



Navigating the authority paradox: Practising objectivity in environmental expertise



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ABSTRACT

We empirically reveal how environmental experts interpret the objectivity norm while navigating the authority paradox. The paradox here is that while there is a need for objective scientific advice, such advice is only to be acquired from experts and expert agencies whose objectivity and, hence, authority are contested. Viewed through the lens of practice, we identify what practitioners at the PBL Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency understand by objectivity. Using this paradigmatic case, we show how practitioners renegotiate the meaning of objectivity while seeking to engage with new policy actors and extended peers in an independent, rigorous and legitimate manner. Successfully navigating the authority paradox is related to skilfully representing and adapting to various meanings of objectivity. Experts and experts agencies accordingly need reflexive skills to recognise which meanings of objectivity they ascribe to and which ones are invoked in public debates. Environmental experts who are able to loosely connect diverse objectivity conceptions are more likely considered as trustworthy and authoritative partners in environmental science-policy interfaces.

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1. Introduction

For government expert agencies to properly perform their role as credible and influential science-policy interfaces, it is vital that their authoritativeness is publicly recognised. Do government expert agencies generate new ways of demonstrating their authority, given that in present-day society their public legitimacy – grounded in claims of objectivity – is often publicly challenged? Drawing on empirical work, particularly in the field of climate science and politics (Beck et al., 2014; van der Sluijs et al., 2010), we can say that this hardly seems to be the case; on the contrary, the norm of objectivity seems to be reinforced by the media, as well as by scientists and the expert agencies themselves.

Experts typically seek to conform to identity norms, like objectivity, when approaching their task (Hilgartner, 2000). Tracing the historical and cultural origins of objectivity reveals that over time the word 'objective' has acquired different meanings and associated scientific practices (Daston and Galison, 2007).

There is no single definition that captures the meaning of objectivity and new meanings are added as practices change over time, giving objectivity its irreducible complexity (Douglas, 2004). In science-policy interfaces objectivity plays a dual role in distinguishing valid policy-relevant knowledge from mere politics. Objectivity in the sense of what counts as proper scientific representation of nature, and objectivity in the sense of the role of public interests and values in the reasoning process. This double objectivity, scientific and political, is achieved through institutional projections of credibility and truth to policy makers and other audiences (Jasanoff, 2011). Institutionalised forms of scientific advice to governments, therefore, routinely commit to objectivity as a central identity norm to ensure that the advice has credibility and influence in society, thus assuring their authoritativeness (Bijker et al., 2009; Hilgartner, 2000; Jasanoff, 2005).

Institutional responses to credibility crises in scientific advice to governments, e.g. the Climategate affair, signal that expert agencies like the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) wish to restore public faith in their autonomy, openness and disinterest. They employ 'repair' strategies by increasing the transparency of their scientific procedures and extending peer review to include non-scientific peers in the assessment process. The IPCC's relationship to public policy and its various global 'public' audiences is hardly subjected to critical debate (Beck et al.,

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2014; van der Sluijs et al., 2010). Accordingly, the epistemic power of the IPCC remains unchallenged and unreflexively guides a global and science-based understanding of climate change, subordinating plural and local understandings of climate change to a singular technocratic framework (Turnhout et al., 2016).

We have conceptualised this situation as an ‘authority paradox’¹: large uncertainties and value conflicts reinforce the need for authorities who can speak in the name of an objective science at a time when the objectivity of experts and expert agencies is subjected to public scrutiny. Public challenges of the objectivity of expertise are undermining the authority of scientific experts. The paradox here is that while there is a need for objective scientific advice, such advice can only be acquired from experts and expert agencies whose objectivity and, hence, authority are contested (Bijker et al., 2009; Gluckman and Wilsdon, 2016). Institutionalised forms of scientific advice to governments are faced with this paradox. Government expert agencies increasingly have to operate in disparate multi-actor and multi-level settings where policy issues – especially in the environmental field – are marked by severe political pressure, disputed values, high stakes in decision-making and very large epistemological and ethical system uncertainties (Funtowicz and Ravetz, 1993).

How do the experts themselves navigate the authority paradox? This question is best examined in situations where experts start actively questioning, challenging and innovating their practices, while they aim to safeguard their credibility and influence as an authority.

In this paper we present an empirical study to show how practitioners in a Dutch government expert agency, the PBL Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency (*Planbureau voor de Leefomgeving* – PBL), interpret the objectivity norm when considering their role as credible and influential experts in today’s constantly changing governance settings and issue configurations.

