What is the role of researcher media advocacy within the Australian road safety policy process?

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Abstract

Road safety policy debates are often highly public and involve an array of stakeholders with competing interpretations of what issues are problematic and require policy attention, what solutions should be considered and what groups should be involved in the policymaking process. Science can have a particularly prominent role within these advocacy battles, leading the policy process to resemble a structured conflict over what constitutes 'relevant evidence' and 'expertise'. This scientific emphasis places substantial importance on the 'expert' views of researchers, which in turn results in their prominence within policy-relevant media discussion. While conventional researcher outputs are subjected to substantial critical analysis by their peers, their media advocacy outputs may be less critically scrutinised. Further, there is also conflict about the perceived role of researchers and whether advocacy should form part of their role. This study aimed to learn from key stakeholders, including researchers, involved in Australian novice driver road safety policy debates how they perceived the role of media advocacy by researchers within the policy process. It emerged that media advocacy by researchers is seen by many road safety stakeholders as being a major policy agenda-setting force. It is also generally perceived by stakeholders as having the potential to help disseminate research widely throughout the community so as to stimulate more evidence-informed policy debates. Finally, stakeholders perceive several structural factors as limiting the level to which researchers are involved in the media domain including their lack of both expertise in advocacy techniques and awareness of existing political constraints facing policymakers. By making perceptions of the role of researcher advocacy more transparent, this study hopes to focus the attention of the Australian road safety community on this important but largely overlooked neglected issue.

Keywords

Advocacy, media, evidence-based policy, research utilisation

Introduction

Along with a range of political, economic and other factors, scientific research may underpin the development of road safety policy. While the notion of 'evidence-based policy' may not be as prominently employed in road safety policy discussions as in other public sectors [1, 2] including health [3, 4], the notion of 'evidence-based policy' is nonetheless employed in road safety policy discourse. This paradigm is based on the notion that the policy process should be governed by the efficient utilisation of scientific research in order to maximise the societal benefits of policies [3]. In this sense it promotes an image of the political process being governed by technical rationality, in which the research outputs and expert views of researchers are granted significant 'cultural capital' [5].

Recent studies explaining the failures of the evidence-based policy paradigm in the health sector have led to an increasing focus on the role of persuasion within the policy process and in particular, how argumentation and advocacy mediate the use of scientific research [6]. Literature of this type presents the policy process as a semiotic battle in which conflicting parties attempt to have their conceptions of policy problems, acceptable solutions, evaluation criteria and legitimate policy actors dominate those of their opponents. That is, the policy process is presented as a social drama centred on conflict regarding the appropriate 'terms of the debate' [7]. Due to the current prominence of the evidence-based policy paradigm, these terms of the debate are largely framed in the language of science. From this perspective the impact of scientific research on policy decisions is dependant on its utilisation within positions advocated by policy actors. The actual use of research is then less dependant on its technical merits than on the persuasiveness of the arguments on which it is based [8].

When the policy process is viewed from such a perspective, researchers may be seen as the producers of two types of artefacts employed in advocacy: publications and expert views. Within current policy processes these two artefacts unavoidably construct particular versions of reality upon which decisions are to be based. As such, choices regarding 'presentation' and 'communication' within the scientific enterprise are a major contributor to policy creation. This focus upon researcher communication of policy-relevant results has become a focus of attention in many policy fields including public health [9, 10]. However, with a few notable exceptions [11], academic studies acknowledging or attempting to explain the role of researcher advocacy have not been attempted in road safety. This knowledge gap is particularly surprising considering the public nature of road safety policy debates and the prominence of researchers within them. For these reasons, this study attempted to demonstrate the discord between the theory and practice of evidence-based policy within road safety.

