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What If There Were More Policy Futures Studios?

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Unexpected election results are intersecting in new and often disturbing ways with enduring issues such as economic and social inequalities; climate change; global movements of people fleeing war, poverty and environmental change; and the social and cultural consequences of long-term cuts in public funding. These developments are punctuated by dramatic events such as war, terrorist attacks and disasters such as floods, fires and other effects of changes in rainfall and temperature. Many of the available public policy visions of the future fail to connect with people's day-to-day realities and challenges they face. Where could alternative visions and more effective public policy solutions come from? And what roles can design and futures practices play in constituting these?

For people using design-based and arts-based approaches in relation to social and public policy issues, the practices, structures and processes associated with institutions making public policy present a paradox.¹ On the one hand, creative methods can enable people to participate in assessing how things are, in ways that are meaningful to them, and imagining how things could be different, and to do so in collaboration with people they might not ordinarily engage with. Workshops and spaces for exploring futures such as design jams, hackathons, digital platforms, exhibitions and co-working hubs can open up a distributed creative capacity for negotiating potentialities in relation to current actualities. The strong emphasis in design on how people experience issues – understanding things on their terms, informed by the principles of ethnography – can open up participation, critique and creativity. Such practices can surface and open up difficult questions about institutions and how they work.

On the other hand, such approaches often do not lead to the hoped-for results. Having agency in co-design workshop does not replace the need for having agency in your home, neighbourhood, place of study, play, worship, or work, in your communities or the wider world. Such initiatives do not replace the need for political parties and public administrations to have visions, policies and plans that connect with people's lived realities and the means to achieve them. Nor do such approaches have the same legitimacy or accountabilities as the established practices, structures and processes in the institutions they intervene into. Further, design-based methods for involving people in exploring futures do not scale easily. The kinds of expertise required to facilitate exploratory futures processes and spaces are not well understood and cannot be easily reproduced. In addition, the close relationships between design practice, consumer marketing and the tech industry situated within Eurocentric modernism means that design's methods are intimately tied up with particular kinds of socio-technical imaginaries.²

Set against this tension, the question I want to explore here is the potential of combining design and futures approaches in (re)imagining public policy making, by (re)connecting people's experiences with policy infrastructures, processes and practices. To do this, I review briefly some current ways of thinking about how policy options can be explored and anticipated, drawing on research in foresight. Then, using

examples from activities by public servants developing new kinds of policy making practices, I summarise the characteristics of what I call the ‘policy futures studio’. Rather than necessarily being a team, or unit, such a studio can be a distributed set of capabilities. Together these capabilities can enable the inventive co-emergence of future ways of living, being and working that connect policy infrastructures and processes with people’s lived experiences of issues.

Exploring Policy Futures

Policy making practices and institutions are in flux. Increasing digitisation of data, media and communications, and innovations in ways of organising and delivering services, intersect with political, often neo-liberal, exhortations to reduce public investment, empower corporations, or require individuals to find solutions to policy problems (Peck & Theodore, 2015). Changes to policy making is taking place in central, regional and local government around the world, sometimes in the form of ‘policy labs’ (Williamson, 2016). Gatherings of such labs and professionals working with them (e.g. Nesta, 2015; EU Policy Lab, 2016; Service Design in Government, 2019) emphasise the sharing of knowledge among peers, cross-institutional connections, and illustrate the range of policy domains and scales within which new approaches are being tried out.

Sometimes called ‘open government’ (e.g. OGP, 2011), these developments include:

- Evidence-based policy, premised on the idea of demonstrating “what works” and using this to inform priorities, directions and investments with a particular emphasis on translating insights from the social sciences (e.g. Breckon, 2015).
- Broadening participation in developing policy and using a wider range of evidence including big data analysis, sharing public and administrative data as well as ethnography (e.g. Verhulst & Caplan, 2015).
- Experimentation in policy making by trying out ideas before applying them at scale, for example through randomised control trials based on applying behavioural insights (e.g. John, Cotterill, Richardson, Moseley, Stoker, Wales, & Smith, 2011) but also small-scale policy prototyping (e.g. Policy Lab 2016; Chari, 2018).

In the context of this ongoing experimentation, two domains of professional practice are increasingly tied up with the new policy practices: futures and design.

