

Metropolis Geneva Workshop H19

Metropolis Research: Dissemination Strategies
Presenter: Thomas Denton; Manitoba Immigration Council

Torrents and sieves

(a polemic on dissemination of Metropolis knowledge)

A torrent of information

Have you ever “Googled” your name? Of course you have. The other day I submitted mine to that remarkable search engine. I never thought I had a particularly ordinary name, but Google came back with 560,000 hits. For fun I submitted “immigration” and back instantly came 9,890,000 hits. So I thought I would restrict things to a Metropolis-like “human migration”; still 2,450,000 hits. Well, what about the other twin pillar of Metropolis, “integration”: 7,930,000 hits. Perhaps I should check a more rarefied topic, “dissemination strategies”. Google still produced 653,000 references. Even to the uninitiated these numbers would begin to suggest a dissemination problem.

The world would be overwhelmed with this torrent of information – if it were paying attention. But it has its own mechanisms for muting the din that are just as effective as our TV remote’s mute button; in my home little advertising information is allowed to harass us. The world’s techniques are less direct, and the volume of the information assault tends to be controlled by its media as proxy. They become the sieve that picks up some nuggets while letting the torrent flow through unremarked.

Some years ago in the heart of Africa I met an erudite man who ran a private school and who had his own religion which he not only practiced but apparently drilled into the children. He called this religion “the sieve”. I was never clear whether he was the sole practitioner or whether this religion had a larger following. He attempted to explain his beliefs to me, but I was equally unclear whether the truths that descended from on high were captured by the sieve, or

whether the sieve caught the junk and let the pure stuff flow through. One could raise the same questions about the sieving practices of the media.

I have some knowledge of all this. In another life I was for a time the publisher of a mass circulation daily newspaper in Canada.¹ It never ceased to amaze me that so much information was available every day from the news services of the world, never mind the output of one's own reporters. Yet we only had a "news hole" that was typically one-quarter to one-third of the paper's daily size – the rest being the advertisements that paid most of the expenses and governed the size of the product. From the day's news torrent only the most compelling items made it into the news hole, along with horoscopes, comics, crossword puzzles, restaurant reviews, advice to the lovelorn, weather forecasts, and all the other inconsequential stuff that people will pay to read. While special interest groups complained that we weren't publishing their "good news", they were routinely usurped by murders, plane crashes, car bombings, elections, gas pump holdups, bears up trees, sports scores - the kind of stuff that gets far more news space than most academic treatises – and sells papers.

Yet despite the competition for attention, immigration has been making news throughout the world of Metropolis. One can cynically add that it mainly makes "negative" or "bad" news. From my primary exposure to Canadian news I can report that immigration stories have covered things like harboring possible terrorists, border controls, asylum seekers who are generally seen as problems, deportation stories damning for the cruelty they expose in our immigration processes, statistical analyses that show that immigrants are not doing as well as they used to, problematic concentrations of immigrants in our mega-cities, etc. I am sure you are familiar with the genre, and can replicate my list from media sources in other Metropolis countries.

¹ Founding publisher of the Winnipeg Sun (1980-1983) which began publishing November 5, 1984, as an independent paper, and is now a part of Quebecor's Sun Media

Not only are the immigration news stories generally of the “bad news” type, but columnists and “op-ed” writers in Canada tend to write negative stuff about immigration too, usually from either a less-than-informed perspective or from a thinly disguised bias against immigration in the kind of numbers our government’s current policies allow. To be fair, there are some with a kinder approach, but they seem to lose in the simplistic jousts writers with a deadline and a space limitation usually engage. Pejorative foils favour the negative.

So we have a torrent of information generally, and through Metropolis auspices a pretty respectable river of information too. What is its use and impact? What is the sieve catching? Or to raise the first query posed to this panel: what is “the degree to which the efforts of Metropolis to disseminate research findings lead to value-added decision making knowledge”. That begs two subordinate questions: (1) what efforts, and (2) whose decisions?

Dissemination for academic purposes

Grant applications for Metropolis funding in my remote academic province of the Metropolis world must contain the dissemination strategy that the researcher intends to employ. I learned very early in my association with Metropolis that what is “satisfactory dissemination” to the academic community has nothing to do with the media and its sieves. The learned and at times masterful papers developed in academe traditionally, in my journey of discovery, have not been aimed at changing the world or gaining public notoriety (although these things could happen) so much as they have been aimed at expanding knowledge and informing the world of scholarship. There is nothing wrong with this. Scholarship is always its own best justification. (The fact that at the same time the papers enhance the credentials of the principal researcher while giving his or her graduate students topics for acceptable theses or dissertations, is of course entirely coincidental).

The traditional methods of dissemination, publication in a learned journal, presentation at a learned conference, I would dub “classic” or “naïve” dissemination. This dissemination has been wonderfully enhanced by the Internet, by many web sites, and by Google and its ilk. If we see these things as the current “efforts”, then what about the second subordinate question: whose decisions?