In order to ground the study in rich explanatory detail, a comparative case study design was chosen involving two particular policy processes; those surrounding night-time and passenger restrictions for the early provisional driver period. These particular novice driver policy debates were characterised by high levels of media attention, which persisted over several years in each jurisdiction, in which conflicting interpretations of relevant scientific information and media advocacy by researchers was particularly prominent. Furthermore, jurisdictional variations in policy outcomes resulted from these two debates despite similar existing scientific information regarding the potential effectiveness of the restrictions. As such, these policy processes offered the opportunity to highlight non-scientific factors, including advocacy, which were hypothesised as potentially exerting substantial influence on policy outputs.

Methods

A comparative stakeholder analysis study design employing semi-structured interviews for data collection was deemed most appropriate to fulfil the study aims. The research was conducted in four states, namely, New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland and Western Australia. A purposive sampling method was employed which was determined following a thorough analysis of all publicly accessible documents regarding the debates surrounding night-time and passenger restrictions in each included jurisdiction. These included discussion papers, Hansard, newspaper articles and other relevant documents available online. Investigation into the organisational structure of the road safety policy process in each jurisdiction also helped determine the sample.

Between 8 to 12 key individuals were identified in each state, including representatives from the following stakeholder groups: licensing authority representatives, insurance companies, motoring organisations, researchers, media, police, journalists, victims lobby groups and youth lobby groups. While politicians and political advisors were identified as critical stakeholders they declined to participate. Potential participants were invited by email, mail and phone and were provided with information regarding the study and assurances of confidentiality. Approximately 85% of all those invited agreed to participate. In all, 39 one-hour semi-structured interviews were conducted between August 2007 and March 2008

The interviews were transcribed then coded using textual reference software (NVIVO7). The resulting data was grouped into key themes (stakeholder's perspective) and patterns (researcher's perspective) [12]. These patterns and themes provided the framework around which analysis then proceeded [13]. The University of Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee approved the study.

Results

Three main issues were raised by participants. Firstly, media advocacy by researchers was presented as a major agenda-setting force within the case studies. Secondly, the majority of participants suggested researchers should increase current levels of media engagement so as to publicise scientific information generally confined to the research domains of peer-reviewed journals and conference presentations. This employment of the media for the communication of research was presented as having the potential to educate the community and in this way, facilitate more evidence-informed policy debates. Finally, several constraints were identified currently limiting media advocacy by researchers including funding arrangements and a lack of relevant expertise.

Researcher media advocacy within the case studies

All participants acknowledged the prominence of researcher media advocacy within the policy debates in question. An incrementally increasing body of evaluation research supporting the effectiveness of night-time and passenger restrictions was seen as providing the long-term foundation of these policy debates. However, the majority of participants presented the key initiating event in their jurisdiction as prominent media coverage of multiple fatality novice driver crashes followed by policy advocacy by international and/or Australian researchers. The prominence of Australian researcher comments within the media in the following weeks, months and years was seen by participants as a major force keeping the restrictions on the political agenda. Participants presented researchers as capitalising upon the ongoing media publicity granted to high profile crashes and the views of victim relatives, in order to advocate for the introduction of night-time and passenger restrictions. As one licensing authority representative stated:

> *"I think family victims felt like 'I need to do something about this and I don't want any other family to suffer the way I've suffered' and have that personal motive and need to act whereas the researchers have been saying for a long time 'research is showing that these restrictions will save lives' so from their point of view it's a good time to jump onboard and say that now that we've got some community support."*

Despite the general agreement regarding the prominence of researcher media advocacy within the case studies and its key role in setting the policy agenda, different opinions were granted in relation to the actual contribution it made to policy outcomes. A clear division in relation to this issue was seen between researchers, motoring organisation representatives and lobbyists that supported the restrictions, who presented researcher media advocacy as being a major positive influence on outcomes, and government representatives and all other groups opposing the restrictions, who viewed it as being either relatively unimportant or having a negative influence. Those viewing media advocacy by researchers positively focused on its role in raising the quality of the public debate by communicating the scientific evidence-base of the various potential policy options being advocated for by various stakeholders. As one researcher stated in relation to their personal advocacy efforts:

