

Epistemic success and societal impact in extra-academic collaboration

Koskinen, I.

Collaboration with extra-academic agents is nowadays common in science. Especially when the aim is to produce practically usable knowledge, and solve pressing problems, stakeholders and extra-academic experts are included in research teams. Various forms of collaborations are being developed in diverse fields; they range from co-research with private enterprises to activist research initiated by stakeholder groups. They however share one goal: increasing the societal impact of academic research. Philosophers, historians, and sociologists of science have examined cases of successful collaborations across disciplinary boundaries and across the boundaries of science. But this literature usually presupposes that success in such collaborations depends on whether the collaboration succeeds *epistemically*: whether epistemic exchange takes place, whether new findings are made, methods developed, etc. In science policy, however, success in extra-academic collaboration is often taken to mean success in creating *societal impact*: solutions to practical problems, commercializable products, policy-relevant results. There is an implicit assumption that is common in all these literatures: a collaboration that fails from an epistemic point of view, cannot succeed in creating beneficial societal impact. I question this assumption. I illustrate my claim with a case study that serves as a counterexample. I have followed a 2-year project in which the research team consisted of sociologists, artists, and journalists. I attended their research meetings and interviewed all participants, focusing especially on two collaborative phases: in the first the sociologists collaborated with the journalists, and in the second, with the artists. From an epistemic viewpoint, the collaboration between the sociologists and the journalists succeeded: by conducting a survey in a major newspaper they created a boundary object that produced data for the sociologists and was a source of several articles for the journalists. Together they were also able to create a solution to a methodological problem that troubled the sociologists. Considered from the same viewpoint, the collaboration between the sociologists and the artists largely failed. Many of the initial objectives were abandoned, the sociologists and the artists never agreed on certain starting points of the collaboration, and finally the subgroups worked independently without much epistemic exchange taking place. However, if the criterion of success is taken to be the created societal impact, both collaborations succeeded. Both created more public interest in the work of the whole group than would have been likely without the collaboration, and this interest led to policy outcomes. So the societal impact of an extra-academic collaboration does not necessarily depend on whether the collaboration succeeds epistemically or not. I argue that to understand the relationship

between epistemic success and success in creating societal impact in extra-academic collaborations, it is necessary to differentiate between different types of societal impact. I then conclude by discussing the possibility of situations in which a collaborative project produces epistemically dubious results but succeeds in creating the wanted societal impact. If such situations are indeed possible, it is particularly important to recognise the looseness of the link between epistemic success and societal impact.