There is a long-standing relationship between futures practices and research and public policy recognising the need for elected leaders and staff in public administrations to make decisions amid high levels of complexity and uncertainty about outcomes (Urry, 2016). A range of approaches and methods from forecasting to scenario planning are used. However, one review of the use of scenario planning in public policy highlighted the uncertain results from developing and using scenarios, and the importance of political and institutional cultures in shaping their effectiveness (Volkery & Ribeiro, 2009). Some governments have invested in building up an internal capability in exploring futures and encouraging a wider capability and ecosystem to shape policy making. For example, Fuerth’s description of *anticipatory governance* argued that governments should develop capabilities in foresight, which he defined as “the capacity to anticipate alternative futures, based on sensitivity to weak signals, and an ability to visualize their consequences, in the form of multiple possible outcomes” (Fuerth, 2009, p. 16). Advocating a systems approach to futures, Fuerth argues that complexity theory, with its emphasis on non-linearity and interdependency, is an important way to think about how policy should be formulated. A scaleable foresight capability for government requires four sub-systems, according to Fuerth: a foresight system; a system to integrate foresight into the policy process; a feedback system to assess performance and manage institutional knowledge; and an open-minded institutional culture (Fuerth, 2009, p. 20). To build up anticipatory governance requires changes to institutional norms and cultural practices.

Elsewhere, in his study of three countries' strategic foresight activities, Habegger identifies two ways they contribute to public policy making. The first is to provide systematic knowledge about trends and developments in the wider environment. The second, more significant, benefit is the mutual learning processes and networks created across professional communities and policy areas (Habegger, 2010, p. 56). These researchers highlight that while the outputs of strategic foresight or scenario planning, such as reports, can be important within governance contexts, it is the open-minded, curious and analytical capacity to change how policy making is done that is of value.

In contrast, the professional domain of design has only recently become more visible as a field of practice and research engaging with public policy making. Over the past decade, the practices, expertise and methods associated with late 20th century design studios have been reworked in relation to complex, fast-changing and dynamic social and policy issues (Bason, 2017; Kimbell & Julier, 2019). Packaged up as design thinking, agile collaboration, service design or other variants, different versions of designerly expertise are being deployed in relation to complex public and organisational challenges. Bringing design into policy contexts brings a focus on the practical generation and exploration of new ideas that allow policy specialists to collaborate across silos and surface the perspectives of beneficiaries and citizens (Bason, 2014; Kimbell, 2015a). For example Christiansen and Bunt (2014) suggest that policy making is reconfigured through design in four ways: By providing a focus on outcomes, rather than solutions; creating systems that enable post-production, rather than stand-alone services; experimenting to produce the grounds for conviction; and by recognising and exercising a new type of authority that is distributed, rather than hierarchical. Thus as with futures expertise, design, too, has the potential to change policy making practice but is also hampered by deep-seated institutional norms and political realities (Bailey & Lloyd, 2016).

As these new policy practices emerge, there are indications that the capacity of futures and design to *anticipate and explore futures in the present* has the potential to contribute significantly to enabling policy makers to mediate collectively between what is and what could be. Whereas evidence-based policy rests on producing valid and reliable evidence about things in the past to guide future action, anticipatory foresight practices such as scenario planning emphasise mutual learning between producers and consumers of insight in relation to dynamic change (Ramírez & Wilkinson, 2016). Here, the practices associated with the design studio materialise possibilities that make conversations about the future specific, tangible and meaningful, providing ways to build “evocative stories” (Miller, 2007) about futures that can bring people together to assess pathways and make decisions. Design and futures use methods that constitute publics, data and problems in ways that can result in changes to issues, but which also open them up. As Lury and Wakeford put it, such *inventiveness* exists in

The relation of two moments: the addressing of a method – an anecdote, a probe, a category – to a specific problem, and the capacity of what emerges in the use of that method to change the problem (Lury & Wakeford, 2012, p. 7).

Viewed through the lens of “inventive” social research (Marres, Guggenheim, & Wilkie, 2018), futures and design can be seen as a collective capacity to bring publics and policy issues into view and in so doing, to open them up. Recent examples of the application of design and futures approaches to contemporary policy problems provide insights into how the practices associated with futures and the design studio mediate between current actualities and future potentialities. In what follows, I sketch out the characteristics of the ‘policy futures studio’, drawing on examples from recent experiments in policy development. Most of these come from the work of Policy Lab, a multi-disciplinary team in the UK government’s Cabinet Office exploring new ways of making policy, with whom I worked closely for a year.³ Figure 1 visualises the key concepts from futures, policy and design that policy futures studio brings into relation with one another.