> *"We were providing a solution to the dilemma that we've got, a major problem with young drivers - the dying. What do we do about it? There's the knee jerk ones 'oh well, they speed and they drive fast cars' so let's deal with those. I was sort of saying 'well if we look at the evidence flows, no, they're not good solutions, ones that are, are the night driving and passenger restrictions' so we brought the research to the public to say 'look, what's being advocated isn't necessarily going to fix the problem, these are some of the options that potentially, are not going to fix but certainly reduce the incidents.'*

Integral to this type of argument supporting the worth of researcher media advocacy was the notion that the potential exists for policy debates to be relatively uninformed by scientific evidence, with the views of researchers lying at the periphery. As a different researcher discussed:

> *"In bringing the research evidence to the floor I felt that in the end, this was a clear path that [we] needed to play because in the absence of that, you don't have a researcher or research evidence being brought to the table."*

Conversely, those participants that viewed the role of this researcher media engagement negatively perceived some researchers as employing scientific rationale to publicly justify policy positions that were not in fact evidence-based. That is, these participants viewed researchers as having become 'advocates' rather than unbiased analysts 'keeping to the science'. Some participants holding this view hypothesised that the central aim of these 'opinion-maker' researchers was to market themselves and their organisations. This general view was summarised by one government representative in the statement that:

> *"I don't know quite why they [researchers] jumped on the bandwagon because it was something that went beyond what I would have thought [their organisations] scientific brief would have been. I think there was also a prominence given to the marketing for [the organisation] itself. It certainly gave it a very high profile and I think at the end of the day there's some marketing and positioning that was required… the researchers went outside the research brief and they actually*

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505

had become opinion makers which, as I said was an interesting issue, an interesting tactic to adopt."

Clearly, participants perceived media advocacy by researchers as being a major policy agenda-setting force within the policy processes surrounding night-time and passenger novice driver restrictions. However judgments as to whether this advocacy actually made a 'positive' contribution to policy outcomes were conflicting.

Should researchers use the media to become advocates in policy debates?
Participants generally viewed media advocacy as being the major contributor, along with scientific research, to policy outcomes. In particular, the inherent ability of the media to generate more *immediacy* in communication as opposed to scientific research was viewed as central to its major influence on policy. As one lobbyist explained in relation to these points:

"Simple graphs are not just easier to understand, they're much easier to use... When you're trying to get a point across in the media, it's far better to have one simple graph to show what happens like the one on what happens to young drivers on Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights, than to talk for half an hour on it and I'm very careful to take those with me... Pictures are worth 1,000 words. A picture of a P plater smashed around a tree is going to give far more impact than 1,000 studies because I mean the [jurisdictional road safety authority] is full of studies, this university is full of studies. Not much happens from a study. It backs up what happens at the critical time when the media can get out there and demand something happens... the way of the media, you don't get more than 5 to 10 seconds if you're going to be on the 6 o'clock news and you've got to get it out very quickly, maybe you get 15, 20 seconds but you've got to have something pretty potent to say."

One of the key reasons given by participants for this ability of the media to exert more influence on policy than scientific research is its focus on individual road safety impacts as opposed to the population-level focus of research. As policymakers and the community were presented as granting more weight to narrative personal accounts than rigorous scientific research, this issue was presented by participants as being of crucial importance. As one researcher stated:

"I think because of the perspective we're coming from which is a population one, I think that concept is a difficult one… our focus is on the population health area and it doesn't translate to the individual. Ultimately it does but they will say 'but yeah, what about that person who lives in this area and … he gets bashed at night… but ultimately what we're trying to do is shift the agenda so that the whole population reduces the incidents and that will be achieved by an incremental shift down this scale that we're looking at… And I guess also the policymaker, at the bottom line they're going to have to deal with it when it gets pushed through Parliament, a member for Timbuktu standing up saying … 'my ruddy members are going to' and so they do have to think about the individual and how it does affect them."

