

Quantification, administrative capacity and democracy

Andrea Mennicken and **Martin Lodge** consider the implications of ‘governance by numbers’ for public services

The business of government is increasingly run with a calculator to hand. Policymaking activities and administrative control are progressively structured around calculations such as cost-benefit analyses, estimates of social and financial returns, measurements of performance and risk, benchmarking, quantified impact assessments, ratings and rankings, all of which provide information in the form of a numerical representation. Through quantification, public services could be said to have experienced a fundamental transformation from ‘government by rules’ to ‘governance by numbers’, with the aim to produce a self-regulating human society (Miller and Rose 1990; Supiot 2015).

There are signs everywhere that this ‘quantitative turn’ is making a profound impact on the way essential public services are organized, controlled and delivered. This quantification has fundamental implications not just for our understanding of the nature of public service itself, but also for wider debates about the nature of citizenship, democracy and the state, as well as for understandings of public administration. Research associated with **carr** (see for example the works by **carr** research associates Yasmine Chahed, Matthew Hall, Silvia Jordan, Liisa Kurunmäki, Martin Lodge, Andrea Mennicken, Peter Miller, Yuval Millo, Tommaso Palermo, Michael Power, Rita Samiolo) charts and explores those implications across different policy sectors (such as health/hospitals, higher education/universities, criminal justice/prisons) and countries (including France, Germany, UK, US).

At the centre is a concern with the power of quantification in altering the governance, organization and delivery of public services. Numbers and tools of quantification are not only devices of rational rule and administration. They fundamentally alter understandings of what it means to govern, and they shape and change understandings of the role of public services. Tools of

quantification are viewed as ‘technologies of government’ (Miller and Rose 1990) which alter the power relations that they are embedded within and enable new ways of acting upon and influencing the actions of individuals. In the following we outline some of the key questions inspiring our research.

Quantification and economization

We scrutinize linkages between quantification and economization (Miller and Power 2013). Firstly, we explore to what extent quantification is a mechanism by which the economization of organizational life becomes elaborated and institutionalized. Tools of quantification are used in the definition and determination of public service success and failure; decisions concerning the rationing of public services (e.g. rationing healthcare or limiting access to study programmes); and the realization of aims of ‘economy, efficiency and effectiveness’. How are boundaries between the public and the private redrawn through processes of quantification and economization? How interlinked are quantification and economization, given that instruments of quantification (e.g. performance ratings) have also been called upon to mediate between conflicting values in the public services (e.g. objectives of economy and quality)?

Secondly, we investigate cross-sectoral and cross-national similarities and differences, i.e. the implication of quantification in different ‘governmentalities’. Despite the spread and growing influence of calculative infrastructures across public services, relatively little systematic attention (in the form of cross-sectoral and cross-national comparative analysis) has been devoted to the ways in which tools and practices of quantification and calculation have travelled across different sectors and countries, and how they have altered modalities of governing in the organization and delivery of public services in this process. In doing so, we need to be less focused on ‘constraints’ of

national context and more sensitive to the dynamics evolving between and across different states and public service sectors, triggered e.g. by the adoption of similar new public management instruments (such as benchmarking, performance measurement, quality management, rankings, ratings, and impact assessments). Research activities most often are either nationally focused or concentrated on one particular public sector (such as healthcare, higher education or the prison service). Scholars at **carr** bring together and confront different strands in the literature on public sector reform and the so-called New Public Management that have, as yet, mostly received siloed attention in the literatures in political science/public administration, accounting, sociology and law.

Instruments of quantification, such as the balanced scorecard, performance ratings and rankings, have travelled across the public sector (and the world) as standardized, universalized tool, yet their day-to-day operation, uses and effects depend on the institutional structures, administrative capacities (e.g. analytical capacities and enforcement capacities) and the cultural specificity of the contexts within which they are put to use. At the same time the quantification instruments themselves affect the contexts they pass through. New (accounting) entities are created via quantification (e.g. cost centres). New infrastructures are built around quantification instruments, which challenge and change existing organizational structures, working arrangements and political visions. New calculative expertise enters the public services (via accountants, financial advisers), which redefine existing working routines and understandings, including concepts of quality and associated notions of professionalism.

Distinct national public management styles are challenged by increasing cooperation among (public) management experts across national borders, and standardization at supra-national



level. Public sector governance can no longer be treated as a predominantly national affair. There has been a growing evolution of internationally operating private providers in the public services, especially in the area of prisons but also healthcare, and with mixed results. In higher education and the governance of science, national systems are said to be increasingly evolving into a European-wide, if not international competition for students, research staff and funding. Globalization, EU harmonization attempts, and international standardization (ISO quality standards; international public sector accounting standards; transnational corporate governance codes) have enabled and conditioned debates about, and practices of, public sector governance. This has been evident in particular in the rise of international ranking exercises (see also the article by Mehrpouya and Samiolo in this issue).

In addition, public services across Europe have witnessed considerable challenges over the past decade. One challenge has been the diagnosed trend towards 'post-NPM', namely the argument that there has been a growing emphasis on outcome rather than output measurement since the 2000s; and we have seen a growing emphasis on ethics and collaboration. Collaborative governance is often seen as adding to democratic legitimacy. Whether such changes have actually taken place has only rarely been explored. Importantly, the financial crisis has placed extensive, still ongoing and possibly even strengthening, financial pressure on states, and therefore also on how public services are governed.

