Developing a strategy for knowledge translation and brokering in public policymaking[1]

Introduction: why we need to formalise knowledge brokering

A policy is a set of related decisions which give rise to specific proposals for action or to negotiated agreements[2]. These decisions may relate to single issues such as the imposition of regulated limits on chemical discharges into a water body; or to issues which are far broader in scope such as the creation of a new national park or a local enterprise partnership, or a state-wide system to provide care for the elderly. For these broader issues, the challenge for policymakers is to ensure that the decision-making process effectively meshes different types of knowledge such as scientific knowledge, knowledge of the local context and wider knowledge of what has worked in the past; and to do this whilst involving different types of organisation such as line ministries, research providers, non-governmental organisations, advocacy groups, local delivery bodies and citizens. Supporting this complex decision-making process often requires people and organisations able to facilitate the links between these different groups; working as neutral intermediaries to translate and 'broker' different types of knowledge so that current policy decisions are based on the best available knowledge[3].

Some people and organisations may already operate in this way. Strategy units, policy analysts, local liaison officers and research communications experts (for example) all perform some type of brokering function, to various extents, as part of their day jobs. Think tanks, networks and research consortia may similarly work outside the policy environment as intermediaries between policy's needs for knowledge and the vast amount of information that exists on any issue. But there are good reasons for strengthening and formalising the role that knowledge brokers can play. The pressure of events may be such that it is difficult for a policy team to raise its eyes from its desk and contemplate wider issues such as horizon scanning, experience from other policy areas or new and emerging evidence. It is also a challenge to keep on top of the vast array of knowledge being

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[2] For definitions of key terms, see the final section of this paper.

[3] This is not to supplant or preclude the potential for direct dialogue between those who are directly generating knowledge and the users of that knowledge. Such interaction can be vital in moving issues forward. There are however good reasons why intermediaries can add value to the process.

developed and who is developing it, the speed at which it is emerging (particularly for global issues such as climate change), and the potential of social media and other IT tools to improve access to information. Broad, cross-cutting issues often give rise to evidence from one source which appears to contradict evidence from another source; such as the apparent conflict between environmental and economic evidence involved in making policies for 'green growth'. And generalist policymakers often find it hard to understand highly technical scientific knowledge, let alone decipher its implications for what they are currently working on and how to best mesh it with local or contextual knowledge.   A dedicated knowledge broker has real expertise in seeking knowledge, systematically pulling from a range of different techniques to connect the producers and users of knowledge in the most appropriate ways[4]. They are also skilled in dealing with the implications of power dynamics between stakeholders and how this affects the ways that knowledge is sourced and applied in policy (particularly important for ensuring that the voices of the marginalised are heard); and are able to mediate and facilitate complex relationships so that all stakeholders can fully engage in the policymaking process.

Because policy processes are complex, there is no single role for knowledge brokers. Instead, they perform different functions at different times and for different issues. Understanding this helps managers develop a strategy for investing in these intermediary/brokering functions; deciding how to do so cost-effectively, what exactly it would entail, what would need to be in place, and what sort of return they might expect.   Drawing from the international literature and from practical experience, this paper sets out a simple framework which describes the different functions of a knowledge broker.

Six functions of a knowledge broker

At its simplest level, knowledge brokering simply facilitates the flow of information from one side to another. This may be communicating the nuance of policy goals to researchers to enable them to better understand how to produce policy-relevant research. Or it may be the other way round: assembling the relevant information for a particular policy and communicating it well (synthesising the information, making messages 'sticky' and being strategically opportunistic) to ensure it gets to the 'right' people at the 'right' time. But this alone may not be enough: the more complex the policy area, the more likely it is that the network of relationships between policymakers and those who generate the information will need to be managed to ensure that they remain stable, productive and focused on achieving the policy's goals.

However, it is not simply a matter of ensuring that the right person gets the right information at the right time: new information about an issue may prompt a change in behaviour of the person or organisation who receives it. For example, the reduction in numbers of people smoking in the UK since the 1960's resulted from the vast body of information about its health effects, not simply because of increased taxes on cigarettes.   In delivering public policy the challenge is to put in place the supporting structures to foster *sustainable* behaviour change by both individuals and organisations. Here, the role of knowledge brokers is to ensure that knowledge is used to build resilient institutions which can continue respond to issues as they arise, even after the initial impetus for the policy has faded.

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[4] See the definition of a knowledge brokering tool, at the end of the paper.