The previous two quotes reflect the view of the majority of participants regarding the importance of media coverage, much of which may not be founded on scientific evidence, in producing policy. The majority of participants perceived peer-reviewed publications, conference presentations, parliamentary submissions, political lobbying and informal contact with policymakers and key political gatekeepers as being the most important channels through which researchers should communicate their research results and personal views. While many participants holding this view nonetheless supported an increase in researcher media advocacy, some were vehemently opposed to researchers engaging in activities outside their traditional domains due to a range of factors including their lack of advocacy expertise and their lack of awareness regarding the political constraints facing policymakers. When questioned on these arguments raised by other interviewees, many researchers voiced strong reservations regarding their credibility. As one researcher stated:

"[A government representative] said 'you shouldn't be touching policy at all' sort of thing … 'you should stay clear of it, it's not [your] role to do be doing that' and I think that's just incorrect, I mean, good policy is about policy that has had been informed and what I find really annoying is that we live in a democracy, we are researchers and we have a privileged role being a

researcher… we're paid by the taxpayers to do what we love to do and [the notion that] we shouldn't report anything that we do that's contentious or that may point to government not necessarily doing the right thing or it's not the right way forward, I think that's incorrect... that's rubbish and they just didn't like me coming out and being quite public about 'these are not good strategies, these are not good policies' and in some instances, sure, I might have gone too far and been too vocal about it but it made everyone say 'shut up' or whatever or made them even think about it a little bit then we're moving forward."

Those participants arguing for an increase in researcher media advocacy justified their positions through reference to the 'hidden' and relatively 'passive' nature of research outcomes and expert opinions. As one lobbyist stated:

"Well a lot of them [researchers] are very passive and they rely on a long, a much longer gestation period. We like to see things happen. A lot of people in road safety all talk a lot to each other. Same people and they'll all go out and they look for grants to do more and more studies but you've got to ask yourself what's happening, is it resulting in anything or is it just more and more study? There's a time where all this study has got to be translated into some form of action isn't there?"

While not being as forceful in their beliefs, researchers also acknowledged the need to publicise findings outside of the traditional mediums. As one researcher stated:

"I do worry a little bit that, and this is coming back to the whole issue about translating research to practice, the people working in academic research centres I think have to make sure that they just don't rely on the peer reviewed journals to disseminate their information. Whilst I think that's a really critical thing itself we also have to make sure that we are disseminating our information and being actively involved in all other ways of influencing policy."

The majority of licensing authority representatives (many of which have formal academic qualifications), also supported this position. Their views on the issue were well represented in the statement given by one licensing authority representative that:

"I think they could be more proactive in marketing their outcomes. Certainly through the media because at the end of the day politicians react to the media and if they market themselves better to the media and get it out there into a public forum and cause community debate on the research [it's a good thing], provided it's valid and appropriate to the particular issues that are coming up. Not so much what's happening today, what's going to happen tomorrow and the next day and the next day and if they can get that into the public forum and encourage community debate then I think we'll get politicians and certainly the government bureaucracy moving a lot quicker to get the outcomes actually into place. So I think they could market themselves a lot better."

Participants clearly perceived media advocacy as being a major influence on policy outputs due to its ability to create more immediacy in communication. They also viewed traditional domains of research knowledge as being inaccessible to the general community. As such, the majority of participants argued that researchers should increase their efforts to use the media to communicate scientific research to the community so as to facilitate more informed policy debates.

