

Talk at LNVH Spring Symposium – Alyt Damstra

June 13 2025

The insights I would like to share with you come from my daily experiences as a so-called knowledge broker. Since 2020 I work for the Scientific Council for Government Policy in The Hague – de Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid for Dutch speaking colleagues – and I combine this beautiful job with my chair ‘Knowledge and strategic policy advice’ at the University of Amsterdam (at the Political Science department). In this role I study the work we do at the council, as I look, as an academic, at the science for policy interface, with a specific focus on advisory bodies. Advisory bodies that, for various reasons, occupy a special position within this system, which I will discuss in more detail later.

But before I do that, let me take one step back and quickly discuss the complicated relationship between science and politics as the most important sources of knowledge and policy. Science and politics are mutually dependent. Through legislation and financing, government policy has a major influence on science. The current cutbacks in scientific education make this influence very tangible. Political choices matter. They create the framework and space within which scientific research can flourish or is pushed to the margins.

But as said, the dependency also goes the other way, because knowledge is also an indispensable building block for policy. Knowledge plays a role in all stages of the policy process. Whether it concerns defining policy problems, structuring them, prioritizing them, designing policies, implementing them or the evaluation stage. Knowledge is important. And to be sure, it is not only scientific expertise that matters here; other sources of knowledge are also relevant, such as local knowledge of the environment or the lived experiences of citizens. The implicit but widely supported assumption is that all these forms of knowledge and expertise make a positive contribution to the quality of the policy process. A positive appreciation that is reflected in the pursuit of *knowledge-driven policy-making* (or: *kennisgedreven beleid*).

Mutual dependence thus. At the same time, both domains are driven by fundamentally different rationalities. Science tries to build knowledge of how the world works. Politics is about weighing interests and values, about making decisions – and about finding the political majority that is needed for this. Scientists ask questions. Doubt and contradiction are the engine of the scientific method. But in politics, answers are crucial. Politicians are not so fond of doubt, uncertainty and loose ends; clarity is what they need. Yes - knowledge is important, but knowledge alone does not make policy: values and interests are just as relevant. Knowledge is often used strategically, to legitimize or substantiate already preferred policy positions. Requesting research belongs to the most tried and tested methods to buy time and postpone difficult political choices.

Scientists specialize in a single discipline; politics transcends domains, especially when dealing with complex policy issues – the so-called wicked problems. And, finally, science is slow; while political decision-making is dynamic: some decisions take ages, but they can also be taken overnight. Sometimes literally – as we have seen happen more than once over the past few months.

Direct confrontations between science and politics

Precisely because of these intrinsically different rationalities, things quickly become complicated when science and politics start to overlap. Yet this seems to be the case more and more often. Certainly around complex, knowledge-intensive and polarized issues. The distinction between science and politics can quickly become blurred. The textbook example: during the corona crisis, the Dutch government constantly referred to the knowledge and advice of the Outbreak Management Team; which gave the impression that they were the ones who determined policy, while political considerations faded into the background. But even under less exceptional circumstances we see that the boundaries between science and politics are blurring. Professors in robes joining Extinction Rebellion to protest against fossil subsidies. Regional governments that instruct scientists to develop a new arithmetic lower limit for nitrogen pollution. Politicians who argue during the formation of the government about the alleged political leaning of migration scientists who were invited to share their expertise.

When science and politics merge, politics becomes scientized, and science inevitably becomes politicized. Scientists who speak out politically make themselves vulnerable to accusations of bias. Politicians who refer only to scientific insights suggest that no values and interests have been weighed and that there is no political responsibility. For science, this blurring of roles is rarely good news. If the political battle is not fought in the political domain, it moves to the scientific domain. When this happens, it is not the values and interests that are up for discussion, but the value of science itself. Opponents of a policy invoke alternative facts and question the integrity of the dominant scientific discourse. Scientists are faced with skepticism and intimidation they find very difficult to defend themselves against. Such debates might be necessary – as was argued before and I am looking forward to hearing your thoughts on that – but they are also uncomfortable and often damaging. So - in addition to the previous speakers and may be somewhat contrary to them - I would like to underline the importance of role stability.

Now, let's turn to the science for policy ecosystem. It is in this complex field of forces that this ecosystem forms an indispensable and connecting link between both domains. It is not easy to describe the Dutch *science for policy ecosystem* in a few sentences. The Netherlands has many colleges, committees, councils and agencies, each with its own working methods, expertise, position and relationship to the government. There are permanent organizations that have their own legal basis, such as the planning agencies and advisory councils such as the Education Council, the Health Council and the Council for Culture – and my own Scientific Council for Government Policy. There are also temporary committees - often set up at the request of the government or parliament - such as the State Commission on Racism and Discrimination.