Taking the PBL as a paradigmatic case (Flyvbjerg, 2006), this paper sheds light on the wider problem of persistent technocratic and science-based environmental knowledge production systems (Turnhout et al., 2016). Participatory or transdisciplinary modes of knowledge production have proven hard to establish due to disciplinary traditions and expert-driven research cultures in the home institutions of experts (Mattor et al., 2014; Sternlieb et al., 2013). There is a tendency in environmental science-policy interfaces to institutionalise new modes of knowledge production in accordance with prevailing values of scientific independence and autonomy (Lovbrand, 2011; Van der Hel, 2016). In practice, therefore, these attempts appear to deviate little from, and can even reinforce, a technocratic style of working (Reinecke, 2015; Turnhout et al., 2013). Experts tend to “do [. . .] more of the same under a different name” ((Van der Hel, 2016): 173). The lens of practice, in this paper adds a new perspective to institutional tensions in science-policy interfaces by illustrating the complexity of the objectivity norm (Douglas, 2004). In the next section, we will introduce the PBL as a paradigmatic case for government expert agencies seeking to navigate the authority paradox. We then explain our methods of data collection and analysis. The empirical section of the paper shows how PBL practitioners start questioning, challenging and innovating their practices and develop new

meanings of objectivity at the same time. The paper concludes by pointing out how the authority paradox may be successfully navigated by experts in environmental science-policy interfaces.

2. The PBL as a paradigmatic case

The PBL Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency can serve as a paradigmatic case (Flyvbjerg, 2006) for government expert agencies seeking to navigate the authority paradox. Using this case, we can learn something about the way practitioners conform to the identity norm of objective science, while they start to consider and evaluate their assessment approaches and expert roles in today’s advisory setting of constantly changing governance and issue configurations. This section introduces PBL’s position at the Dutch science-policy interface and illustrates its responses to credibility crisis in the past.

The PBL is the Dutch national institute for strategic policy analysis in the fields of the environment, nature and spatial planning. It is a government-funded expert agency that aims to “contribute to improving the quality of political and administrative decision-making by conducting outlook studies, analyses and evaluations in which an integrated approach is considered paramount.” PBL holds the legal status of a policy assessment agency with “a prime concern to generate policy-relevant studies in an independent² and scientifically sound manner” (PBL, 2016).

PBL’s activities fulfil a traditionally-determined authoritative role for a small group of professional representatives and government. First and foremost, PBL works closely with government departments that oversee its operation and research capacity. PBL is presented in the public debate as a powerful institute that disciplines policy-makers into rational policy making; using impartial calculation methods to assess policy goals and options in a way which is neutral and non-partisan (Halffman and Hoppe, 2009). The rhetoric of objectivity is deployed not only by the agency itself (Kunseler, 2016), but also by politicians and policy-makers who seek to correct one another with claims of expertise. They accept PBL’s knowledge as ‘best guess’ statements to create the playing field in which they operate and bargain, because “questioning this would lead to a swamp of policy unpredictability” (de Vries, 2008).

While the authoritativeness of the PBL is firmly grounded in its legal (de jure) position as an independent government expert agency, in practice PBL practitioners tend to define their expert role flexibly when dealing with different clients and public audiences, by skilful boundary work (Hoppe, 2009; Huitema and Turnhout, 2009; Pesch et al., 2012). In this way they can ensure that there is an organisational fit with a policy field or issue based on PBL’s mandate to produce science-based policy-relevant studies. Authoritativeness in such dynamic boundary processes comes from playing a credible role in a succession of concrete situations. This creates a de facto (real) authority alongside PBL’s de jure (legal) authority (Hajer, 2009, 2012), which then leads to the accumulation of epistemic authority over time.

Nonetheless, PBL’s credibility has been called into question on several occasions e.g. when errors became evident or when PBL was accused of an ideological or political bias. Against the background of today’s complex governance settings and issue configurations, PBL can expect to increasingly face potential credibility issues, especially as uncertainties and value controversy

¹ Bijker et al. (2009) introduce the paradox of scientific authority to investigate how the Health Council of the Netherlands manages to maintain its position of scientific authority, while that authority seems to be deteriorating in the rest of Dutch society. Hajer (2009) introduced the authority paradox to explain how “the phenomenon of media 24/7 multiplies the attention for the classical-modernist political centre at a time at which crucial problems often spill over jurisdictions, disempowering the political centre” (p.176). Both Bijker et al. and Hajer showed how the paradox expresses itself in institutional settings whose classical-modernist roots are challenged by appeals for democratisation.

² This independence is laid down by law in the Regulation for Policy-Analysis Agencies, article 4, which states that Dutch policy-assessment agencies (*planbureaus*) are solely responsible for the content and quality of their work and that policy-makers should refrain from interfering with research content and methods (Staatscourant, 2012).

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