So the role of the knowledge brokers changes depending on whether the need is to simply bridge a divide between those who need knowledge and those who have it; or whether there is a more complex and longer-term need to strengthen the institutions which can foster behaviour change by citizens and local organisations. Building on Sarah Michaels' work, we can differentiate between six different roles which are given below, and in the figure on page 4.
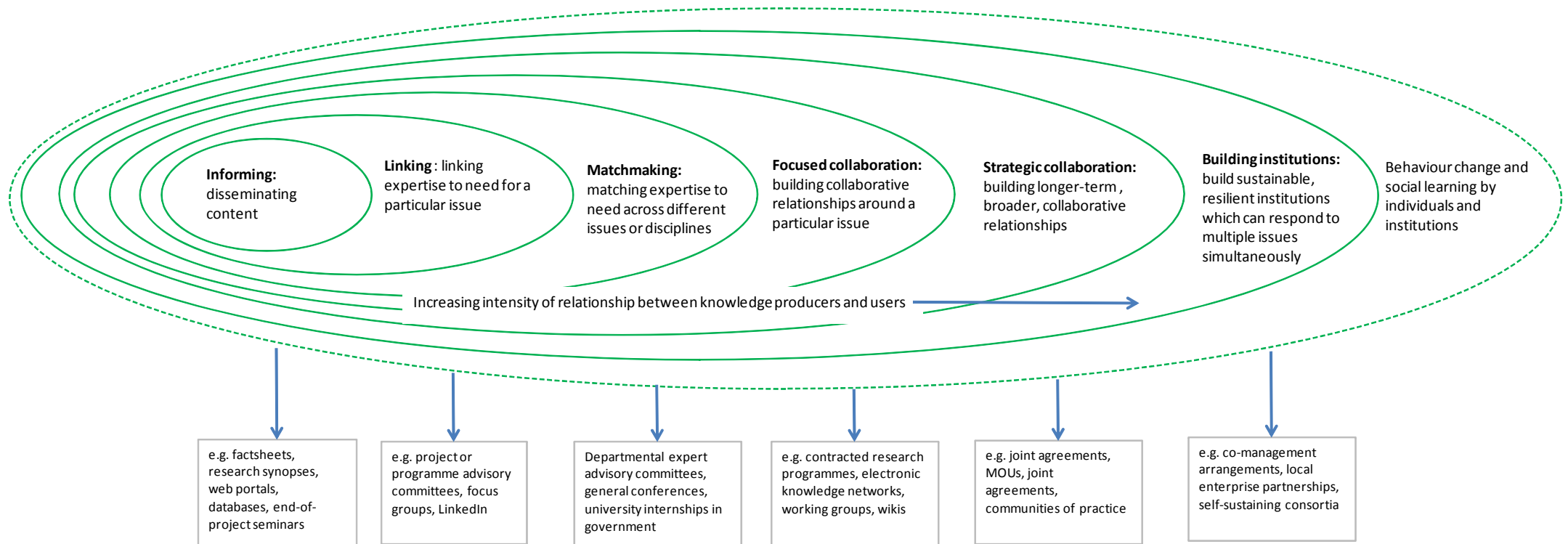
- **Informing[5]:** disseminating content, targeting decision makers with information, making information easily accessible and digestible. Examples include factsheets, research synopses, web portals, databases, end-of-project seminars
- **Linking:** linking expertise to need for a particular policy area, helping policymakers address a specific policy issue by seeking out the necessary experts. Examples include project or programme advisory committees, focus groups, LinkedIn
- **Matchmaking:** matching expertise to need across issues and disciplines, helping policymakers think more broadly about a topic, finding experts with relevant knowledge from another discipline, helping them take a strategic overview to address the fullness of the issue. Examples include Departmental expert advisory committees, general conferences, university internships in government, mapping the evidence base for an issue
- **Focused collaboration:** beginning to construct formal relationships to focus on a particular issue, contracting people or organisations to provide knowledge on an as-needed basis. Examples include contracted research programmes, electronic knowledge networks, working groups, wikis
- **Strategic collaboration:** lengthening and deepening the collaborative process, strengthening relationships and moving to a situation where all sides jointly negotiate the questions to be asked. Examples include joint agreements where the emphasis is on equality in the relationships between actors such as MOUs, joint agreements, communities of practice
- **Building sustainable institutions:** deepening the collaborative relationship to the extent that all parties jointly frame the issue; broadening institutional capacity of institutions to respond to several issues simultaneously. The focus is on co-production of knowledge and joint learning from doing; the arrangements are self-sustaining in terms of both funding and function, with all sides contributing resources. Examples include co-management arrangements, local enterprise partnerships, self-sustaining consortia.