<u>What factors are limiting media advocacy by researchers?</u>
When participants arguing for increased media advocacy by researchers were asked why they perceived the current level as inadequate, responses centred on advocacy existing outside the traditional key performance indicators of researchers. As such, researchers were presented as having neither the time nor money to engage in such extraneous activities. As one licensing authority representative stated in relation to the transfer of information:

"I think the researchers have a responsibility in terms of the transfer of the information… I think it doesn't happen enough in terms of them actually being involved in the debate publicly… I think many more of them should be involved in the debate but sometimes they also are not being paid for their time and they may respond or some of them may take it on as this is part of my role in terms

of I want to see some practical change based on my own research or what's best for the wider community. I think there's a range of issues the tertiary or the research community could be involved in and they're fairly silent but maybe they're busy on what they're being paid to do than do other things. I'd love to see them being involved in a wider range of issues out there and joining in the debate and putting a more informed position out there in terms of what gets reported."

A second reason given for the lack of researcher media advocacy was the fear of researchers to 'bite the hand that feeds them' and become 'blacklisted' by key research funders (governments and motoring organisations) supporting non-evidence-based policy positions that researchers may wish to advocate against in the media. As one researcher explained:

"You don't want to appear to be too critical of the group that actually funds you as well and I think that's one of the dilemmas and that's why it's great to be a truly independent group, not to have rely upon government funding… [a particular researcher] is fairly vocal and fairly critical and there were problems from time to time because of that as it was seemingly like (they were) criticising the hand that feeds but it gets to a point where it's reasonable to do that. You have to do it, you have to speak up and I guess over many years I've had to be very careful with my words publicly because I've not wanted to appear to be overly critical of the [licensing authority]."

Participants arguing for increased media advocacy by researchers clearly felt that time limitations and funding arrangements were constraining such efforts at present.

Discussion

The results from this study uncovered the major influence of media advocacy on the policy process, as seen by key members of the road safety policy community. This confirms the views of policy scholars seeking to explain the policy process in terms of rhetoric rather than merely through scientific rationality [14-17] . Researchers were perceived as playing a substantial role in these policy-relevant rhetoric debates occurring within the media. In particular, the role of researcher media advocacy was seen as a major agenda-setting force in the policy process. This confirms the views of scholars and other stakeholders promoting increased policy advocacy by road safety researchers [18-22].

Despite agreeing on its prominence, a variety of judgements were made by participants as to the importance of these efforts by researchers. The majority viewed efforts to widely disseminate research conclusions so as to educate the community, as resulting in increasingly evidence-based policy debates. As such, there would appear a general mandate for researchers to further engage in such 'public education' activities. If research is not used cynically by Australian policymakers as a tactic to prolong inaction [23], but as a tool through which to facilitate a more informed community and evidence-based policy process, then stipulations of this kind within government-funded contracts would seem to logically follow.

In contrast, there was also a general view raised that researchers should retain their image as unbiased analysts by not deviating beyond strict communication of existing evidence to become policy advocates. While this could be argued as logical, this separation of the communication of policy-relevant science and policy advocacy fails to recognise the essentially persuasive nature of all communication, scientific or otherwise. A wealth of political science and philosophical literature has demonstrated the inherently persuasive nature of scientific research itself, in that conclusions are always produced by subjective choices regarding the research question and which findings are promoted or silenced in analysis [24]. As all information cannot be simultaneously communicated, that which is selected and voiced is chosen on the basis of judgements regarding relevance and validity. As judgments are inevitably subjective in nature, the communication of road safety research is inevitably a process of persuasion designed so as to naturalise a particular outcome or belief in the mind of the recipient.

As the business and political worlds have acknowledged for decades, by rearranging the order in which the same 'hard facts' are presented or questions asked, different ideologies are granted more or less significance and different perspectives can be induced in the minds of the recipient. This point is well exemplified by a story by Postman [25] regarding two priests, the first of which writes to the Pope asking

"whether it is permissible to smoke while praying," and is told it is not because prayer should be ones sole focus of attention. The second priest asks "whether it permissible to pray while smoking," and is told it is because praying is always appropriate. As Danzinger [26] explains, Postman's point is that the form of a question blocks one from seeing solutions to problems that become visible if asked the same essential question differently. This is also true of the way in which scientific evidence is presented. This point is particularly useful for properly conceptualising the reason for the lengthy development of graduated licensing discussion papers by jurisdictional authorities, including those within the present study. Clearly the notion that researchers should always avoid 'advocacy' in the media is illogical at its core, as there is little actual difference between the roles of 'information conduits' and 'policy actors'.

