



The research impact of broadcast programming reconsidered: Academic involvement in programme-making

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Abstract

This commentary responds to an article by Melissa Grant, Lucy Vernall and Kirsty Hill in *Research for All* (Grant *et al.*, 2018) that assessed the impact of broadcast programming through quantitative and qualitative evidence. In that piece, the authors attended exclusively to the uptake by, and attitudes of, end users. But viewer or social media statistics can paint a patchy picture, and feedback groups recreate an unusually attentive mode of reception. This commentary argues for an alternative or complementary emphasis on the participation of academics in producing broadcast programming for the purposes of writing REF impact templates. In highlighting the process of programme-making rather than the reception of a completed output, the commentary seeks to 'read' academic impact on the media in a more dynamic way, and speaks to the sometimes substantial and substantive involvement of academics prior to a programme's broadcast and its ultimate effects in the public sphere. Indeed, a focus on the 'front-loaded' impact by academics in the media, and on their longer-term institutional ripple effects, offers evidence that is more easily captured than establishing the attitudes of audiences. The latter are notoriously difficult to determine and, as Grant *et al.*'s (2018) data show, do not always do justice to the importance of media work as part of impactful academic activity.

Keywords: impact evaluation, REF templates, media production, television, radio

Key messages

- The impact of academics working with the media can be as much evidenced with testimonials from media professionals involved in the production process as by examining audience responses.
- Such testimonials could provide good evidence when adjusted for implicit industry-specific assumptions. Only a limited or traditional view of academic knowledge production, particularly in the humanities, may lead to them seeming to be of limited use for claiming research impact.
- Repeat or follow-on programming or interviews may by themselves be indicative of the impact of prior media work.

The 2021 iteration of the UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF2021) is set to increase the weighting for 'impact case studies' to 25 per cent of a submitting unit's overall score – up from 20 per cent in 2014. In addition, impact will be incorporated

into an institutional research entity's environment template as well. And, since 2021 will mark the second time that research is assessed according to its 'effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture or public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia' (REF2021, 2019: 68), the evidential threshold is sure to be raised. As a result, researchers and research support services across UK universities are not only more concerned with generating impact than ever before, they are also in regular discussion – and sometimes dispute – about how to conceptualize and collect evidence for all claims of effect, enhancement or *change* (as shorthand for how impact is institutionally understood) in preparation for REF2021.

In this regard, an article in Issue 2.1 of *Research for All* was of particular use in planning media case studies – if also problematic (Grant *et al.*, 2018). Starting with the question 'Can the research impact of broadcast programming be determined?', the conclusion was rather sobering for colleagues committed to working with the media. Melissa Grant, Lucy Vernall and Kirsty Hill started by collecting statistical evidence for a 'talking head' appearance on a major television documentary. They purchased viewing figures and, following Penfield *et al.* (2014), they also analysed impact through social media altmetrics (alternative metrics). While the raw numbers were impressive, such data are by themselves insufficient. And evidencing meaningful engagement with media outputs is much harder. In order to complement the quantitative approach with the qualitative, Grant *et al.* (2018) then arranged focus groups to give feedback. Although they 'could not find indisputable evidence of a change in behaviour or knowledge' as a result of University of Birmingham research being spoken about on mainstream television, they 'could show limited indicators of such changes' (*ibid.*: 127). In other words, the effect that could be claimed was more a *stimulation* of the audience into thinking about a subject – in this case, dentistry – than a *substantive* change in understanding. For REF purposes, the case that can be made for a major media coup becomes worryingly modest.

This conclusion surely sells the researchers and their important work short. My own media engagement as an academic is mainly with speech radio. Listeners are more likely to tune in while driving or cooking than they are to huddle around the wireless and listen in a hermeneutic fashion. Focus groups re-enact especially attentive consumption of media content, which is not reflective of everyday experience. In fact, many people will switch off before the end of a programme, perhaps because they are interrupted rather than due to lack of interest. So, if as part of normal, reasonably inattentive, media consumption, a listener or viewer is suddenly surprised, curious and alert, then in relative terms I think that impact is significant. I say 'relative' because such a change from paying passing attention to close listening or viewing is more fundamental behaviourally than if a listener or viewer were already decidedly focused on media content from the outset, and came away with a slight change in their opinion or knowledge. In the latter instance, there is no dropping of tools and turning up the volume that I, for one, hope for in my listeners when engaging with the media. I suspect that the programme in question for Grant *et al.* (2018) had its fair share of fascinated audience members. But those viewers are of course hard, if not impossible, to find; as such, for REF purposes they must remain a fantasy.

