STI narratives in Wallonia

A complex interplay

Eu-SPRI Forum Early Career Researcher Conference
- 2014 INGENIO PhD Days -
My PhD research subject:
- Studying the evolution of regional STI regime in Belgium

Today’s paper:
a conceptual framework, a research agenda. Compare the STI policy narratives in Wall.
STI systems in transition

• Broad literature: Science and Technology Studies, Innovation Studies
  • “mode 2 production of knowledge”, “post normal science”, “strategic science”, “academic capitalism”, ...

• A dichotomous conception: old vs. new regime
Old vs. new regime? It doesn’t fit...

• Exploratory interviews, policy analysis in Wallonia:

• There is one evidence: Walloon STI system is complex, with different features, multiple discourses and multiple trajectories

• A complex landscape made of multiple, overlapping institutions and diverse policy instruments aiming at different goals
Research questions

• How is the global transition of STI systems taking place at the regional level?

• How can science and technology policy studies give a better account of the transition, regarding local specificities?
My proposal: a dynamic narrative approach

• Studying the coexisting policy narratives that circulate as rationales for STI policies

• Public policies as narrative: problem, intervention, solution... a *plot*
  • With a temporal sequence
  • Narratives help to make sense of thing
  • Descriptive + prescriptive / explanatory + mobilizing resources
  • Convince and enroll: narrative are related to power relations
    ➢ Attention for context of speech – how is a narrative conveyed: who is speaking, to whom, with which purpose...
Four master-narratives as ideal types

How should scientific research be organized and funded?

• Accountability, relevance, strategic research: two “recent” narratives

  The “Knowledge-based economy”

  The “Grand societal Challenges”

• Autonomy of Science: two “older” narratives
  (“older” doesn’t mean “old fashioned”)

  “Science, the endless Frontier”

  “Science for the sake of Science”
Main hypothesis - a research agenda

• Dynamic use of narratives as resources:
  • one narrative is not tied with one (group of) actor(s)

• Multiple narrative can be conveyed to make sense of the STI system:
  • In different situations, stakeholders use different (combination of) narratives, regarding the policy instrument they are defending or the reform they are calling, regarding the audience and the context, etc.
Preliminary illustrations: following the actors in various situations

• University Rector praising the work of the technology transfer office – proud of the spin-offs and patents

“It was an innovative concept in 1989”, remembers the rector of the University of Liège, Bernard Rentier. “Only ten years had passed since the idea to valorize University know-how was born in the USA. We had plenty of unexploited things in our drawers and boxes.”

Interview of B. Rentier, Le Soir, 14th of March, 2009, p.9

• A clear example of KBE
Preliminary illustrations (2)

• A contrasting situation: public mobilization against a new criteria for selection of research project

• “potential societal impacts” for bottom-up, basic research

“predicting social impact is extremely complex in basic research. Examples of major developments stemming from research devoid of societal goals are countless.” [...] “potential applications are [...] only speculations, it belongs more to literature than to science”
Conclusions

• From regime to narrative: analysis of narrative in context = enriched description for local situations

• Linear conception of innovation and distinction between basic vs. applied research are still very powerful narratives in certain situations

• Multiple variants of master-narratives are intertwined, and if they compete, they also are used by various actors in different contexts

• Next steps: generalize – interviews and analysis of other situations
Thank you for your attention

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