



Evidence in an era of 'post-truth' politics

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It's not easy being an advocate of evidence in this era of 'post-truth politics'.¹ The fact-free dogmatists seem on top. But listen carefully, and there are quieter political voices following the evidence. They are working hard to create better schools, hospitals, and public services, by making policies that work based on data and research.

We will hear from these voices at the global forum for government, [Evidence Works 2016](#) at the Royal Society in London, at the end of September. The two-day meeting will hear from politicians in the Parliament of India, Dutch Senate, and the German Bundestag. And these are not just lone lawmakers; we have groups spanning the political divides. In the US, Republicans and Democrats have come together to create the [Commission for Evidence-Based Policy](#) – co-chaired by the Republican House Speaker Paul Ryan, who is being talked about as a potential Presidential candidate. Another inspiring group can be seen in Kenya: the cross-party Parliamentary Caucus on Evidence-Informed Oversight and Decision-Making. It's an informal evidence network for politicians in both the Kenyan National Assembly and Senate. We urgently need more partnerships like these. Partnerships of like-minded people who are searching for the truth, and willing to cut across party allegiances in order to find it. These alliances don't have to be just within countries, but can span borders, such as the [Global Parliamentarians Forum for Evaluation](#) with MPs from over 30 countries, from Cameroon to Cambodia, Paraguay to Pakistan.

Understanding the demand for evidence

These politicians should be applauded. But the producers of evidence need to catch up and empathise with these important consumers of their products. We need to weave together the worlds of evidence and politics. Certainly the research community needs to get better at getting their message across, reframing evidence to better fit the day-to-day needs of policymakers or frontline professionals, but bridging the ['evidence-policy' gap](#) requires more than that.

We must listen to governments – particularly those staff who are on the side of evidence. We must shift the focus to improving the demand and capacity for using the best available evidence. This is the aim of the Alliance for Useful Evidence, to increase the demand, and to build and support networks of fellow-travellers to argue for evidence. Networks already exist in some countries and regions, such as [Evidence for Democracy](#) in Canada, the [Moneyball for Government](#) in the US, the [African Evidence Network](#), or the [Ask for Evidence](#) campaign in Europe. Evidence Works 2016 will support these networks and reach more widely with participants from over 40 countries and multilateral bodies such as OECD, World Bank, UN and the European Union.

The evidence on evidence

As well as listening to government, we also need to look at the research on what works in evidence-use. There is a wealth of material, including insights from behavioural research, social marketing, and policy studies. But we don't seem to look at that much of it. So to help people locate it, we ran a systematic review of all the available research, [The Science of Using Science](#),² with academics from South Africa and the UK at University College London's [EPPI Centre](#). Six key areas needed for research-uptake were identified,³ but, on their own, none of these mechanisms are enough to make a difference. You need a mix of them. For instance, just designing a pretty website summarising research evidence is not enough in itself to make policymakers use the evidence. Nor will it be enough to run an Evidence 101-type training for civil servants.

Above all, we need to be really looking hard at what politicians or frontline staff actually need from research. What governments want may not just be 'what works' in policymaking, but wider evidence - data analytics, behavioural insights, horizon-scanning, or research from the 'hard' sciences. All these types of evidence are valid. As long as they are trustworthy and useful for governments (see appendix for a list of the sort of evidence that could help answer different policy questions).

Pooling resources

There already are welcome initiatives to foster more cross-national summaries of research and keep us out of national silos. We have the [Cochrane](#) network that provides trusted medical and health evidence from 130 countries. Outside of medicine, there is the [Campbell Collaboration](#) growing systematic reviews in social policy. And to help knit it all together, a new network has been set up: [Evidence Synthesis International](#) will create common standards and methods for doing reviews. But most commissioning of research syntheses still take place within single countries. The Alliance for Useful Evidence contends we can do more to bring governments together when reviewing evidence - perhaps by setting up a new [international clearing house](#) of evidence.

Such pooling doesn't have to be done by multilateral bodies like the World Bank or OECD. Smaller organisations can make this happen. A model to learn from is the [Innovation Growth Lab \(IGL\)](#). A Nesta-led initiative in the UK, it works with a number of government ministries worldwide to pool resources for experimental trials on innovation, entrepreneurship and business growth. Instead of going it alone, governments can learn from and with each other. You can get more value for money by joining up with other governments. Working with government partners in seven different countries, IGL has supported randomised controlled trials in 13 different countries across North and South America, Europe, Africa and Asia. Surely we can do this in other policy areas - and make stronger evidence by testing across many geographical locations.⁴

There's clearly plenty of appetite to look outside your country to see what others are doing. Squeezed into just two weeks in September 2016, there are five major international evidence events.⁵ Evidence Works 2016 hopes to make a unique contribution by zeroing-in on the 'demand' side of evidence.