The authors' efforts to establish focus groups are therefore understandable. Nevertheless, I want to suggest that there is another convincing, much easier and equally meaningful way to evidence impact in cases of media *engagement*. This term is key. While it makes sense to quantify social media responses to programmes, or the number of page views for related online articles – or, indeed, the length of time spent viewing an online post (during which a reader might be engrossed, or

might be making a cup of coffee) – the effects can also be traced through repeat commissions or interviews as a result of a media appearance. In other words, if we look beyond the buzz, controversy or discussion of individuals' attitudinal responses to media programming, and instead focus on its institutional consequences and 'repeat work', the story of impact might be strengthened. As Philip M. Napoli (2014) notes, 'engagement' can be a proxy for media 'impact', with engagement defined as both the reactive behaviours of audiences and, say, a rerun, promotion, expansion or follow-up of a feature. Too often we conceive of programming as affecting only the end users: the consuming public. But the viewers or listeners among the broader public who are first and foremost influenced by an academic's research are the producers and commissioners of programmes. Hence, we should consider change effected among this group as well.

Grant *et al.* (2018) mention that the programme-making process they tracked lasted two years, from the production company's initial approach through to broadcast. The eventual ten-minute segment inevitably hides much prior discussion, and possible influence over aspects of the programme's narrative and visualization. Reflecting on his landmark television series *A History of Britain*, first broadcast between 2000 and 2002, Simon Schama (2004: 20) notes that its conception and production was a 'collective enterprise'. He goes on to attack what he perceives as a prevalent bias among academics that historical research, for example, should take a printed form; he objects to the norm that:

... the success of television history is judged (just take a look at academic written reviews of *A History of Britain* in *History Today* for example) by the degree to which the preoccupations of print historians are faithfully translated and reproduced on television. (*ibid.*: 24)

Compare the similarly reductive way in which nature programming is frequently, and falsely, assumed to be straightforwardly realist observation. Nature broadcasts are not a matter of televising 'nature' as a pre-existing canvas, but are instead the result of creative, practical and interpretative exchange and intervention (see, for example, Gouyon, 2016). In a similar vein, we could posit that television or for that matter radio documentaries are not only content that can be *read*, as it were, by those whose reactions, in turn, we seek to capture and examine. We should go beyond understanding programmes via concepts borrowed from print. They are produced through a dynamic process of knowledge creation during which academic research has multiple points of impact (as is, in fact, the case for print journalism too). As Jerome De Groot (2009: 173) observes for television: 'the documentary is a work of collaboration between all parts of the production team, and it is also something developed within clear boundaries that are far from the standard limits of academia'. Some description of this work during the production process, and ideally producers' or commissioners' testimonies about the specifics of the collaborative enterprise, are together very valuable sources of evidence that are simple enough to collect, and provide the qualitative complement to quantitative data about share and reach, as well as an alternative or addition to feedback sessions with audiences.

The scholarly literature on collaborations between academics and the media emphasizes the intellectual and creative exchange – and negotiation – that goes on in the production process, time and again. Media work may provide a means of testing out and staging new or controversial scientific theories (as Jack Horner did as consultant on *Jurassic Park* (1993); see Kirby, 2011: 127–31), and it can present new historical arguments – for which Schama, David Starkey, Amanda Vickery and many

others are known. My purpose here is not to advocate this idea in any scholarly way, however. Others have done so already, and have made corollary claims that those academics who engage with publics are statistically also strikingly active researchers (Jensen *et al.*, 2008). Rather, I want to note that the interactional nature of media production involving academics, and therefore its inevitable impact – on research, and also, more significantly for our present topic, on the media industry – is often neglected in the practical composition of REF templates. Particularly (but not exclusively) in the humanities, there is a disciplinary bias towards understanding knowledge creation as a solitary, written exercise that subsequently may be taken up in its printed form, and be impactful in that form. In accepting this (mis)conception, those writing REF submissions rob themselves of an argument for impact that complements the evidence of Grant *et al.* (2018), from ‘behind the scenes’ of a programme.

Testimonials from media professionals, as used in the scholarly literature on public engagement more widely (and as are included in all of the aforementioned academic publications), could be a formal part of a media REF case study. I have found radio colleagues only too happy to supply (short) testimonials, despite their impending deadlines and the need to keep moving on to the next project. Public broadcasters, in particular, know the sorts of pressures academics face only too well: they had to learn the art of justifying their engagement earlier than the academy. And the request for a reference is itself a testament to the sort of relationship that is created: as academics, we often help producers out with ideas or research that might lead nowhere, or send them in the direction of a suitable colleague. In return, I have found colleagues in the media to be kind at returning favours, especially if they also understand our correspondence as useful to them in the long term.