Rather than perceiving media advocacy as outside the domain of researchers, attention should instead be granted to the question of how to make this advocacy more relevant and effective. This issue is centred on the fact that as one motoring organisation representative stated, *"Researchers don't necessarily make good advocates, but neither do many advocates have a thorough comprehension of research."* In such an environment it would seem logical for researchers to make efforts to educate influential advocates as well as increase their own advocacy skills. While not being complete solutions to existing problems, strategies of these types may help facilitate an increase in evidence-based advocacy.

Limitations

While study participants were questioned as to the overall role of media advocacy by researchers within the Australian road safety policy process, much of the discussion was focused on those processes surrounding night-time and passenger restrictions in four jurisdictions. While this gave the discussion significant depth, the involvement of researcher media advocacy in these cases may not be representative of its role in road safety policy processes more generally. As such, investigation of its role within other policy processes involving different key factors from those in the case studies would offer the opportunity to confirm the generalisability of the results. The inclusion of an American jurisdiction later this year will provide further opportunity to test the validity of the study results.

The lack of policymakers and political advisors within the sample provided a second study limitation in that their views may have differed from included participants. Future research in this area should prioritise participation from these two groups of key policy actors. Despite the lack of input from these two groups and the relatively small sample size more generally, the variety of key participating stakeholders ensured study input from a sufficiently diverse array of views. This ensured that study conclusions were not overly biased by the opinions of any individual stakeholder or stakeholder group.

Due to the qualitative methodology employed for this study the potential existed for subjectivity in data analysis and interpretation. However, this potential was reduced by discussing preliminary conclusions within the research team and many of the interviews. A further limitation was the lack of triangulation of results. While participant views regarding researcher media advocacy were able to be compared between stakeholder groups and jurisdictions, no 'hard evidence' was employed to test the validity of these views. This issue has been addressed in the larger body of work involving this study by conducting a media analysis focused on the case studies. This involved the systematic collection and analysis of all Australian print media discussion of night-time or passenger restrictions from 2004 to 2008. Comparison of media and stakeholder analysis results is currently being finalized and will be published in 2009.

Conclusions and Implications

Researcher media advocacy is viewed by the road safety community as a significant force within the policy process. Due to their role in educating or advocating to the community as to the scientific basis of policy alternatives, researchers are one of the major groups setting the policy agenda. This may in part be due to the influence of the media in moulding community perceptions and the importance of electoral support within the rationale of policymakers. While all media communication by researchers is to some degree persuasive in nature, the degree to which they focus on research evidence lies at the core of conflicting views regarding its proper place within an idealised policy system. If Australian road safety policy systems continue to be heavily influenced by media discourse then media advocacy by researchers will remain a force impacting to some degree on policy outputs. For this reason, more attention should be

placed on approaches currently being utilised so as to develop strategies to increase the quality and effectiveness of media advocacy by researchers.

Several potential strategies exist which may increase this advocacy. Firstly, researchers could be encouraged to widely disseminate their findings by including these activities as stipulations within research funding contracts. Researchers could also be provided with increased media training so as to improve their advocacy expertise from the current low levels described by participants. Finally, increased communication between researchers and policymakers may result in increased researcher awareness of existing political factors constraining the introduction of evidence-based policies, which may in turn facilitate more politically-sensitive media advocacy strategies by researchers.

Due to participant views regarding the link between media discourse and policy outputs, the key role of researcher advocacy within media discourse and the lack of research in this area, the issue of road safety researcher media advocacy clearly requires further empirical investigation.

Acknowledgements

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