Also from a substantive perspective, there is huge variation. For now, it is enough to note that the Netherlands has a very rich and varied Science for Policy ecosystem, also in comparison to other European countries. In this system, advisory councils occupy a special place. Unlike institutes such as the RIVM or the planning agencies, they do not just unlock and provide knowledge, they also convert knowledge into guiding input for policy. In: advice, recommendations and action perspectives. It is these advisory councils that I will focus on in the remainder of my story.

When I joined the WRR in 2020, a colleague made it clear to me in my very first week that advising is something completely different from academic research. Knowledge is important - but ultimately advice must be provided. Policy advice requires a translation of knowledge into recommendations and these are inevitably normative; after all, policy recommendations are based on values. In addition, advice can have very different functions: putting new developments on the agenda, bringing a new perspective to policy issues that are stuck, or thinking about the longer term.

For all these forms of advice, advisory councils must be able to find a balance between distance and connectedness. On the one hand, a certain distance from the government is a prerequisite for being able to provide independent and authoritative critical advice. But too much distance is undesirable; there must be some degree of connectedness. After all, advice must land, the recommendations must match the questions that politicians and civil servants are struggling with. Only then will an advice be considered relevant and legitimate and is there a chance that something will be done with it. The tension between these two opposing values is expressed in the artificial way in which the relationship between advisory councils and government is described. It is referred to as 'embedded autonomy', 'resilient connection' or 'freedom in restraint'. If we look at the way in which distance and connectedness are given concrete form in the organizations themselves, structural financing, independent personnel policy and control over the work program contribute to the distance that is necessary for independent advice. Regular exchange with ministers, members of parliament and civil servants is a way in which connectedness takes shape. As well as accepting and implementing a request for advice and the mandatory cabinet response.

Two broad developments have fundamentally changed the relationship between science and politics and thus also have an influence on the connecting role that advisory councils can play between these two domains. I refer to the radical transformation of our information environment and the global rise of populist politics. Because of the time, I will only briefly discuss both.

In the current high choice media environment, it has never been easier to obtain information and get informed. The supply side has exploded. Due to digitalization, time and place have lost much of their meaning, information is available anytime and anywhere just by using your mobile phone. The unlimited availability has come with major benefits, also from a knowledge perspective. It has become easier to inform yourself; it has also become easier to disseminate scientific knowledge to a wide audience. Both are gains. But with the disappearance of traditional gatekeepers, there is hardly any control over the quality of the online information flow. Anyone can blog, vlog, post, like, share and

comment – and can do so at any time of the day. This does not only mean that everyone, all of us, have become producers. We are also curators; through our online behavior, we determine which content is further distributed in our network and in what way.

Many new media have emerged, including media with a distinctly biased profile. These ‘alternative media’ offer a different perspective than what can be heard in the traditional press. Journalistic codes and guidelines are, for these media, subordinate to the viewpoints they want to convey. Criticism of science and criticism of the government are recurring elements of these viewpoints. As well as criticism of the traditional news media, consistently referred to as ‘mainstream’. Finally, the open infrastructure has made it very easy to bring misleading information into the public debate. It is often political elites who contribute to the legitimacy of this content, by producing it themselves or by sharing it with their followers. The emergence of new technology, certainly in the field of generative AI, means – on the one hand – that even more knowledge can be unlocked. It also means that detecting disinformation has become an even more difficult issue.

But it is not only the supply side that has undergone a profound transformation, this also applies to the user side. We, as users, are more capable than ever of determining our own information diet. The human tendency to prefer information that confirms what we already found and what we already thought is timeless – but we can now actually act on it in the current high-choice media environment. Especially around politicized policy issues where societal stakes are high, we see the emergence of online communities around alternative sources of knowledge, which are incompatible with the dominant scientific discourse. This phenomenon became clearly visible during the corona pandemic, but we have seen it happen more often since then, for example around migration and nitrogen.

Parallel to this transformation, we see that populist politics has been on the rise in recent decades. This graph shows the share of votes in European countries for populist parties over the past 30 years. The figure shows that support for populist parties has grown in recent decades and that this growth is mainly driven by radical right populism – the green bars. Radical right, populist parties have become powerful political players in many European countries. Well-known examples are Fidesz in Hungary, Fratelli d’Italia in Italy and the Swiss People's Party in Switzerland. Wilders' Party for Freedom also belongs to this party family and, as the largest government party in Dutch parliament, now has considerable influence.

