsidies, on behalf of itself and several other countries. In making its case, Brazil drew on agricultural and economic data made freely available online by such organizations as the US Department of Agriculture, the Environmental Working Group in Washington DC, and other NGOs. It also submitted studies from university-sponsored organizations in the United States, such as the Food and Agricultural Policy Research Institute and scholarly articles from the *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* and other scholarly journals.

The relief agency Oxfam has also begun using research as an advocacy and development tool by preparing briefing papers, in this case summarizing research and data on cotton subsidies, which Chad and Benin used for their presentation to the WTO. This ability to access research has become part of the struggle to create sustainable and fair markets for the developing world. One of the triumphs of the open access movement, which took place not long after Chad and Benin's submission to the WTO, is the UN's Access to Global Online Research in Agriculture (AGORA) program. This program qualifies these countries for free online access to the *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* and

Open Access to Research

The open access movement in scholarly publishing is developing a number of ways to provide free online access to research articles. There are two principal means of doing so. The first is for authors to post copies of their work in open access archives, prior to and after publication in peer-reviewed journals, with the publisher's permission. The second is for authors to publish their articles in a growing number of open access journals. As the proportion of open access literature continues to grow, countries around the world will have similar resources to use in conflict resolution in bodies like the WTO.

Government agencies like the Economic Research Service of the US Department of Agriculture—which posted 65 research papers online in 2005—form an important resource for policymakers worldwide. However, open access to the larger world of peer-reviewed research would allow the full value of this body of work to be realized as a public good. This could, in turn, lead to better-informed policy deliberations among nations and a wider range of considered solutions, given the theoretically innovative and experimental quality of that literature. The global community is already well served, for example, by two open access research archives: Research Papers in Economics (RePEc) and the Social Science Research Network. They represent a new breed of intellectual commons and offer free access to well over 200,000 working papers from over 50 countries. The contributing economists are ensuring the widest possible circulation of their work by making their papers freely available online, even as many of those papers have been

submitted to peer-reviewed journals and are working their way through that process. In the course of my study, Bank of Canada policy analysts affirmed that the RePEc was an important source for the latest thinking on a topic.

The journal publishers, including big corporate players such as Elsevier, Springer, and Sage, have recognized the contribution that open access archives are making and now grant authors permission to post their work on such sites. Researchers now have the opportunity to have their work play a far greater role in international policymaking. A small but growing number are taking steps to archive their work. Others are also becoming involved in publishing in open access journals that make their content freely available online, whether immediately upon publication or some months after. In the area of international affairs, *Globalization and Health* and the *Harvard Human Rights Journal* make their content immediately and freely available to the world, as do the *Journal of Cotton Science* and the *International Journal of Sociology of Agriculture and Food*. Open access enables local journals, published far from the academic centers in the North, to gain a worldwide presence online. This increases the possibilities that the research these journals publish can have an impact on this new political age of information, with its tribunals, courts, and councils.

Some may question how journals can possibly afford to offer open access. I have been working with the Public Knowledge Project at the University of British Columbia and Simon Fraser University to develop a free software package that can reduce many of the overhead and clerical costs of publishing. Open Journal Systems (OJS), as the software is known, has made it possible for hundreds of new and existing journals, in 11 languages around the world, to offer open access to their peer-reviewed content. But once the content is open it must be easy to access. OJS has also been designed to support a much wider readership by providing readers with a series of “reading tools” that enable them to readily locate related studies, relevant media reports, government documents, online forums, and other resources. These tools help readers see how the research fits with other studies and other sources of information, so that policymakers, for example, might bring greater depth and more nuanced information to their analysis of both local and international concerns.

Conclusion

One can only hope that as more researchers observe how open access broadens the international presence and contribution of their work, they will act as authors and members of professional associations to ensure that peer-reviewed and published work is made more widely available. On the international stage, this increased access could bolster the pursuit of a more just and equitable basis for

resolving international disputes. Certainly, it would speak to rising public expectations concerning a right of access to information, in the name of accountability, transparency, and responsibility. At the same time, as research acquires a new and expanded readership, it may well inspire and sharpen the work of researchers after so many years of speaking only among themselves.

The goal of the open access movement is not to see politics somehow reduced to a science in the manner suggested by Hume’s provocative title some 250 years ago. Science made public will not marginalize or dictate political processes or decisions. Rather, what we know about global warming and economic subsidies, complete with disagreements, contradictory findings, and differing theories, will become part of the political dialogue—locally and globally.

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Of course, increased access to this knowledge will rarely simplify matters, especially when those matters are taking place on an international scale. But one can reasonably expect that open access will educate more citizens and policymakers than before, making knowledge and policy more democratic. ■