

The cloud of unknowing: Time for value-ing gerunds

Jean Hartley<sup>1</sup> and John Benington<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Open University

<sup>2</sup> Warwick University

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We respond to Mark Prebble's welcome and thought-provoking article not by repeating in full our previous, published arguments about public value as contested democratic practice (Benington, 2015; Benington and Hartley, 2019), but by highlighting some key points about profound changes in the context to take the conversation forward from where Mark leaves it. These have implications for knowing, contesting, value-ing and creating publics.

**A liminal period of crisis, uncertainty and transition, requiring major paradigm shifts;** The Covid pandemic, the climate emergency, the historic geo-political shifts which are re-drawing the power-relationships between the USA, Europe, Russia, Africa and above all China and other parts of Asia, together with the exponential growth of trans-national financial corporations, global social media giants and artificial intelligence (the latter largely beyond accountability to democratic national governments), combine to create a period of epochal change in the ecological, political, economic, social, technological and cultural context of societies and nations. The outcomes of these tectonic changes are still very uncertain: "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this

interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 276) - but clearly require major paradigm shifts in mindsets and practices.

These changes in paradigms (as fundamental as those following Copernicus, Newton and Darwin) challenge existing forms of knowledge and of knowing. We discuss below Prebble’s interesting arguments about the implications for research and evidence for policymakers, politicians and citizens involved in making judgments about public value in these uncertain and contested times. Given the essentially dynamic and dialectical nature of knowing, which is deepened in this period of transition, we need to rethink many aspects of public value-ing.

We argue that in this melting pot of continuous flux and uncertainty, we need to shift to gerunds as our primary way of thinking about and enacting public value. Gerunds are nouns formed from and acting like verbs; they refer to an active process rather than an end state. This implies, for example, a shift of perspective towards governing as a continuous proactive process as opposed to government as a set of organizations or institutions; strategizing as a habitual mindset and activity in rapidly changing circumstances rather than strategy as a once for all plan or final document; creating a public as a dialectical process to call a public into existence (Dewey, 1927; Benington and Moore 2011,b); fostering the conditions for a safe and effective democratic public sphere; and value-ing as a complex process of listening carefully to the voices, ideas and ideologies of differing individuals and interest groups; discovering through dialogue and negotiation the foundational values they will accept as a group of citizens rather than just as consumers, and patiently negotiating a communal purpose and sense of societal direction (Reich, 2018).

## **Knowing**

Mark Prebble's well-crafted article includes a strong case for the "unknowability" of whether or not public value is being created in any particular context. He draws on a long and strong epistemological tradition about the complexities and uncertainties of knowledge creation and the construction of discourse. He then develops a line of argument about how to know what is the public, and whether or not public value has been added, subtracted or changed in a diverse range of situations. He concludes that it is not possible to know with certainty which government actions will advance or diminish public value, who gains and who loses, and therefore what is the "best decision" for policy analysts and politicians. He therefore finishes by arguing that "government requires humility" and reminds us of "the importance of toleration, discourse and compromise".

We pick up and take forward the argument where Mark Prebble leaves it in his last paragraph. How can governments act with "humility" and in partnership with other stakeholders, to create the conditions necessary to foster "toleration, discourse and compromise" including between groups with deeply differing ideologies and competing interests? We argue below that in the current global crisis of conflict and uncertainty, public value creation requires not the search for a comfortable consensus but a tough dialectical process of negotiating some basic foundational values between competing factions.

We suggest both philosophical and practical ways to address the uncertainty of "knowing" what constitutes public value in complex and contested contexts, including mechanisms for promoting curiosity and experiment and addressing knowledge uncertainties before, during and after the enactment of decisions. We endorse Prebble's idea of "toleration" as a foundational value in public life, but we conceptualize public value creation as a *contested* democratic practice (Benington,

2015; Benington and Hartley, 2019). This means that “compromise”, in the sense of each party making middle-of-the-road concessions, may not always generate the best public value outcomes. Sometimes negotiating a “best decision” may involve no compromise at all. This can be the case when there is a need for a process to restore truth, justice and reconciliation after a violent conflict or breakdown in law and order (Benington and Turbitt 2007). At other times contested democratic practice may lead not to compromise but to innovation — the generation of new practices based on step-change shifts in ideas, policies and strategies, and unexpected, fresh directions (Hartley, 2005; Torfing and Triantifillou, 2016).

