Radicalisation opens door for social sciences

But doubts remain over policymakers’ intentions

EU officials have pledged higher priority for social science studies of radicalisation, amid growing political pressure to counter violent extremism across Europe.

A European Commission policy review presented in Brussels on 26 September identified research on Muslim languages and cultures; fieldwork on jihadist recruiting environments; and studies on the use of big data and social networks in terrorist activities as three areas where social sciences could make a difference.

The review was presented to a meeting of about 80 social scientists and officials, gathered to discuss how Horizon 2020 might modify its next set of work programmes, due next year, to contribute to a fuller understanding of violent extremism.

Something of a divide emerged between the policymakers, who want quick answers to security and surveillance questions, and the social scientists. “Political pressure tends to focus mostly on security issues,” said Gilles Kepel, a political scientist at Sciences Po in Paris and co-author of the review. “Social sciences want to put this into a wider perspective.”

Speakers also suggested that sociologists and political scientists would have to work hard to see their efforts translated into tangible results, and to overcome the political and public-opinion biases that shape the narrative around terrorism. Most agreed, however, that the social sciences could help policymakers understand some of the forces behind terrorism. “There is a lack of an evidence base,” said Magnus Ranstorp, a terrorism specialist at the Swedish National Defence College.

The policy review was instigated last year by research commissioner Carlos Moedas, in an effort to show that the research directorate could contribute to the EU’s broader response to terror attacks. It was lent greater impetus by terror attacks in Brussels and Nice earlier this year, and in June, a Commission communication set out improved law enforcement and counter-terrorism measures, as well research and education to tackle the issue.

One of the most important changes could be to give more attention to fieldwork studies, participants suggested. “We need to study the milieux in which radicalisation messages are encountered on an everyday basis,” said Hilary Pikeington, a sociologist at the University of Manchester. This should involve studying the non-radicalised as well as the radicalised, she said.

Pikeington also warned researchers to ensure that their attention didn’t turn into “another discursive weapon to beat already beleaguered communities”.

“Communities already exposed to constant surveillance understand radicalisation research as complicit in the cycle of production of Islamophobia; and many social-scientists are sceptical that research can do anything but further stigmatise,” she said.

“Radicalisation is interesting, but it’s too narrow a dimension,” said Kepel, citing investigations into the role of a lack of a father figure, and conversations with jihadists in prison, as examples of other important areas.

Discussions acknowledged the difficulty of translating findings into effective policy. “There’s no quick fix, and it will always be difficult to have as nuanced a policy response as the research demands,” said Sophia Eriksson Waterschoot, head of unit for Europe 2020 education and training at the Commission.

One of the areas now gaining attention is the role of social media networks and YouTube in recruiting radicals, the event was told. But several researchers at the meeting voiced concerns that policymakers’ focus on immediate security fixes would hinder exhaustive study of social issues surrounding terrorism. And Kepel highlighted lack of co-ordination between different branches of the social sciences as an ongoing problem.

The research directorate is hoping that its efforts through Horizon 2020, and the establishment of a Radicalisation Action Network to bring together social scientists and practitioners, will help frame the EU’s wider policy response to terrorism. “More comparative and interdisciplinary research is certainly needed,” director-general of research Robert-Jan Smits said.
Make knowledge transfer about the reservoir, not the spigot

Policymakers increasingly want science funding to deliver excellent research that also yields a benefit to society. This trend has created a vision of the ideal scientist in the form of a researcher engaged in entrepreneurial science, creating excellent knowledge and transferring it into the market through spin-offs, patents, licensing and contract deals.

This emerging vision is coming to dominate scientists’ horizons because it has become directly associated with access to funding, and so with career prospects. But this singular notion of “the excellent scientist” creates too narrow a view of how research can benefit society, because it focuses on the last link in the knowledge chain.

Science is a progressive effort where many researchers contribute to a collective reservoir of knowledge. Without that reservoir, the entrepreneurial scientist would never be able to perform the final, most visible act.

Surely, then, science and policy should focus more on understanding all the stages of the chain that support and lead up to the entrepreneurial act, rather than just rewarding and encouraging the last scientist. Maximising the growth of the reservoir is at least as important to getting the best social returns as encouraging high-profile entrepreneurial behaviour.

What’s not known, however, is what distinguishes the knowledge in this reservoir with high potential impact, and without knowing how such knowledge is created, policymakers are in no position to maximise it.

An important characteristic of useful knowledge is that it fits with the way people outside academia understand their needs. Knowledge that is accessible to consumers will be easier to apply, and from society’s perspective represents a better resource for future research.

One way for academics to make their knowledge more accessible is to incorporate user knowledge into the research process. If we could detect and characterise the researchers who are open in this way, then we would better understand those more likely to produce knowledge relevant to society, and help to maximise the reservoir of useful knowledge.

Our research team has sought to do just this. Using the Impacto database—which contains data on how 1,500 researchers at the Spanish National Research Council engage with users—we examined the characteristics most associated with open researchers. Personal characteristics included age, gender, seniority and working conditions such as salary and job security; professional characteristics covered disciplinary affiliation, multidisciplinarity and connections beyond academia. We divided the research process into five kinds of activities, from reflection to dissemination, and defined open researchers as those who had taken account of user needs, or included user input, in at least three of their research activities. This category corresponded to about a quarter of the overall sample.

We were surprised to find that personal characteristics are not significantly correlated with openness. Researchers in the social sciences and humanities are also just as likely to be open as those working in science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

The most open researchers, though, do share other professional characteristics. They tend to use formal interaction channels, such as patents, licences and contracts, rather than informal links. They are engaged with external agents, including companies, non-governmental and international organisations. They are more likely to work on interdisciplinary problems, showing a general receptivity to outside influences, and they tend to be in fields that are experiencing greater pressure to contribute to societal problems.

Our findings suggest that we need to move beyond a one-size-fits-all picture of the entrepreneurial scientist if we want to better understand what kinds of researchers are laying the foundations of useful research. Most importantly, these scientists are well-connected, not just to users in wider society but also to other disciplines and perspectives. They are active in research communities that incorporate users and are doing research that speaks beyond the boundaries of their own discipline.

If policymakers want to maximise the benefits of research for their society, they should create incentives for researchers to be more open in their work and not restrict those incentives to the final activities of the process. Policies should encourage academics to incorporate more external knowledge in their research, and recognition should be given for building channels to other groups that will help the eventual uptake of knowledge.

More to say? Email comment@ResearchResearch.com

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