It is possible to invest in any function at any time. However, those at the bottom of the list will need to incorporate elements of the functions above them – it is not possible to go straight into *building sustainable institutions* without first getting the collaborative relationships in place (*collaboration*), which means knowing who the experts are (*matchmaking, linking*). In turn, ensuring that these activities work well means that it is important to know where the relevant information lies and how to get hold of it (*informing)*.

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[5] Informing can also be just a knowledge translation function. As with the whole field of knowledge translation and brokering, there are no hard and fast distinctions between these six different functions.

The six functions of knowledge brokering

Linear dissemination of knowledge from producer to user →→→ Co-production of knowledge

Informing: disseminating content

Linking : linking expertise to need for a particular issue

Matchmaking: matching expertise to need across different issues or disciplines

Focused collaboration: building collaborative relationships around a particular issue

Strategic collaboration: building longer-term , broader, collaborative relationships

Building institutions: build sustainable, resilient institutions which can respond to multiple issues simultaneously

Behaviour change and social learning by individuals and institutions

Increasing intensity of relationship between knowledge producers and users →→→

e.g. factsheets, research synopses, web portals, databases, end-of-project seminars

e.g. project or programme advisory committees, focus groups, LinkedIn

Departmental expert advisory committees, general conferences, university internships in government

e.g. contracted research programmes, electronic knowledge networks, working groups, wikis

e.g. joint agreements, MOUs, joint agreements, communities of practice

e.g. co-management arrangements, local enterprise partnerships, self-sustaining consortia

The diagram above shows how they fit together. The presentation as a series of nested ovals does not imply that there needs to be a linear progression between the functions: it is simply intended to show that those functions in the outer ovals need to incorporate aspects of the inner ones. A knowledge broker will use different tools and techniques for each of the functions – the choice of which tool will depend on the particular issue they are dealing with, the goal of the intervention, the size of the budget and other practical considerations. Importantly, a knowledge broker should not add another layer of management, but should work instead to reduce the 'distance' between the various stakeholders. This could be by developing researchers' communication skills so they can better inform policymakers of their work, by providing a clearinghouse where people can have their enquiries met or be put in touch with the relevant experts, or by facilitating the process of building multi-stakeholder partnerships.

What needs to be in place

There are three things that underpin any brokering activity: robust evidence, a commitment to evaluation, and the trust and credibility of the broker.

All decisions need to be based on *robust evidence*. This means using the best available knowledge, sourced according to the highest standards of the relevant discipline, and interpreted in the context of what is currently facing policymakers[6]. It is not the broker's role to check the quality of the evidence – while brokers could challenge whether or not there is sufficient evidence for a decision and then help identify ways to improve it, there need to be other systems in place to assure the quality of the evidence base.

The second is a commitment to *evaluating the role of the knowledge broker*. Whatever the initial intention, investing in knowledge brokering will change the behaviour of those with whom the broker interacts and the challenge is to ensure that this is behaviour change is sustained after the broker leaves. A broker who is good at *informing* could show policymakers better ways to search for knowledge, either by training them in search capabilities or telling them about particularly useful web portals or aggregator sites. An expert *matchmaker* might set up new relationships which bring in evidence from other areas or different disciplines and give policymakers a broader view of the issue they are working on. Whatever the particular role they are performing at any one time, knowledge brokers should step aside once their impact has become self-sustaining – or they risk becoming just another layer of management[7]. It is therefore important to develop clear measures to evaluate their impact, though any such measures are likely to relate more to how they enable people and organisations to change their behaviour than to the broker's ability to produce 'outputs'.

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[6] See 'definition of terms' below.

[7] Note that this may never happen: in *informing* (for example) because there is an ongoing need for information. For complex policy areas, the process of building sustainable institutions may be so challenging as to demand the skills of an expert mediator/facilitator who can continue to manage difficult relationships. There is no reason to assume that knowledge brokering is just about supporting transitions.