Governing by numbers

There has been considerable debate about the shift towards governing by numbers. Although performance measurement, ratings, rankings and other devices of quantification can have undesirable effects on the governance of public services – see Espeland and Sauder (2007) on the effects of law school ratings – numbers can also be invested with hope. Espeland and Stevens (1998) have argued that quantification can offer 'a rigorous method for democratizing decisions and sharing power', particularly in situations 'characterized by disparate values, diverse forms of knowledge, and the wish to incorporate people's preferences'. This raises the question of the extent to which numbers, such as prison performance measures, university rankings, or quantified hospital assessments, can be called upon as a 'mediating instrument' (Miller and O'Leary 2007)

where different, potentially conflicting values are at stake. To what extent can quantification be appealed to as a link connecting a multitude of actors and domains, mediating between disparate values and rationalities, such as those of security, economy, decency and rehabilitation in the case of prisons; economy, care and quality in the case of hospitals; or excellence, efficiency and innovativeness in the case of universities? This is a question that we cannot answer a priori; our empirical investigations will, however, help to answer it.

Quantification and democracy

Once it has been established how far quantification in the form of economization has penetrated the control over public services, fundamental challenges for the understanding of democracy (in terms of participation and citizenship) can be discussed: (i) the relationship between responsibility and accountability and the role of individual responsibility in quantified accountability regimes; (ii) questions about power and consequences of shifts in power and sovereignty through quantification; and (iii) questions about legitimacy and different sources of legitimation and their societal consequences. In addition, quantification represents a challenge for bureaucracy, namely (iv) how administrative capacities are enhanced through such instruments, and (v) what administrative capacities are presumed and required to make instruments of quantification operable. In so doing, **carr** seeks to produce sound input for debates on the mounting societal critique of neo-liberal government in Europe and on the critical consequences of societal reaction to what Michel Foucault termed 'politics of economization' (Linhardt and Muniesa 2011).

These concerns are explored through three core themes:

➤ How quantification travels. Whereas some authors have emphasized the universal and homogenizing force of quantification across sectors and countries, studies have also pointed to institutional differences in dynamics and trajectories of reform of control over public services (Hood et al. 2004). This project offers a focused exploration of how quantification has travelled across sectors, jurisdictions and time. It pays particular attention to changes since the mid-1980s and the impact of the 2008 financial crisis. One of the key arguments in the historical institutional literature has been that regardless of international, standardized reform language (facil-

itated by settings such as the OECD), actual reforms have continued to be shaped by distinct national/local/regional patterns. To what extent do different 'state traditions' matter due to the importance of particular legal doctrines, assumptions about the 'appropriate' role of public services, and the ability of reform-minded politicians and bureaucrats to execute change? It has been argued that contemporary reforms in the control over public services are largely characterized by the distinctiveness of particular sectors. The rise of international markets in education, for example, can be said to have had a greater homogenizing effect on how higher education is being controlled than other sectors. At the same time, the internationalization of service providers might similarly be said to provide for a source of diffusion of ways in which public services are being controlled.

➤ Quantification and administrative capacity. Changes to the control over public services have commonly been associated with a shift within government from production/delivery to more regulatory functions. Scholars at **carr** explore whether and how quantification has given rise to a shift in demands on administrative capacities (e.g. expectations regarding analytical skills, regulatory capabilities, legal, staff or financial resources) (Lodge and Wegrich 2014). To what extent do tools of quantification advance the capacities of public administrations across sectors and states in terms of being able to monitor and steer? What are the administrative prerequisites for such instruments to have their intended effects? How have instruments of quantification been adapted to depleting public budgets in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis? Has there been a trend towards (deepening) economization? Have there been signs of resistance to, and disappointment in, the tools of quantification, and are there signs of a wider crisis of instruments of control, given scandals and failures in the domains under investigation, or the regulation of public services more generally?

➤ Quantification and democracy. Instruments of quantification are integral to the ways in which democracy is justified and operationalized as a particular set of mechanisms of rule. What, then, is the relationship between tools of quantification and questions concerning democracy, especially in terms of issues of quality, societal equity and fairness in the delivery of public services? To what extent can instruments of quantification

(such as ratings, rankings and other performance measures) be called upon to mediate between conflicting values and rationalities engrained in public service governance (mediating between objectives of economy and values of fairness, equity, and public welfare)? What roles do they play in processes of inclusion and exclusion, political deliberation and participation?

By exploring these questions, our research responds to key claims, namely (a) whether quantification is a universal, converging trend, (b) whether quantification is leading to homogenizing pressure on public administration in the form of administrative capacities, and (c) whether quantification is associated with changes in understandings of subjectivities, personhood and citizenship. Questioning the (extent of the) transformative character of quantification in public service therefore offers the potential for contributing to debates about the future of public services in the context of competing reform doctrines, growing exposure to demographic and environmental change, and continued financial austerity in many OECD and non-OECD countries.

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