However, there are two potential problems with the sorts of qualitative statements that academics might receive from producers and commissioners in the media industries, although we can find arguments to address these problems. The first is not really a problem for REF, rather a prejudice that media academics tend to say they experience among peers. Critics of media, and public history especially, have remarked of the commissioning process for television history that ‘many of the accounts of the generation of ideas came from anecdotes and things that came up in conversation that struck the commissioners’ (Gray, 2010: 72). The idea that media work is not systematic, and thus not really academic, is long-standing (and has been dubbed the ‘Sagan effect’ after Carl Sagan, a prominent media personality and scholar who was denied tenure at Harvard; see Jensen *et al.*, 2008). This bias dovetails with an assumption among some scholarly colleagues that researchers who are part of such conversations simply got lucky, and perhaps even are in luck because they conform to privileged, popular conceptions of the ‘academic’ or ‘academic historian’ in everyday life (such as the media don). On the first point, networking is fundamental to many forms of impact – from working with community groups to influencing policymakers. I am not aware that impact in REF terms has any criterion regarding the context in which it should begin to be generated. This is quite aside from the fact that prompts for academic projects may likewise be anecdotal or conversational.

The second point, though, is significant. Personally, I would modify the stance in the second assumption, given a rightful shift in thinking in the contemporary media environment – about diversity, for example. But regardless, and more importantly for practical questions concerning evidencing impact, the objection speaks to a commonplace suspicion in the academy, according to which uptake of research in the media is thought to be as much to do with the *researcher* as with their actual *research*, if not more so. And it is the research that must demonstrate impact for REF. Indeed,

Ann Gray and Erin Bell (2013: 51–5), in their study *History on Television*, describe the industry's desire for presenters of history documentaries who display authenticity, evoke intimacy and appear ordinary – as well as for those who, if they are professional historians rather than celebrities, have academic credibility obvious to the public. Similarly, radio colleagues who have kindly furnished me with references about our collaboration on programmes tend to emphasize my own suitability over the underlying research itself (which they have at times even read, with illuminating conversational responses that I have profited from – media work can enhance research, but that is another topic). They have noted fluency, say, in bringing 'quirky' cultural facts to life, in a 'listenerly' way. Could the cynic not be forgiven, then, for concluding that my own impact work, and that of other academics in the media, is due to a performative character and unfulfilled childhood aspirations for the stage?

I think we can and should see things differently. Comments from those in the industry that evince semantic slippage from the research into the researcher are a testament to the fact that the academic in question has managed to 'pitch' their work by speaking the language of a world beyond their own: that of the media instead of academia. There is a long and respected tradition in academia of writers subordinating themselves to their writing. The staple of the media, on the other hand, is personality. If an academic manages to translate their work into an image of themselves as an expert (a 'talking head') or cultural mediator ('presenter'), then that very performance is, I suggest, evidence of impact. Such academics effectively switch discourses and themselves engage in behavioural change – they are not necessarily self-interestedly bringing their research along with them in pursuit of a bit of fame and, who knows, even fortune. Their research thereby assumes a repackaged, personable form – and what more is the point of impact other than for research to be applied in a non-academic way, in the conventions of somewhere beyond the academy? This does not mean that media outputs can be listed in a template as stand-alone proofs. However, introducing them in this way, and selling the conventional speech of the testimonials – conventional for the media industries, that is – hopefully amounts not only to a convincing strategy. It is partly already evidential. And it can be augmented by turning, in a final move, to listeners or viewers.

The term 'impact' brings to mind a static rather than a procedural image: capturing a changed state. In cases of media work, this risks an especially reductive view of the impact of academic research: the end users of media content are understood as the obvious and, too often, the only audience that is impacted. It would be perverse to ignore audience feedback, and so the contribution by Grant *et al.* (2018) is useful to those of us planning impact case study submissions related to broadcasting. I do not wish to undermine their study. But as Grant *et al.* (2018) themselves admit, collecting evidence among end users is hard and does not yield particularly compelling results, even if common sense assures us that such airtime is incredibly valuable to institutions (in terms of both marketing and public engagement). As I have argued elsewhere (see Braun and Schofield, 2018: 389–91), I believe that the Mary Beards of today's academy have impacted not only on the media industries and their consumers for the greater good, but also on research in vulnerable subjects, such as classics – I suspect there is once again more of it, for a start. Thus, rather than criticize Grant *et al.* (2018) for their endeavour, I want to provoke instead. Are they not missing a trick, or at least a step in their story? Turning to testimonials from producers and commissioners, and outlining the extensive work and collaborative process that leads to even fleeting television or radio appearances, is an evidence set we should attend to as well.

Notes on the contributor

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