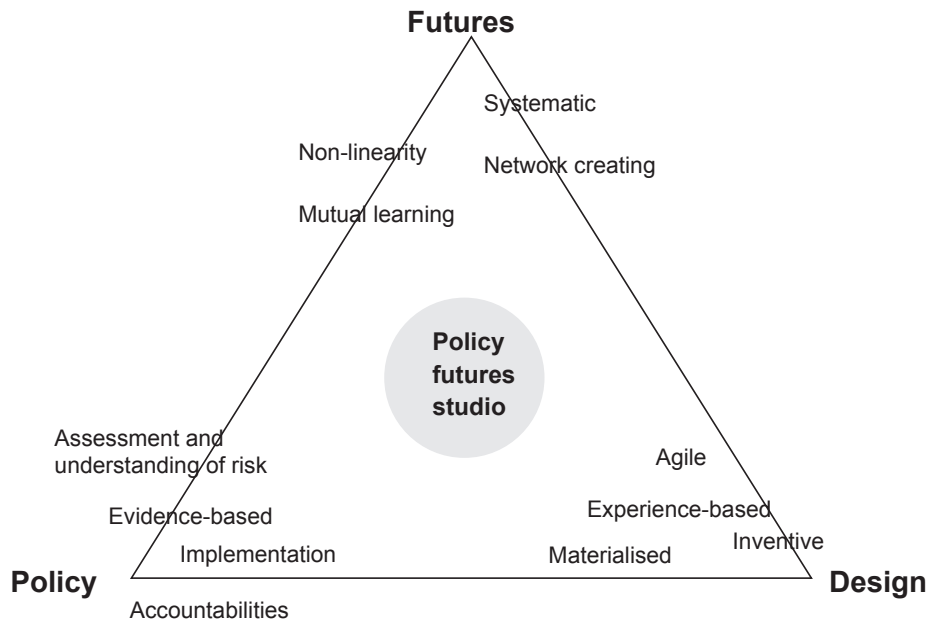


Figure 1. The policy futures studio

Characteristics of The Policy Futures Studio

Publics and problems revealed as “in the making”. A policy futures studio does not start with a pre-defined public or issue. Its activities and outputs materialise a public and issue and make it available for others to engage with through a process of anticipatory action learning (Inayatullah, 2006; LeDantec & DiSalvo, 2013). For example, I was involved in supporting a Policy Lab when they facilitated a two-day “policy sprint” using an agile methodology as part of a project with officials from two government departments (Drew, 2015a). The policy sprint positioned the officials, front line staff and people with contextual and local knowledge of the issue and other stakeholders as involved in a collective inquiry. The policy sprint process included reviewing existing data of different kinds, identifying gaps in current knowledge (especially regarding the experiences of beneficiaries and citizens in the policy domain), and scoping a research and design project to create insights and co-design new ideas to inform policy. Its outcomes included turning a group of individuals from across government into a team with a capacity to work across organisational and knowledge boundaries to inquire into the policy issue and explore options together.

Materialising potential futures as people experience them. Experience-based or “human-centred” design focuses on people’s experiences of issues and potential solutions. This attentiveness to the micro-social worlds in which policy issues exist reveals new insights that may be hard to grasp from the institutional centres of power, through the lenses of experts or via large-scale data analysis. It also provides ways for officials, service providers, researchers and other stakeholders to engage with one another across their disciplinary and organisational boundaries. Described as a way for practitioners to engage people more deeply in exploring futures, using a variety of forms, formats, and media broadens participation and engages a collective intelligence in exploring possibilities (Candy & Dunagan, 2016). For example, a cardboard model of a health centre realised via “table-top prototyping” (Kimbell, 2015b) produced by public servants in a workshop organized by Policy Lab made a potential new policy graspable but also revealed aspects of the challenges to which this provisional solution responded. Visualisations and artefacts produced by Policy Lab associated

with potential future scenarios enabled policy makers to imagine and assess possible developments relating to the maritime industry (Miller, 2019). Such outputs are moments of synthesis (Fariás & Wilkie, 2015) within a collective negotiation between what is and what could be. As well as being models of potential future arrangements, such materialisations of potential solutions are models to think with.