### **Collecting, sharing, analysing, and interpreting different kinds of knowledge**

Prebble states that “knowability is the ability to identify a preferable course of action with sufficient confidence to justify adopting that course.” However, this seems to imply, as in a traditional policy analysis cycle, that ideally there are a series of logical and formal analytical steps to gather and analyse evidence in a sequential decision-making process, largely to be undertaken by professional policy analysts within government (Hogwood and Gunn 1984; Bardach, 2008). We want to emphasise that the current global context (characterised by multiple over-lapping uncertainties) requires a more provisional , dynamic and inclusive approach to the gathering, assessment and use of evidence for public decision-making.

Although, as Prebble states, the correct or best decision about public value outcomes is unknowable, it is possible to have a continuum of confidence in the quality, sufficiency, longevity and range of application (contextualization) of available evidence. For example, doctors can be pretty confident about the typology of blood groups and which blood groups can be used safely and effectively as donations to

which recipients. (They can never be totally confident because new blood groups could conceivably be discovered). In this situation, public value benefits can be fairly confidently predicted by training doctors and nurses with the appropriate knowledge to undertake safe and beneficial medical practice. Towards the other end of the confidence spectrum, the emergence of evidence of the new coronavirus leading to deaths and disease (SARS-CoV-2) in late 2019 led to a widespread search for knowledge about the characteristics of the virus, the illnesses it created and the treatments which were effective. Treatment could not wait for full “knowability”; there had to be rapid drawing on relevant knowledge of similar or somewhat similar diseases in other places and times, and experimental action undertaken on the basis of the best available evidence (initially drawing on intuitions, hypotheses, recognition of similarities and differences from other illnesses, knowledge acquired in other pandemics, small trials, and followed up later with large-scale randomised control trials). Gradually, over time, knowledge is building up about the virus and its variants, and the diseases that are emerging in different countries and contexts. Users of that knowledge (scientists, policy advisers, politicians, citizens) are becoming more confident in its use for decision-making as the quality and range of evidence is accumulating, and being tested both in the lab and in the population and largely being shared. However, scientists, policy-makers and others clearly need to continue to keep an open mind and be ready to adapt policy and practice as new knowledge unfolds (e.g., as when it became clear that Sars-CoV-2 is airborne as well as spread through surface contact (Lewis, 2020)). Part of the role of elected politicians is to listen carefully to scientific evidence and emerging knowledge and to be willing to make difficult decisions about the balance between private value (e.g.

loss of individual freedoms) and the public good (e.g. the consequences of these freedoms for the public as a whole).

Confidence in the quality, sufficiency and relevance of knowledge for policy analysis can therefore grow over time with the gathering, analysis and sometimes re-analysis of more evidence, a greater variety of methods to undertake research, well designed studies from a greater number of sources and locations and so on. However, confidence needs always to be provisional, with the understanding that a strong way to test any generalized principle or hypothesis is to aim to falsify it (Popper, 1959). This is perhaps one element of the 'government humility' of which Prebble speaks. Being alert to new data, new interpretations and new contexts which render a principle or hypothesis false is an important part of scientific method, and can be deployed in assessing, in a transparent way, aspects of public value in complex, contested contexts. (Not all aspects of public value can be handled in this way, as we discuss below).

Over recent years, evidence-based practice has come to inform and support policy-making and practice (Reay et al, 2009). One influential article (Briner et al, 2009) defines evidence-based practice in terms which illuminate the public value-ing process: "Evidence-based management is about making decisions through the conscientious, explicit, and judicious use of four sources of information: practitioner expertise and judgment, evidence from the local context, a critical evaluation of the best available research evidence, and the perspectives of those people who might be affected by the decision." (p. 19). Their use of "conscientious, explicit and judicious" implies an active process of knowing. Best available evidence means not only scientific evidence but localised and contextualised knowledge. The exact mix will depend on the nature of the problem, the particular context, and how much is

already known about the issue. This involves seeking out evidence not just from academic or governmental research but also from a wider range of potential sources and according to the context.

