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Research Evaluation in the Audit Society

Introduction

A challenging analysis of the impact of a new Total Quality Management (TQM) system on the basic research practices of a commercial laboratory demonstrates how the perceived ‘value incongruence’ between the tasks of the scientists and TQM can create distrust, anger and resistance (Sitkin/Stickel 1996). Indeed, the introduction of formal controls with the manifest intention of enhancing trust and transparency within the organisation seemed to have the opposite effect. The study reports how the performance measures embodied in the TQM system were perceived as ‘inappropriately precise and deterministic’ in relation to a basic research task, which was seen to be inherently ambiguous and highly uncertain. In one reported example, a laboratory manager refused to inform staff about the patent goals of the organisation, arguing, in a manner consistent with Goodhart’s law, that such targets were not only distracting but might affect the propensity of scientists to take intellectual risks (204). The manager had effectively established himself as a ‘buffer’ between the creative scientists and the management system.

The conflict was bilateral: management was critical of the scientists’ refusal to share in the larger values of the organisation and to import a TQM system which had demonstrated its success in other areas. In turn, scientists were critical of the enforced uniformity of TQM, believing their position to be in some sense unique and beyond the reach of control systems.

The key features of this story have become a somewhat familiar starting point for scholars interested in the evaluation of science and its consequences. TQM is emblematic of the broader ‘audit society’ thesis (Power 1997), which draws attention to the counterproductive invasion of spheres of professional autonomy through apparently crude managerial instruments, such as accounting, performance measurement and audit. For the private sector scientists in the above circumstances, we might substitute teachers, doctors and social workers with only a slight change of emphasis. The observed value incongruence between the tasks of scientists and quality management is part of a broader perceived incongruity between the professional actors and formal systems of evaluation and control.

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In the United Kingdom, an idealised model of the financial auditing process gained organisational and social significance as a template for evaluative practice during the 1980s. This normative idea of audit - and the implied possibility of making visible private clubs of practice - became highly attractive to reformers of the public sector and played a central role in the conception of a new public management as manifested in the United Kingdom. From this point of view, audit is far from being a neutral practice of monitoring and is a vehicle for the dissemination of distinctively 'managerial' values and ideas. TQM and similar initiatives can be understood as practices of self-observation and control which can also be externally observe and validated. Audit seems to be about innocent checking but is in fact part of a larger programme for radical change. The idea of the 'audit society' has provided a focus for counterdiscourses of resistance for different professional groups, particularly in the field of education.

Yet, as the contributions to this volume show, beneath this almost conventional account of professional autonomy, under threat is a more complex picture, particularly in the case of the evaluation of science. This short essay focuses on three substantive themes which deserve further attention in progressing the audit society debate and which are developed in the following chapters. First, we deal with the progressive transformation of evaluative practice by audit. Second, we consider the irony that auditing and evaluation, far from being 'value incongruent' with science, in fact draw on science for their own legitimation. Third, we reflect on the complex relationship between peers and auditors. In conclusion, we consider some further aspects of the way in which science is becoming a managerial and regulatory object.

1 The 'Auditisation' of Evaluation?

An enduring puzzle about the 'audit society' hypothesis concerns the relation between audit and evaluation, and the significance of this relationship for science. The distinction is made in a variety of ways, although there is general acceptance that that there are two practice clusters which have had very different histories, techniques and purposes. For example, programme evaluation can be associated with expansionism in welfare programmes and the application of the social sciences - including forms of cost-benefit analysis - in the assessment of whether such programmes achieve their intended effects (Mosher 1979; Power 1997: 115-119). In contrast, the history of financial auditing reveals a relatively narrow focus on the quality of financial statements produced by private companies. Whereas audit has developed hand in hand with the creation of prescribed standards for accounting, evaluation operates according to the standards of enquiry customised for specific applications. Audit is more like a check of conformity to pre-existing standards of 'best practice'; evaluation is more like an investigation of what has happened, an analysis of effects. Audit has been typically, but not exclusively, the province of accountants; evaluation is more the