Trump's reelection in the US demonstrates how the appeal of radical right-wing populism can gain wings in a digital information environment dominated by Big Tech. The unprecedented merger of political, economic and opinion power is shaking the democratic constitutional state to its foundations. It shows once again that populist politics is a lasting factor of significance, a political ideology that knows how to appeal to and mobilize large groups of citizens. Worldwide, but certainly also in the Netherlands. Key features of this political ideology are a clear divide between the common people and a perceived elite and the defense of a national identity against attacks by outsiders. Another characteristic element concerns a skeptical and even hostile attitude towards so-called truth-seeking institutions - such as

journalism, the judiciary and also science. This hostile attitude is expressed in various ways. First, by systematically questioning the integrity of knowledge sources. Journalists are dismissed as subjective, judges are said to secretly pursue a political agenda, and scientists are biased and activist. The special status that is granted to scientific knowledge is therefore up for discussion; there is no need to grant authority to these types of insights. Second, scientific insights hardly form a basis for political considerations. Not even when they unambiguously point to the adverse effects of a proposed policy.

What are the consequences of this changing playing for the balancing act that advisory councils have to perform? Balancing between distance and connectedness, in order to provide critical but also effective advice to politicians? I see a number of challenges.

Firstly, maintaining distance. More than ever, the risk is real that scientific insights are drawn into the political arena. Society talks back, via social media platforms and through alternative media. The communication around polarized topics is not gentle. The integrity of scientists is being questioned, and alternative evidence is being presented. The fact that scientific knowledge is always to some extent *uncertain*, provides an excellent opportunity to sow doubt. For example, a few months ago, the Minister of Infrastructure and Water Management indicated that climate science is not fully crystallized yet. Which is true, because science never is. But it does not alter the fact that there is an overwhelming scientific consensus on the causes and disastrous impact of climate change.

But perhaps the challenges related to *connectedness* are even greater. In essence, connectedness requires a reciprocal dynamic in which political actors must at least have some level of appreciation for the work of advisory councils. Last year, the Advisory Council on Migration published a letter to the Minister of Asylum and Migration. In this letter, the chair and secretary called for the advisory bodies not to be pushed aside. Policy proposals about the introduction of a dual status system and asylum emergency measures had not been submitted for consultation. Only a small selection of organizations had been consulted, and they were only given one week to respond, instead of the usual six to eight weeks. The council pointed out that important expertise was not involved in the legislative process and that leaving this expertise out, would come at the expense of the quality. By circumventing and bluntly ignoring these advisory bodies, the Minister gave a clear political signal: advice based on expertise is not very important but it is very time-consuming. Such incidents raise the fundamental question of what role knowledge still has for policy and more specifically: how advisory councils can continue to shape involvement when politics is not so keen on it.

I conclude with two brief reflections on the implications of these challenges for the role of knowledge brokers in the science for policy ecosystem. First of all: the growing importance of role stability. Role stability presupposes a thorough knowledge of one's own position and assignment. In a context of increasing resistance to science, this requires investments that strengthen the craftsmanship of policy advice. Precisely because it is such a special discipline – to paraphrase my colleague once again. How exactly does knowledge lead to a policy recommendation? What normative framework underlies it? And how is quality monitored? One's own working method and all the considerations that play a role in it

must be thoroughly known. This also means a keen awareness of the limits to advice. It is not up to any council to make political choices. The trick is to be directive without engaging in politics. In addition, clear relationships with the environment are of great importance. As mentioned, involvement presupposes reciprocity. And that is not self-evident. But one's own involvement can be actively promoted. By continuing to approach all parties for discussions, by bringing reports to the attention of the public and presenting them everywhere, or, in extreme cases, by explicitly calling on your own minister to make use of the available expertise.

But the importance of agility is also increasing. Advisory councils must be able to adapt to a rapidly changing environment. If the involvement of political actors is under pressure, implementation can still be achieved in other ways. By talking to civil servants, by speaking to lower authorities and social organizations or citizens for whom the recommendations are relevant. It is true that interactive exchange usually yields more than just sending. Advisory councils can create involvement by connecting even better to the needs within departments. Reports and advice can also find their way to society via the public debate, where they can be of particular value to the work of other organizations such as the Council of State and the Ombudsman.

The epistemic common ground is shrinking, our research group on Knowledge resistance concluded a few years ago in a joint publication. It is of great importance that this shared ground does not become even smaller. Advisory councils have an important role to play in this. Society is facing major challenges. For almost all of these challenges, scientific knowledge is indispensable for tackling them and scientific policy advice can unlock this knowledge and convert it into a perspective for action. But then advisory bodies must continue to be given the space to do their work with both distance and connectedness.