This could lead to an unsatisfactory mish-mash of different data of variable quality and range of explanation, with plenty of opportunity for so-called “fake news.” However, Briner (2018) argues for a structured approach to sifting and weighing evidence:

*ask* (about how a problem is framed and what kinds of evidence may be useful in understanding and tackling it);

*acquire* (obtain knowledge from all the four sources given above if at all possible);

*appraise* (what is the quality and trustworthiness of the evidence);

*aggregate* (pull together the best available evidence, which is not necessarily all the evidence);

*apply* (use the evidence to inform decision-making);

*assess* (undertake evaluation of the decision and consider counter-factuals).

Nutley et al. (2019) argue that in seeking evidence to support decisions there is a need for supplementary questions beyond “what works” and these include how and why interventions work, for whom, at what price and with what consequences. We would add further questions about how long a decision continues to create public value, given the fast changing and unpredictable nature of the current global ecological, political economic, social, technological, organisational and cultural context

Sometimes, such sifting and weighing up of evidence can be done in real-time, at a pace conducive to deep thinking and analysis, and with the transparency which helps to ensure accurate theory and evidence. But not all public value creation has the luxury of time. Those working in emergency services (e.g. hospital accident and emergency; policing) often have to work with unknowability — but also with the awareness that a failure to make a decision may be as costly to life and limb as a pragmatic, provisional decision. There is no time for democratic debate where decision-making is measured in milliseconds! Alison et al. (2021) analyse the cognitive paralysis which can occur when police are faced with two equally dangerous and unpalatable options for action. As well as rehearsals and emergency scenarios, they argue for “grim story-telling” as a way to encourage the use of imagination in order to avoid the narrowing of cognitive options which can occur in stressful situations. So public value strategies, tactics, and options may need be explored and rehearsed both in practice and in the imagination, to prepare for decisions which may later have to be taken under pressure; for example policing the Drumcree demonstrations in Northern Ireland (Benington and Turbitt, 2007). Rehearsal and simulations can also be valuable in day-to-day settings.

In the active process of knowing, a key role for government in creating public value is to stimulate and support evidence-gathering, its assessment, use and evaluation of that evidence in practical settings. Some of this can be through funding research to examine current problems and opportunities to create public value, and also to promote ‘blue skies’ work on future longer-term and complex ‘wicked’ problems. Robust, high quality and transparent research by universities, professional bodies, and even ‘citizen scientists’ as well as by government departments ensures a strong evidence base, often using mixed methods (qualitative and quantitative,

including engaged action-research) and undertaken in a variety of contexts. Research is not only important to assess existing practices and consider counter-factuals, but also to develop innovation. Innovative practices, almost by definition, will lack a strong evidence base initially and some may be highly contested, but dialogue and exploration of possible consequences is needed to keep public value outcomes at the forefront. This may include undertaking formative as well as summative evaluations (Weiss, 1979) and also using the 'intelligent failure' of small losses (Sitkin, 1992) to design small experiments and interventions to test ideas and impacts in a variety of contexts before launching into large-scale reform or change.

Knowing can be increased by supporting groups which are interested in collecting and assessing quality data. The citizen science movement has generated valuable data in the science field (Irwin, 1995; Riesch and Potter, 2014), and has encouraged public participation, thus increasing public understanding of science. This participatory approach has been used for many public issues in the fields of education, health, social care, economic development and democratic politics (e.g. the Porto Alegre decision-making Baiocchi, 2001; priority-setting in healthcare, Lenaghan et al, 1996). For example, citizens' juries have been tested as one way to encourage participation and the judicious and systematic weighing up of the best available evidence on complex issues of public concern (Smith and Wales, 2018). Deliberative democracy is more, not less, important at a time of polarization and increasingly fragile institutions (Fung, 2020).

There are some topics which require a level of professional or technical knowledge beyond the scope of many publics, but even in these cases there are likely to be expert amateurs or those with lived experience who can contribute. Expert patient groups in the UK National Health Service are one example (e.g. Harris

et al, 2016). This is a reminder of Briner's (2018) category of best available evidence coming from stakeholders' concerns alongside other sources of evidence. It also means that discussion and debate (of experiences, of the quality of data, of aesthetics and values) are important along with quantitative data. What is the best judgement to make about public value benefits and costs depends on the best available evidence for that context at that moment in time, with those specific groups of people, with explicit and covert purposes and interests, and also taking into account the longer term interests of generations yet unborn, or without a voice in the contested democratic space and process (Benington, 2011; Reich, 2018). Of course, how that best available evidence is used, particularly for national or local policy or strategy, depends on the role played by elected politicians, who are the final arbiters of the use of evidence in decision-making, in democratic states, though their views may be challenged.

