INTRODUCTION

‘Mode 2’ Revisited: The New Production of Knowledge

Nine years ago, six authors published The New Production of Knowledge: The Dynamics of Science and Research in Contemporary Societies. Reviews were mixed. Some philosophers, historians, and sociologists of science regarded the argument in the book as either simplistic or banal (or perhaps both), while science policy analysts worried about the empirical evidence for the trends it identified (or argued that these trends were not new). However, the book’s broad thesis – that the production of knowledge and the process of research were being radically transformed – struck a chord of recognition among both researchers and policy-makers.

Of course, like all theses that gain a certain popularity (and notoriety), this thesis was radically simplified, and collapsed into a single phrase – ‘Mode 2’. The old paradigm of scientific discovery (‘Mode 1’) – characterized by the hegemony of theoretical or, at any rate, experimental science; by an internally-driven taxonomy of disciplines; and by the autonomy of scientists and their host institutions, the universities – was being superseded by a new paradigm of knowledge production (‘Mode 2’), which was socially distributed, application-oriented, trans-disciplinary, and subject to multiple accountabilities.

Those with most to gain from such a thesis espoused it most warmly – politicians and civil servants struggling to create better mechanisms to link science with innovation; researchers in professional disciplines such as management, struggling to wriggle out from under the condescension of more established, and more ‘academic’, disciplines; and researchers in newer universities, other non-university higher education institutions, or outside the academic, and scientific, systems strictly defined. Those with most to lose were most sceptical – including researchers in established disciplines and institutions, who feared that the quality of science would be eroded if such levelling ideas gained political currency, and who feared that their own autonomy would be imperiled if more explicit links were established between research and innovation.


Both reactions were predictable. A generation ago, Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* aroused far more interest among social scientists – and humanists, who not only felt a shock of recognition in his account of paradigm shift but also saw that it could enhance the legitimacy of their disciplines – than among natural scientists, who saw Kuhn’s companion idea of incommensurability as a threat not only to universal, or ‘objective’, truth but also to progressive experimentally-based research.\(^2\) His own discipline, physics, was most resistant of all to his ideas.\(^3\)

However, in the case of *The New Production of Knowledge*, there was a new twist. The ‘Mode 2’ thesis, however simplified, was recognizably derived from the argument presented in the book. So, as authors, we could not object. Our critics may even have seen us as being hoist by our own petard, because inherent in the very notion of ‘Mode 2’ (or socially distributed knowledge), is the idea that this cannot be authoritatively encoded in traditional forms of scholarly publication. If nurse researchers pounced on ‘Mode 2’ to reduce their subordination to medical research, or if global accountancy companies placed ‘Mode 2’ at the heart of newly-established ‘Centres for Business Knowledge’ – both of which are actual examples – who were we, the authors, to complain? We had fallen into our own postmodern trap.

It was partly to resist this collapse into relativism (and over-simplification of the argument), partly to answer the valid criticisms of that argument, and partly to develop our broader thesis, that the present three authors wrote a second book, *Re-Thinking Science: Knowledge and the Public in an Age of Uncertainty*.\(^4\) Yet, the difficulty remains – how to describe and defend, in traditional academic discourse (‘Mode 1’, in our own terminology), ideas that attempt to analyse how that discourse is being transcended (‘Mode 2’). ‘Mode 2’ is not only a concept, inherently open to manipulation or exploitation by others (even in ways of which we may disapprove); it is also a project, an example of the social distribution of knowledge, which it seeks to describe.

This special issue of *Minerva* cannot hope to resolve this difficulty. Instead, we hope it will contribute to the continuing debate about the future of knowledge production. This Introduction is divided into four

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\(^3\) Gary Gutting (ed.), *Paradigms and Revolutions: Applications and Appraisals of Thomas Kuhn’s Philosophy of Science* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980).