It's important to have these places to meet and share ideas. But we also need to firm up partnerships with other countries. That is why we want to work with our US partners, [Results for All](#), and those attending Evidence Works 2016 to set up a global coalition, to knit together all the great work happening across many countries, big and small, north and south. The voices arguing for evidence-informed decision-making may be quieter, but are stronger in depth and global breadth, and will outlive the anti-factual mood of some countries. Let's build that coalition of pro-truth politics.

Appendix 1: Rationales for evidence and types of evidence required for policymakers

Table From *Using Research Evidence: A Practice Guide* p.50

Heading	'Big questions'	Rationales for evidence needs	Types of evidence required
A: Understanding the context ; fundamental processes and phenomena, baselines and benchmarks	Where are we now?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To gather and analyse available/new data • To evaluate risks, issues and uncertainties 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reviews of existing knowledge • Surveys of social and environmental data • Research on causality • Risk assessment
B: Development of models, methodologies and tools	Where are we going?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To understand current drivers and trends • To predict future drivers and trends • To assess implications for policy outcomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sensitivity analysis • Horizon scanning • Forecasting and scenarios • Modelling impacts and outcomes
C: Developing and using the evidence base to help set targets and formulate policy	Where do we want to be over the next 5-10 years?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To understand the economic/social value of change • To understand the feasibility/cost of change • To negotiate goals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic and social research • Deliberative engagement processes • Feasibility and pilot studies • Market surveys
D: Development and appraisal of options/solutions E: Optimum decisions and effective implementation through communication , engagement and consultation to influence change	How do we get there?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To identify/evaluate current options • To identify/develop new solutions • To evaluate new/old options 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Option/evaluation studies • Regulatory impact assessments • Interventions to promote innovation
F: Monitoring progress towards policy/programme targets G: Policy/programme evaluation	How well did we do?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To monitor progress • To evaluate policies and programmes • To learn lessons 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interdisciplinary evaluations • Deliberative evaluation processes

Source: Shaxson, L. (2014) 'Investing in Evidence; Lessons from the UK Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.'

ENDNOTES

1. See for examples these discussions on post-truth politics: Post-truth politics; Art of the lie, 'The Economist.' (10 September, 2016); Gopalakrishnan, A. (2016) Life in post-truth times: What we share with the Brexit campaign and Trump. 'The Times of India.' 30 June 2016; Connor, J. (2014) Tony Abbott's carbon tax outrage signals nadir of post-truth politics. 'The Age.' 14 July 2014; Drezner, D.W. (2016) Why the post-truth political era might be around for a while. 'The Washington Post.' 16 June 2016; Freedland, J. (2016) Post-truth politicians such as Donald Trump and Boris Johnson are no joke. 'The Guardian.' 13 May 2016.
2. Breckon, J. and Dodson, J. (2016) 'Using Evidence: What Works?' London: Alliance for Useful Evidence. Accessed at, <http://www.alliance4usefulevidence.org/publication/using-evidence-what-works-april-2016/>
3. See p.6 of Breckon, J. and Dodson, J. (2016) 'Using Evidence: What Works?' London: Alliance for Useful Evidence. Accessed at, <http://www.alliance4usefulevidence.org/publication/using-evidence-what-works-april-2016/>
4. For a further discussion of the best experimental approaches to government, see Breckon, J. (2015) 'Better Public Services Through Experimental Government.' Accessed at: <http://www.alliance4usefulevidence.org/publication/better-public-services-through-experimental-government/#sthash.hs8ILbli.dpuf>
5. The pan-African Evidence 2016 Conference in Pretoria; the What Works Global Summit in London; the European Evaluation Society biennial in Maastricht; International Network for Government Science Advice Conference in Brussels; and Evidence Works 2016; A Global Forum for Government in London.



About the Alliance for Useful Evidence

The Alliance for Useful Evidence promotes the use of high quality evidence to inform decisions on strategy, policy and practice in the UK and beyond. We do this through advocacy, research and capacity building, and we work with partners in national and local governments and civil society to encourage debate, discussion, collaboration and innovation. The Alliance is funded by three partners: The Big Lottery Fund, the Economic and Social Research Council, and Nesta. To join our growing network of 3000 individuals and organisations supporting the use of evidence, visit www.alliance4usefulevidence.org/join

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