### **Creating accountability**

While some decisions can be weighed in advance, there are also Prebble's "after the event" unknowabilities to grapple with. Intended and unintended consequences, whether beneficial or dysfunctional, can be assessed as part of the feedback loop and decision-making cycle. So, designing in, from the beginning, procedures for summative evaluation, impact measurement, scrutiny, inspection and other accountability mechanisms is important. They may or may not be able to prevent particular problems from arising, but they can contribute to some extent to preventing failures from being replicated elsewhere or in the future.

How these mechanisms are configured is also important. They themselves need to be subject to a public value test — what additional public value are they

creating and what public value may they be wasting? Accountability is critically important within a democratic society so that decisions made on behalf of citizens and future citizens are made with a sense of “fairness”. However, if scrutiny creates a climate of fear and blame in a service or organization, then learning from success and failure is inhibited, with mistakes covered up, explained away, or blame for them diverted onto inappropriate actors and institutions (Cannon and Edmondson, 2005; Tomkins et al, 2020). Instead, accountability should and could be weighing context, action, and consequence with the twin purposes of creating or repairing an existing situation and improving future situations. The evidence is still “unknowable” even after the event, but there can be degrees of confidence about the evidence base of decisions, and a consideration of alternative approaches for the future. “Intelligent failure” may also be important here for creating future innovation (Sitkin, 1992; Hartley and Knell, 2021).

### **Developing curiosity and an appetite for learning linked to action**

A key theme of Prebble’s article is the unknowability of public value. Yet one does not need to be a knowability optimist or pessimist to make a contribution to creating public value outcomes. Being a knowability sceptic (but not a cynic) may be a more realistic, more useful and more effective stance to take. This means recognising that all knowledge is provisional, in part because of the dynamic nature of the natural environment, the political-economic, social and technological context, human fallibilities, and their institutions and behaviours. What is knowable in one context may be irrelevant in another context or out of date by the next day. There may be degrees of confidence in the evidence base behind particular public value propositions but given that this is dynamic then maintaining curiosity and asking

questions is central. This is important for individuals (citizens, professionals, politicians, managers for example) but also for institutions, in the public, private, and voluntary sectors. Creating learning capacity in organizations so that their systems, processes, and cultures exude a continual interest in “what works, for whom, in what circumstances and why” in complex policy and practice matters (the basis of “realist evaluation”: Pawson et al, 2005; Pawson and Tilley, 1997 is a contribution to public value practice. Organizational learning and questioning needs to be linked to action or the conscious withholding of action, based on recognition of when to prepare well but then simply take fast decisions; when to debate, argue, and create dialectical judgement; and when to reflect back and ensure that “lessons learned” are really taken into new practices. Curiosity is increasingly recognized as a valuable approach in many aspects of organizational functioning (Lievens et al, 2021).

## **Valueing**

So far we have argued for the best available evidence, whether that is split-second decision-making in critical incidents or more long-term evaluation of varied forms of data, knowledge and concerns. However, evidence is only sometimes uncontested - there may be many political, social and emotional aspects to it which make evaluation problematic. Some argue that all knowledge is socially acquired and socially constructed (Chiva and Alegre, 2005) and is justified as “true” through social processes (Nonaka, 1994). At the simplest level, there are psychological problems with human judgement - with attending to, perceiving, analysing, and interpreting data (e.g., confirmation bias, optimism bias, statistical illiteracy, escalating commitment, and so on). At the social level, there can be problems created by group think, emotional commitment to particular identities, in group and

outgroup biases, fake news, culture wars and much more. It's a minefield! And this occurs in relatively stable societies, let alone in transitioning, polarizing, illiberal or violently-divided societies.

In addition, and partly consequently, we argue that we need to turn to explicit political processes. We argue that politics — in the sense of the processes by which different interests are reconciled without recourse to war or violence (according to Crick, 2000) are fundamentally intertwined with issues of knowability. Wherever there are diverse and sometimes competing interests, then power and politics are at play (Dahl, 1957), whether their use is explicit or largely hidden (Lukes, 2005; Foucault, 2020).