If the answer is “the academic community” as it seeks to identify further research topics and extend knowledge, then I believe our current “naïve” devices are working. Any researcher worth his or her salt is going to be developing a “literature review” to accompany the new work. You might dub this “the personal sieve”. I believe it is now inevitable that relevant Metropolis papers, given even the most minimal of exposure in this new e-world, will help to inform all new research.

The significant thing for me is not the reality of classic dissemination and how well it is working in 2004. The significant thing is the rapidly expanding volume of Metropolis-related research being undertaken. This may be a Canadian phenomenon, but the inauguration of Metropolis in Canada some eight years ago along with availability of research funding in the traditional and familiar manner of our Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, has stimulated all manner of research on Metropolis themes that wasn't there before. This is abundant proof that our dissemination strategies have been working with extraordinary success *within the academic community*.

As the sophistication of our knowledge pool grows, it adds value to the decisions made when starting and prosecuting new research projects, whether their focus is national or international. But there is another feature of this growth that bears mentioning. A remarkable coterie of international experts is developing, sharing, disseminating, fraternizing – turning the topics of migration and integration into a veritable academic discipline on an international scale at a time when nothing could be more relevant. This needs to be recognized and celebrated. This is

proof positive that current dissemination efforts, albeit of a classic or naive style, are working. Let's not be too critical then. Give it a little more time and, I believe, the results in academia will be profound.

Dissemination to inform policy making

But the policy people seem to want more, which must have a lot to do with the selection of the topic under discussion. How does the mass of Metropolis information developing and available become digested by policy advisors so as to inform policy makers? Frankly I have no idea. The amorphous world of policy making at senior government levels remains a mystery to me. I would surmise it is an amalgam of brain power (both numbers and capacity thereof), the degree to which it functions within or gets beyond its departmental silo, and the reactive nature of politics. When is policy leading and when is it following? When do public opinion polls trump research findings? When and how does the overarching brain of government click in, so that big picture decisions are taken? What was the thought process, the policy process, for example, when immigration functions in Canada were recently rearranged between two departments and two ministers?

Without answers to these questions, without understanding current processes, it is difficult to appreciate the challenges, let alone evaluate the results of knowledge transfers from Metropolis to policy wonks, or to elected people. Thus I am left with my own suspicions and imperfect suppositions.

We all make our decisions based upon reflections from the prism of our own knowledge and biases, refracted through the filter of current exigencies. Or to switch and simplify the metaphor, we all have our own sieve. Therefore I suspect that policy decisions in the immigration realm have more to do with pre-existing biases (political or departmental-cultural) and current political pressures than with empirical analyses based on knowledge transfers from Metropolis. And returning to my metaphor, the torrent through the sieve is catching (and

probably catching “on the fly”) only the pieces convenient for the thesis already in place. One tends to pick the information pieces that justify one’s previous conclusion. This is my supposition; tell me if I am wrong. No criticism is intended here; it’s just the way we are.

In my view one of the best mechanisms for effecting knowledge transfers to policy advisors is the Metropolis Project as it is realized in Canada. The participation of key government people in Metropolis as it functions in my country, through its centres of excellence, its regional and national forums, its various committees and governing bodies, and indeed through its head office overseeing the whole affair, is the best way to absorb what’s happening on the research front. Collegiality has been building between government policy people, academics, and also with NGO types like me, making us all more familiar with the issues, and the research results, as we become more familiar with each other.

It therefore behoves our Federal government to facilitate this dialogue by continuing financial support of Metropolis in all its manifestations. Lest we become too insular in our thinking, I think it is also important to embrace the opportunity that international conferences like this one afford. It is unfortunate that the Canadian government’s current restrictions on the funding of international travel have prevented some from being here in Geneva. This is short-sighted.

It is also unfortunate that our provincial governments have paid so little heed to Metropolis. There is increasing talk in Canada about the need to “regionalize” immigration, to spread its benefits across the land instead of having immigrants congregate in a few larger centres.² This will inevitably mean a greater policy role for the provinces and territories, so they too need to become more aware of and informed about immigration issues and research. Quebec and Manitoba are at the forefront of provincial immigration initiatives, and this is leading to some

² Regionalization is the topic of workshop G41 at the Ninth International Metropolis Conference

Metropolis involvement on their part. But there needs to be more and I suggest that Metropolis Canada become more active in promoting provincial involvement. This will help in transferring knowledge to areas that are going to need it.

Dissemination to inform public discourse

There is another, wider dimension, where dissemination of research knowledge could have impact, but it is the most difficult dimension of all. I refer to the public arena, and the way Metropolis research might inform and even transform public opinion, and thereby create a political climate that would be more accepting of policy change. But how on earth does one do that? We appear to be left primarily with the media as the instrument, controlling the mute button, using its own sieves.

