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Title Moral Panic and the Impact Agenda

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Abstract

The paper employs the idea of a 'moral panic' as a heuristic device to examine the reaction of the academic community to the impact agenda. This involves an analysis of *Times Higher Education* coverage since 2007 when the term 'impact agenda' was first coined, and of discussions in the dedicated academic literature that began in 2009. It finds that the impact agenda is often used as a cloak to conceal very familiar discourses that are perennial problems in science and higher education policy: e.g. threats to academic freedom, the 'tyranny of relevance', and encroaching philistinism and economic rationalism. Some impact-specific moral panics are identified: e.g. attribution vs. contribution, the inclusion of basic research, and the impact evaluation paradox: high impact = low quality. The paper concludes that social scientists should engage in 'boundary work' to redefine ambiguous concepts and harness uncertainty to positively influence REF development to social democratic ends.

Outline

The term 'impact agenda' is emotive and pejorative, and is 'shorthand for the interests of government or business dominating the priorities of state-supported research funding bodies, to the ultimate detriment of research directions and academic freedom' (Donovan, 2014). The paper takes a long view, and employs an analysis of *Times Higher Education* coverage since 2007 when the term 'impact agenda' was first coined, and the subsequent use of the term in the dedicated academic literature that began in 2009. The paper employs the idea of a 'moral panic' (Young, 1971; Cohen, 1972) as a heuristic device to examine the reaction of the academic community to the impact agenda.

A moral panic is an expression of strong feeling by a population of people about an issue they believe threatens their core social or cultural values. The media tends to play an important role in generating and amplifying anxiety, concern, or even panic among the affected population. The paper tests the hypothesis that there has been a moral panic within the academic community around the impact agenda and research funders' attempts to destabilise or undermine core academic values. It asserts that *Times Higher Education* is the key 'trade' publication, and the vehicle for initially spreading anxiety amongst the academic community. This does not necessarily imply that it sent out to create a moral panic, as according to the theory merely reporting the facts or opinions is enough. It also tests whether this moral panic has filtered into the relevant dedicated academic literature.

The paper presents a content and discourse analysis of the use of the term "impact agenda" and the use of the combined terms "REF" or "Research Excellence Framework" and "impact" in *Times Higher Education* from 2007-2017, and in the indexed academic literature (Web of Science). It finds that core academic values are being defended, although the notion of the impact agenda has often been employed as a cloak to conceal very familiar discourses that are perennial problems in science policy and Higher Education policy: e.g. threats to academic freedom, the 'tyranny of relevance', damage to the research system, and encroaching philistinism and economic rationalism (entailing ethical corruption).

Some impact-specific moral panics are identified: e.g. attribution vs. contribution, time-lags, negative impacts (or 'grim impacts'), the inclusion of basic research, and the impact evaluation paradox: high impact = low quality.

By way of contrast, while moral panics are also raised in the academic literature, this is often accompanied by suggestions about how best to engage with the impact agenda. This resonates with the idea of impact policy being in flux, and that the academic community can use uncertainty in science policy to engage in 'boundary work' to redefine ambiguous concepts and harness uncertainty to influence REF development (Kearnes and Weinroth, 2011). We may view the impact agenda not purely through a neo-liberal or New Public Management (NPM) lens, but also through a social democratic lens that seeks to: (i) reveal the public value of basic and applied research; (ii) is supportive of the humanities, arts and social sciences in their own terms; and (iii) as a post-positivist antidote to NPM audit regimes (Donovan and O'Brien, 2016). In this respect, it is important for the social science community to work to open up impact definitions rather than have these closed down by natural science concerns (Donovan, 2005), and not to be overcome by moral panic and 'impact-fatigue' (Donovan, in press).

References

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