The article discusses debates around the new ‘impact’ agenda in the UK context as driven by Higher Education Funding bodies and Research Councils UK (RCUK), which are jointly responsible for allocating governmental funding to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and individual research projects. The ‘impact agenda’ is defined here as the whole gamut of initiatives related to knowledge exchange and public engagement that have been articulated in recent years, particularly since the Research Excellence Framework (REF, 2008–2013) introduced new criteria of assessing the research conducted within UK HEIs. The REF has made an explicit engagement with this agenda virtually compulsory for research-active academics by introducing ‘impact’ as a new criterion on which the research performance of universities, departments and individual researchers is assessed. The new emphasis on impact, defined as the ‘demonstrable contribution’ that research makes ‘to society and the economy’ beyond specialist academic audiences, has generated much discussion and controversy among academics.

The ‘impact agenda’ has been critiqued on a number of grounds, ranging from diluting standards of academic excellence (Jump, 2012) to limiting academic freedom by tying fundable academic enquiry to policy objectives, and to concerns about the difficulties and costs involved in assessing impact (Martin, 2011). The widespread perception that academic autonomy is increasingly threatened by the twin forces of ‘audit culture’ and the commodification of higher education has been exacerbated by the broader climate of economic austerity and related cuts in university funding. Meanwhile, impact itself remains a poorly understood and nebulous concept even as ‘impact case studies’ are embedded within REF criteria and scores. The difficulty in clearly defining the rules of the game stems from the fact that each discipline, research community and individual researcher has its own notion of ‘impact’ as it pertains to its own work. Nonetheless, there is a real danger that lack of clarity, compounded with the obligatory compliance to impact assessment,
may encourage a strategic ‘game-playing’ and a random incentivisation of short-term impact activities by university management, rather than a vision of what meaningful engagement with non-academic publics may look like.

In the light of this, the basic aim of this chapter is to reflect critically on the difficulties of implementing impact agendas with recourse to a research networking initiative (Translating Russian and East European Cultures, TREEC), funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). The chapter focuses on knowledge exchange, since a key and recurring point of reflection throughout the initiative concerned the nature and practice of knowledge exchange (cf., Mitton et al., 2007) across academic and non-academic ‘communities of practice’ (Wenger, 1998). This topic is explored here through a case study of one particular strand of the TREEC Network Initiative dedicated to storytelling. The heart of the chapter reflects on storytelling as a way to facilitate knowledge exchange, as well as on the ability of the organized storytelling events to bring together different publics. Whilst critical of impact agendas, I proceed from the position that academics have a responsibility, as publicly funded researchers, to contribute to the wider society through their knowledge, skills and resources, and that beyond strategic compliance to impact assessment, knowledge exchange (broadly defined) has always been and should remain an integral part of university activities.

**Critical engagements with ‘impact’ agendas**

Public engagement and knowledge exchange agendas have emerged as key forces shaping the higher education sector underpinned by long-standing debates over the role and purpose of universities as well as by discussions over the future sustainability and success of the higher education sector within a global context. At the same time, the precise linkages between these various elements are often hard to determine, and much confusion remains with respect to issues of definition and measurement. The emergence of such agendas has been further entrenched in recent years by the global economic crisis and associated austerity cuts, whereby the value of knowledge exchange and its associated impact are often framed in utilitarian or market-driven terms.

The vast sweep of university life ensures that while many academic disciplines are able to work to such an agenda with limited additional effort, there remains a substantial portion of academic activity which occupies a more uncertain middle ground whereby knowledge exchange beyond the academy is more difficult to determine or capture, and the utility of any output difficult to quantify. While we must be wary of over-generalising, it is probably fair to say that the arts and humanities and, to a lesser extent, the social sciences have found the emerging agendas particularly problematic in contrast to the so-called STEM disciplines (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics). This has little to do with the relative worth of the different areas of scientific endeavour but reflects, instead, the framing