Zooming in and out. Public policy problems (and their solutions) are bundles of regulation, institutional and social practices, technologies and current ways of imagining society, now and in the future. Normann (2001) introduced the idea of the crane to help managers recognise the different conceptual levels of an issue they were working at. Using the crane to shift between higher and lower orders of cognition allows participants to see an issue within a larger context. Similarly, causal layered analysis prompts analysis of related “layers” of a policy future, enabling participants to identify and surface core myths and metaphors, discourses, social causes and trends (Inayatullah, 2005). Surfacing institutional factors, such as the tendency of large bureaucracies to replicate norms and come to resemble one another (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), draws attention to the social silences and assumptions that play out in policy development. Working at different sites and scales within a policy issue is part of the ‘studio’ approach, which moves between being attentive to people’s situated experiences of an issue and institutional and organizational perspectives.

Translating between different kinds of data and expertise. In a world awash with data and committed to the ongoing production of yet more, the policy futures studio plays an important role in translating between different kinds of evidence, insights and opportunities. The policy futures studio problematizes, rather than taking as given the data, methods to analyse it and generate insights from it, and the activities which make these graspable to policy officials, delivery staff and other actors in the ecosystem. No single expertise is adequate to addressing policy problems. Instead, multiple kinds of expertise can be brought together to explore issues and generate solutions. For example, during a two-day “data studio” I organized about food poverty, participants found themselves challenged to represent an aspect of the issue using materials such as string and pegs, textiles or Lego (Drew, Bennett, & Kimbell, 2016). Going through a deliberative, collaborative process of exploring how to represent an aspect of food poverty enabled participants to generate insights into the issue and into their own disciplinary and cultural framings, as well as making food poverty researchable. In a project involving Policy Lab, designers synthesised and visualised a broad range of evidence on the future of aging produced by the UK Government Office of Science to enable a group of people to digest and make sense of the findings (Drew, 2015b). The policy futures studio enables a shift from evidence-based policy based on past results, to recombining different sources and kinds of data into materialised framings of policy issues that anticipate potential solutions, institutional implications and (re)configurations of resources involved.

Opening up participation. Collaborative design approaches co-exist with other kinds of approach within and across organisations and locations, often connecting between them and engaging broader publics. Whilst not playing down the ethical and political aspects of participation and of data infrastructures (eg Gray, Gerlitz, & Bounegru, 2018), digital resources are one increasingly visible means to enable such connections. Idea generation and development platforms can open up participation in the process of designing in relation to a challenge. Organisations such as multi-national agencies, foundations and government departments set a challenge via the platform, which mobilises responses from a self-organising, distributed public. An example is “How might urban slum communities become more resilient to the effects of climate change?” set by the UK government’s Department for International Development and the Global Resilience Partnership (OpenIDEO, 2016). Through research, idea generation, feedback, improvement, and impact phases, the platform guides participants through a design process with the intention to produce implementable solutions for the challenge partner to invest in. Similarly, formats such as exhibitions which materialise in various media different aspects of futures can engage a broader audience in

discussing those aspects. For example, The Museum of Future Government Services, a temporary event within the United Arab Emirates Government Summit, included mock-ups of future public services to provoke debate (Museum of Future Government Services, 2015).

Conclusion

This essay has argued that public policy making is a relevant site to use the material practices of the design studio and anticipatory learning to materialize and open up futures, which can shape current framings and enable strategic conversations. Brief examples demonstrated that expertise associated with design is already being deployed in government policy teams within different institutional formats, in dialogue with other ways of analysing evidence and exploring futures. Recombining some of this into a proposal for a “policy futures studio” foregrounds policy-in-the-making as a collective, embodied practice that brings publics into view as co-researchers in exploring issues and co-designers anticipating policy solutions at different scales and within different timeframes.

Returning to the themes introduced earlier — limited visions on offer from policy makers, disconnects from people’s experiences and their lack of agency — what might such policy futures studios offer? Whilst avoiding grand or naïve claims that design and futures practices can counteract current lack of visions or effective policy solutions, the characteristics outlined above suggest such expertise can be productive. Studios enable people to make problems graspable and imaginable in the face of high levels of ambiguity, complexity and uncertainty. They translate between local, digital and expert knowledge and data and bring into view their different grounding myths, discourses and framings. They materialise and allow exploration of provisional policy solution-bundles and reveal the networks of resources and institutional narratives, practices and norms that are implicated within them. Policy futures studios will not design definitive solutions, but they may design better problems.

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Notes

1. In relation to these questions, I enjoy a privileged situation, employed (for now) full-time by a university and living in a country with relatively stable institutions, although these are under threat.
2. See Julier (2017) for a critical take on contemporary design cultures.
3. See Kimbell 2015a.

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