

The Leiden agenda

Knowledge democracy

The Broker recently blogged from the conference ‘Towards Knowledge Democracy’, held in Leiden, the Netherlands. We asked Jean-Paul Marthoz to reflect on the blog postings and reports from the event.

Conference organizers know how to put together a programme of experts and speakers, and a balanced mix of lectures and workshops. Conferences are rarely a model of linear thinking, however.

Participants can pick and choose among the speakers, and are alternately attentive and uninterested. Each one filters and decodes the presentations according to his or her own interests, background and objectives. The ideas they take home with them are thus more a kaleidoscope than a true reflection of the entire proceedings, rather like witnesses’ descriptions of a crime scene – they all have seen different things and have been impressed by different features.

Seen through the eyes of the bloggers, the international conference ‘Towards Knowledge Democracy’, held in Leiden, the Netherlands, in August 2009, certainly fits this pattern. The conference attracted more than 500 participants from 26 countries, so there were indeed ‘many’ Leiden conferences. The blogs extend in all directions, offering many different angles, personal and professional. But there is nevertheless an underlying logic, thanks to the two cornerstones of the conference: the keynote speech and the proposals for future action, the Leiden agenda.

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In his opening address, Roel in ’t Veld, chair of the Council for Research on Spatial Planning, Nature and the Environment (RMNO), framed the conference as a challenge for democracy. ‘As the industrial economy has been combined with mass democracy through universal suffrage and later by the rise of mass media’, he writes, ‘one might suggest that the logical successor of the knowledge economy is a new type of governance, to be called knowledge democracy’.

The rise of ‘media politics’, in ’t Veld believes, has caused ‘the political debate to become superficial and short-term oriented’. It has also fomented populism and the ‘gradual disappearance of checks and balances’. In such a context, what roles will knowledge play in the transition to a knowledge democracy?

The Leiden agenda strives to provide an answer to this question. ‘From a democratic perspective, the development, dissemination and use of knowledge [must] meet certain conditions’, says in ’t Veld. It should be independent, relevant for policy makers, credible, legitimate, pluralistic and universally accessible.

The words ‘tension’ and ‘conflicts’ formed a constant subtext during the conference. The tension between science and politics was forcefully expressed in a cartoon (see the blog) showing a politician saying: ‘Find me some scientists who share my views’.

Blogger Georgina Aboud, of Eldis, UK, quotes Professor Ellen Wayenberg of Ghent University, Belgium, on how the knowledge derived from research is used: ‘Knowledge is used when it suits policy makers, and is deemed flawed when it does not’. The same applies to public participation: ‘policy makers cherry-pick the participatory outcomes that suit them’.

In their reflections on ‘knowledge democracy’, most of the bloggers’ contributions seem to have been inspired by the philosophy of the common good, and so acknowledge the need for a long-term perspective. Aboud restates the recommendations of Roel in ’t Veld and Louis Meuleman (RMNO) that ‘we have no right to make decisions which, according to our present knowledge and values, would impose on future generations such costs and risks that we would not be willing to assume by ourselves’. If trade-offs are inevitable, Aboud writes, they should be based on ‘balance; enough alteration in structures to create an environment for change, without developing opportunities for dangerous elements to succeed’.

Transdisciplinary approaches

‘Transdisciplinarity’ also appears to have drawn the bloggers’ attention. ‘I like the cross appeal’, Aboud observes. ‘It

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reminds me of Renaissance (wo)men who could switch between science, technology and art in order to unlock secrets and begin finding solutions’.

Roland Scholz, of ETH Zurich, Switzerland, is the ‘chief evangelist’ of the ‘transdisciplinary approach’. He defines it as ‘a joint process initiated by non-academics (government, NGOs or industry) or scientists to work on an ‘ill-defined, societally relevant, real-world problem, which includes challenging scientific questions. Non-academics take responsibility for the decisions [...], while science takes responsibility for the scientific quality’.

The conference was able ‘to draw together people from different sciences and actually have them discuss inter-/trans-/multidisciplinary research’, comments Pepijn Jansen of Wageningen International. ‘These approaches have been called transdisciplinarity, multi-stakeholder processes, social learning, action research ... Of course, they are not all exactly the same, but [...] these processes are all about getting relevant people around the table and letting them generate new knowledge and a shared understanding about a common issue, and hopefully also finding a way to deal with the problem’.

‘The idea of co-creation of new knowledge is so different from research’, consultant Geesje Kruit agrees. ‘It implies system innovation and action! As Chris Peterson (Michigan State University, USA) states, we should engage stakeholders as our peers’.

There was a sense, however, that among these ‘relevant people’, too many belonged to the familiar coterie of science, academia, government or the media. Aboud observes that this was a ‘very top-down conference, predominantly white male academics’, while Jansen adds that ‘I was hoping to bump into my neighbour or perhaps the bus driver’.

Bart Jan Krouwel of Rabobank Nederland chooses to focus on engagement with the corporate world. ‘Talking about interdisciplinary knowledge, we need more integrated partnerships between researchers and businessmen to develop – together – more innovations’, he writes. But his fellow bloggers are convinced that knowledge should help

enhance public participation in general. ‘Knowledge democracy is about the sharing and creation of knowledge in a democratic way’, Jansen suggests. ‘Through websites such as Wikipedia, the power of knowledge is being democratized’.

There is a danger that conferences such as this, where the best meet the brightest, become elitist. The real world of mass-media-induced ‘illiteracy’ increases the temptation, since people sometimes reject ‘scientific evidence’ in favour of urban legends or unvalidated stories on the internet.

Direct democracy

‘History shows that knowledge societies are rarely democratic’, ponders Hanns-J. Neubert of the European Union of Science Journalists’ Associations. ‘Instead, they tend to be technocracies. Knowledge alone cannot improve democracy’.

‘Citizen participation’ became a conference buzzword: how do we prevent citizens feeling they are subjects and not agents of change. How do we include the public in the knowledge process? How, for instance, can we mix parliamentary and new forms of direct democracy?

At a time when growing numbers of citizens feel disenfranchised, marginalized or excluded, the challenge is to integrate them and their knowledge, says consultant Geesje Kruit. ‘Not the solutions, but how to get them involved, or interested, is the issue.’

Too much consensus is another risk. Knowledge needs to be nurtured by encouraging ‘differing and conflicting views’. ‘The real challenge is finding ways of dealing with people who do not share our values’, Jansen notes. ‘We cannot be really innovative if we don’t welcome outside views’.

Experimentation is the name of the game. ‘Perhaps central to this conference – and the idea of knowledge democracy – is that we need to alter institutions and reshape ill-fitting concepts, while experimenting with new ideas to see what works’, Aboud concludes.

Some degree of modesty seems most welcome. ‘We scientists are not very innovative in our thinking about innovation’, Jansen comments after two days at the conference.

Hanns-J. Neubert ends on a sceptical note: ‘All the knowledge available obviously does not prevent a democracy from taking irrational, even stupid decisions, while investing a good deal of society’s economic and intellectual wealth in dead-end technologies’. He made this comment after fighting his way through a traffic jam on his way home. ‘Democracies still have a long way to go...’, he observes.

Well, now they have a new route map: the Leiden agenda. ■

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