Finally a knowledge broker needs to be *trusted and credible*, both as a neutral intermediary[8] and as someone who is technically proficient. While neutrality is a concern across all six of the functions described in this paper (particularly where power relations between stakeholders are asymmetric, such as where marginalised populations need to be included), the need for technical knowledge of an issue will rise the more the brokering activity is about building sustainable institutions. A broker who is only weakly science-literate will struggle to maintain his or her credibility in a science-heavy issue such as developing local solutions to deal with phosphate releases from agriculture. Maintaining this trust and credibility over the long term cannot be taken for granted, and the broker needs to guard against becoming a 'player' in the system rather than a neutral intermediary; and to step aside when the processes have become self-sustaining.

Summary

The process of knowledge brokering has real purpose and impact. Developing a strategy for knowledge brokering is not simply a question of putting an intermediary into difficult situations: it is more important to understand what might be needed for each policy issue, what function the broker will perform and the most appropriate tools and techniques. The framework presented in this paper helps to clarify what those functions are and gives a selection of possible tools and techniques. The reason for doing this is to help managers thinking of investing in knowledge brokering to do so strategically and cost-effectively, and to clarify what impact brokers are likely to have.

The precise wording of the labels attached to each function are not that important, as it is difficult to know exactly when the description of one function transitions into the next – and the words used may vary depending on the context and preferences of different organisations. Indeed, discussing what is meant by each label could be a useful way of building a common understanding of what needs to happen to improve the flow of knowledge between the different stakeholders. What is important is to understand the differences between the different functions and to then attach labels which make the most sense for your organisation.

Terminology used in this paper

Knowledge brokering is a strategy, approach or process that facilitates the exchange of knowledge between producers and users. Knowledge brokering serves two purposes: first, to improve the utility of knowledge such that it actively informs decision-making and has a noticeable effect on the quality of decisions, policies and processes. Second, it aims to improve the receptivity of decision-makers to new knowledge. A knowledge broker may be an individual, a team or an organization operating in this way.

A **knowledge brokering tool** is a strategy, approach or process that facilitates the exchange of knowledge between producers and users. It may be an event or a series of events, an organization

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[8] Neutrality is an ideal. Where specific knowledge translation and brokering responsibilities are a defined part of a job, particularly for new functions or hires, neutrality is an active goal. However it may be difficult to achieve simply because individuals may work for a unit or organisation whose job it is to advocate. And beyond the personal biases that we all bring to our work, it may be hard for individuals to maintain a neutral stance if they are doing brokering 'off the side of the desk', in ways that are not recognised as part of their formal job description.

operating under particular TORs, a job description for an individual, a style of report, an engagement process, a map or another form of knowledge exchange.

A **policy**: a set of related decisions resulting in specific proposals for actions or negotiated agreements. These may be legislated (such as regulation, economic instrument, such as subsidies or taxes, or programmes of legislation with accompanying organizations and resources) or non-legislated (such as voluntary negotiated standards, risk governance, decisions about the allocation of public funds via research prioritization, and the provision of information to 'win hearts and minds'). A policy does not result from a single decision – instead, it results from a series of negotiations and decisions which all contribute to how it is planned and implemented.

Policymakers refer to the people involved in making public policy who take substantive decisions about how the policy is shaped and implemented, who it affects, what the consequences of the policy might be and how its impact is assessed. Depending on the type of policy being developed these are not only senior officials in central line Ministries: they include the network of people and organizations involved in crafting and delivering the policy throughout its lifetime.

Robust evidence is not simply drawn from the results of research or survey data. There are four components of an evidence base for policy:
- statistical data including trends and survey data
- analytical evidence such as research-based evidence, modelling and impact appraisals
- evidence from stakeholders and citizen opinion – some of which may be sourced using research-based tools, some of which may come from engagement exercises such as horizon scanning, citizen juries, written consultations
- evidence from practice, including evidence from monitoring and evaluation exercises, and analyses of cost-effectiveness

Robust evidence has five characteristics: it is *credible*, meaning that it has been collected, analysed and synthesised following internationally-recognised standards of best practice and peer reviewed. It is *objective*: there has been no bias in the way the evidence has been collected or interpreted and the results have been presented in their entirety rather than selectively. It is *generalisable:* sampling techniques and theories of change are strong enough that local context and history does not hinder the potential for scaling up. It is *reliable*: it forms a good basis for ongoing monitoring work and impact assessments. Finally, it is *contextualised*: the way evidence is analysed and presented is well rooted in an understanding of the context and history of the issue, and takes account of any alternative interpretations that may be put on it[9].

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16 November 2010

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[9] See Shaxson, L.J. (2005) Is your evidence robust enough? Questions for policy makers and practitioners. *Journal of Evidence & Policy* 1(1): 101-111.