

Fighting the 'will of the web'

The rise of social media means policy-makers must arm themselves with facts, not opinion

How quickly have you offered judgement on Twitter? Earlier this year I got excited about the use of bus lanes in London by a minicab firm despite not using a bike, buses, or even the minicab firm in question.

As a professional cynic I had just been sucked into the Something Must Be Done (SMBD) lobby. Those responsible for managing this transport aberration are now likely to be intensely scrutinised while the accuracy of the 'facts' put forward by the 'SMBDeers' is much less important.

At the start of this century there was a renewed commitment at the top of Government to implement 'true' evidence-based policy-making. This was related to the reform of public services in New Labour's second term. It was also seen as an approach that should permeate across Government to ensure policies were not based on opinions, ideologies and what could now be defined as the 'will of the web'.

The civil service can point to lots of examples in which evidence-based policy has been used and implemented, including the reform of home-buying, provision of information to victims of crime and parts of the working tax credits system.

But there are two reasons why this approach is now under pressure.

First, the Government increasingly attempts to shape our behaviours and lifestyles, for which the usable evidence is sometimes scant but the 'SMBDeers' are strong.

The food and drink sector is a high-profile example of this approach. Over the past few years, a sea change has occurred in the industry thanks to the rise of the slow food movement and concerns about nutrition, food safety and the economy. The relatively level playing field for communicating about food has now been transformed.



JULIAN DODD

Views in brief

What has been your best example of prompting public policy change?

Our recent work to define how energy suppliers can meet the expectations of consumers. By cutting through the platitudes and researching the public's day-to-day concerns and expectations, we came up with a consensus for change that is a win-win-win for government, industry and consumers.

Which celebrities will be setting media agendas in 2017?

Celebrities will become increasingly politicised while politicians will edge closer to the red carpet. The quality of British films may well be improved if Hugh Grant followed the Camerons and moved from Notting Hill to Downing Street.

Taxation (or pricing) is now just one of many proposed interventions working their way through the national and devolved political systems to tackle obesity, alcohol-related issues and other non-communicable diseases. However, without reviews of existing research, commissioning new research and evaluating a range of properly costed and appraised options, many of these go against the principles of evidence-based policy-making. These were most notably set

out in 2001 by The Centre for Management and Policy Studies.

Second, those academics who study our political system have previously suggested that in evidence 'light' areas of policy such as behavioural change, it is the role of policy-makers to use the institutional memory of the civil service to assess whether a policy is suitable. But this is strained by the significant reduction in headcount in Whitehall. According to a recent National Audit Office report there is

significant variation across departments, but the overall reduction is predicted to be three times higher than that implemented under prime minister Margaret Thatcher.

With an increase in evidence-light policy aligned with a reduction in the civil service, there is a clear risk that 'SMBDeers' will dominate. Depending where you work, this may be a threat or an opportunity.

But for many businesses, this now means investing in a clear evidence base as part of any robust public affairs defence. By fighting with facts early enough, businesses can still create some balance in policy-making.

This of course assumes JM Keynes was incorrect when he observed: 'There is nothing a government hates more than to be well-informed; for it makes the process of arriving at decisions much more complicated and difficult.'

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