So viewing public value creation (or destruction) as a “contested democratic practice” (Benington, 2015) is critical. This reformulates public value as starting with the communal rather than with individuals and private interests (as Prebble recognises, in his discussion of what is the public) and with the ongoing process of public valueing - “the end goal of creating an informed, educated and empowered public (or series of overlapping publics) capable of taking responsibility for difficult and often painful decisions about what will (or will not) add value to the public sphere not just to individual self-interest” (Benington, 2015, p. 30).

This requires paying attention to bringing a public into being for the purpose of discovering its own interests and making decisions. This was addressed in several chapters in Benington and Moore (2011) and has also been illustrated in a range of case studies, particularly with communities facing difficult decisions (e.g. Benington and Turbitt, 2007; Hartley et al, 2019; Benington and Hartley, 2019). Such communities may be conflictful, fissiparous and contradictory, as well as volatile. The creating of publics which are conscious of both their individual and communal

interests may occur through a host of means, including citizens' deliberative assemblies (Ranson, 2021), citizens' juries, through meetings convened for the purposes of exploring hotly debated matters, in protests and demonstrations.

The key issue then is how to enable careful listening of competing views with respect for opponents who may have diametrically different perspectives and values. This is not easy in a period of culture wars, fake news, and identity politics, even in liberal democracies, let alone in societies which are violently divided. However, as we have explored before (Benington, 2015; Hartley and Stansfield, 2021), "agonistic pluralism" may provide a channel by which to seek out public value outcomes through "a new way to think about democracy" (Mouffe, 1993). She argues that "..... within the context of the political community, the opponent should be considered not as an enemy to be destroyed, but as an adversary whose existence is legitimate and must be tolerated. We will fight against his ideas but we will not question his right to defend them. The category of the 'enemy' does not disappear but is displaced; it remains pertinent with respect to those who do not accept the democratic 'rules of the game' and who thereby exclude themselves from the political community. Liberal democracy requires consensus on the rules of the game, but it also calls for the constitution of collective identities around clearly differentiated positions and the possibility of choosing between real alternatives. This 'agonistic pluralism' is constitutive of modern democracy and rather than seeing it as a threat, we should realise that it represents the very condition of existence of such democracy." (Mouffe, 1993, p. 4).

Mouffe argues that this approach needs to be taken into account in conventional institutional politics. Elected politicians are the final "authorizing environment"

(Moore, 1995) for decisions, but they must first listen to and engage with a range of voices and interests among various publics.

Conflicts and interests play out in a variety of public, private and civic arenas, and with different interests and identities. There is much more to explore, though space precludes further analysis or commentary here. Suffice it to say that processes and outcomes of public value creation may be achieved, dynamically and sometimes temporarily, through debate, discourse, and dialectical exploration. This returns us to Prebble's important conclusion — that humility, discourse and tolerance are critical to achieving public value. We agree and support this argument through the lens of contested democratic practice and agonistic pluralism. It means that public servants, in discerning and creating public value, may well need to work alongside others (Bryson et al., 2017) in exploring and evaluating evidence and options for public value. Their job may include bringing a public into being in order to reflect on priorities and values so that decisions can be taken. In a study of rural crime, the police leadership had, first of all, to convene a public who could discuss a difficult and very emotionally hot issue, before taking action because upholding the law would have been insufficient on its own (Hartley et al., 2019).

This is not an easy place to finish a commentary on Prebble's article because there are no simple or straightforward answers. As in many contexts with high levels of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity, there are multiple and changing dimensions to consider but a public value perspective provides a sense of purpose and direction. Consequently, we build on Prebble's provocative questions, in order to argue that the profound changes in the ecological, political-economic, social technological, and organizational context require a radical paradigm shift if public value is to be analysed and understood. A shift to using gerunds reflects the active,

changing, continuous processes of moving dialectically between theory and practice; in building and questioning evidence; in expressing curiosity about what works, for whom in what contexts and why; in contesting perspectives, views and values in pluralistic agonistic arenas; and in encouraging feedback loops and evaluation as a polity fosters learning, curiosity and public valueing. Making a public is central to these practices. We all have to work in a cloud of unknowing but there are ways to engage in (albeit imperfect) thinking, action, reflection and debate to achieve public value outcomes both in the present and for future generations.

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