

BOFFINS AND BURGERS: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE AND PUBLIC CONSUMPTION

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Abstract

Over recent years, a number of high-profile and controversial issues have called into question the traditional role of science policy and the science community as purveyors of “objective” scientific knowledge on which policy may be based. Relations between scientists, policy makers and the general public have deteriorated, with increasingly adversarial approaches to the use of science, declining trust in both policy makers and scientists, and declining faith in the ability of science to solve, (or at the least, avoid causing), environmental problems.

The present paper argues for the need to recognise the contexts in which scientific knowledge is generated, transmitted and codified in terms of policy and behavioural change. The processes of knowledge generation and transfer are located within a coevolutionary model of change in biophysical and human systems. Thus the present state of scientific knowledge and of individual perceptions must both be understood within the context of the historical processes through which they have passed, and the current configuration of knowledge and institutional arrangements must be understood as an emergent outcome of the historical context and relationships.

The paper is based on on-going research using evidence presented to the recent UK Government Public Inquiry into Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy. The analysis draws on recent research into emergent systems, and on knowledge dynamics within and between organisations. Whereas previous work on emergent systems has concentrated on macro-level relationships between major change processes, the present work focuses on micro-level processes of knowledge transmission, investigating the perceptions of individual actors, through their statements to the Inquiry. The paper suggests that we need to go beyond polarised approaches to the public understanding of science, which emphasise the splits between scientists, policy makers and the public, to a more inclusive approach which recognises the relationships between constituencies, and the potential for both co-operation and conflict between them.

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