Eurasyllum, is a company that was established in 2001 to provide research, evaluation and consulting services dedicated solely to issues of immigration control and asylum policy in Europe and internationally.³ By coincidence its monthly policy interview this September featured a conversation with Joel Budd of the Economist. I think this is an important interview, and commend its full text to you.⁴ To quote some of the things Mr. Budd said, he acknowledges that,

“The media are very influential, but not in the way NGOs or politicians think. It is often assumed that the media (especially the print media) have the power to make people believe things they would not otherwise

³ Eurasyllum is specializing primarily in the analysis and evaluation of developments affecting policy and legal decisions in the fields of immigration and border control processes, asylum determination procedures, and migrant integration schemes internationally. The company's principal activities are targeted at relevant national Government agencies, the European Commission and related international organizations. My colleague, Dr. Baha Abu-Laban, Co-Director of the Prairie Centre of Excellence for Research in Immigration and Integration, and editor of the Journal of International Migration and Integration, is a member of its Advisory Council. So also is Dr. Demetrious Papademetriou, President of the Migration Policy Institute in Washington DC and a founding figure of Metropolis.

⁴ Eurasyllum's monthly policy interview can be found at <http://www.eurasyllum.org/Portal/DesktopDefault.aspx?tabindex=2&tabid=19>

believe; in fact, examples of such influence are very rare.....The real power of the media lies in the ability to set agendas and to determine the contexts in which events are understood.....reports could be cast in a positive or a negative light, but this hardly matters. What is important is that an association is explored and reinforced. Depending on what the journalists decide to write, readers (or viewers, or listeners) will think about immigrants either in terms of the economy, or in terms of public services, or in social and cultural terms. The news stories will provide a context for ordinary people to think about immigration. This doesn't sound like much of an influence, but it is profound. What has happened in many European countries is that immigrants have come to be seen in terms of public service provision, and not in terms of the requirements of the economy – hence fears about pressures on health care, public housing etc. That is partly the result of thousands of individual journalistic decisions.”

Mr. Budd's comments are not only interesting, I think they are correct. How does Metropolis play into that reality, disseminating its research findings, providing the public with a *context*. Frankly, I don't think Metropolis, at least in Canada, is doing a very good job at contextualizing its own findings. The typically narrow focus of a research project through which a candidate will earn a Ph.D., is not conducive to placing things in a wider context. Perhaps it can never be, and that would be unfortunate.

Let me give an example. Research about how well more recent cohorts of immigrants are doing economically, supported by Statistics Canada data sets, shows that they are not doing as well as they used to do. This has been widely reported by the media. Without a wider context, what does this infer? That today's immigrants are of inferior quality, possibly because they are coming from what we euphemistically call “non traditional sources”? That government selection techniques are inadequate, letting in the “wrong” people? That immigrants are a drain on society? That settlement practices are inadequate,

particularly those associated with foreign credentials recognition? See how this simple statistical presentation can feed anti-immigration sentiments, even racism. Is there indeed a wider context? What about the nature and state of the receiving country's economy when the "problematic" cohort arrives? What about the shape of the post-modern state in a free trade era; are fundamental things happening as manufacturing moves offshore, as the service sector grows, as more women work outside the home than ever before, as the population ages? What about the collapsing birthrate and the demographic imperatives that could be driving immigration strategies that transcend mere current economic performance? Or what about a still wider context that could call into question the apparent valuing of individuals based upon their income levels, when any complex and successfully functioning capitalistic society will have and must have workers at all income levels whose work is intrinsically valuable and necessary, irrespective of their pay scale?

I don't see Metropolis researchers, or Metropolis commentators doing very much about the wider context. When the media's sieves catch narrower grist, can they be faulted for failing to frame a context that will help the public's understanding -- when Metropolis itself has failed to do so? What is happening in Canada is that commentators who write negatively (for the media) about immigration are making good use of half-truths to skewer sound but poorly defended immigration policies, and getting good media play as they do so.

(As an aside, Canadian NGOs that typically are in the forefront of refugee asylum issues, that anguish over deportation cases, and that shine light on the turmoil around border controls and "unfair" immigration practices, are far, far more adept at getting their issues before the public. Perhaps Metropolis could learn a trick or two from its NGO stakeholders).

When it comes to contextualizing its research and thus informing public discourse, Metropolis is too fragmented, and not doing a good, nor even an

adequate job. Rather, the drawing of conclusions is being left to others with simplistic sieves, be they the media, the xenophobes, or the anti-immigration commentators. Until Metropolis people rise to this challenge, express the bigger picture in papers, op-ed pieces and interviews, recruit into their ranks philosophers and ethicists, Metropolis is going to continue to be dissatisfied with the results of its research dissemination when it comes to public discourse and the impact this has on policy.

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