



# The Timeliness of Impact: Impacting Who, When, and for Whose Gain?

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## Introduction

Requiring our research to have ‘impact’ beyond the academy immediately opens up questions such as who we intend to impact with our research, when, and for whose gain. Underpinning these questions are little-discussed assumptions about the importance of *timeliness*, to which this paper makes three brief interventions:

### Immediate impact

First, building on the work of others including Pain et al. (2011), asking academics to have an impact beyond the academy is a constructive request and something many geographers have long been doing (there have been debates about how to make geography relevant for many years, see for example Staeheli and Mitchell, 2005). There are valid concerns about the extent to which we should incorporate (or institutionalise) participatory research into the university structure (potentially undoing the power of these approaches). However, this paper starts with the premise that unless we fight for the space to do our research in ways we believe are ethically appropriate and for these approaches to be recognised within research evaluation systems, then eventually we will lose the space and power to shape academia. While we can, and in many ways should, resist the creeping institutionalisation and quantification of our research value, to exclude ourselves from the debates as to how these systems should work is naive and in the long term



counterproductive. Thus the current problem is in the way this process is to be audited and thus how it is to be valued. One of the main problems is the *timescale* of how impact is conceived through REF (Research Excellence Framework, see Rogers et al., this issue) and how this timescale will shape further research. As an advocate of participatory and activist approaches within academia, I understand impact as helping those with whom we work (whether directly or indirectly). Often for social geographers this can be marginalised or ‘hidden’ groups – those ignored by government policies or misunderstood by society. These groups (in my case grassroots eco-builders, low impact development pioneers, and Australian Indigenous activists) often request immediate support, immediate access to research results, and immediate impact.

As such there is *timeliness* to impact in participatory and activist work. Any delay reduces the usefulness to participants. Impact for these groups is less about high-level policy changes (which if we are honest we rarely actually effect), and far more about being a useful ally to these groups, donating our time, resources, ideas and collaboration in *real time* to their endeavours. It is in this co-production of knowledge and the “*process of collaborative research*” (Pain et al., 2011, 186) that our non-academic partners often find academic interaction of any use. Published journal outputs benefit academics more than participants.

### **Slow and mundane work**

Second, if we accept that some of us work usefully with activists, then we need to ensure that we protect the space and crucially the *time* within academia to do grassroots political work. Any political work I do is intrinsically linked to my academic work and thus should be part of my working week. Of course we should also use our positions as academics and our broad perspectives across multiple groups, places, or projects to scale-up our findings to write broader reflective academic outputs (which might or might not have broader impact). However, we cannot allow the pressures of a REF Impact agenda to undermine the importance of doing mundane, slow, and local political work. This is not just public engagement, or moments of ‘giving-back’ in exchange for the goodwill of research participants, it is often when trust and relationships are built, new ideas formulated, and knowledge shared. So often the most interesting information is exchanged while doing the washing-up or doing other mundane activities. We need to make time for this.

### **Competing tensions to timeliness**

Finally, there remains a tension in how we use our *time* in relation to impact work, and its *timeliness*. On the one hand, there is rightly the demand from those we work with to use our time to provide immediate impact for and with them. This is often at a local scale. On the other hand we are increasingly pressured to have a quick impact at a broader scale – to satisfy funding completion and for our CVs. This can force us into risky situations where we might talk about others in order to prove impact without necessarily having had the time to work with participants to

reach joint conclusions (Williams, 2012). This is risky if it goes wrong, and can adversely affect those in faraway places much more than us. This is despite the formal impact timescale set by REF actually being quite long and allowing us to record impact from research conducted many years previously (over the last 15 years).

However this situation is not satisfactory for academics. While we need to allow ourselves the time to work with activist participants, we also need to convince them that in addition to working with them on their immediate concerns, we have more to offer in the co-production of knowledge, which can take time to evolve. Equally, we need to take time to ensure that any broader interventions politically as a result of our work are thought through intellectually and empirically robust, and are not risky to participants. In summary, ideas and knowledge take time to develop; impact is necessary, but we need to be mindful of its timeliness in a number of different and sometimes contradictory ways.

## References

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