The role of ‘non-knowledge’ in crisis policymaking: a proposal and agenda for future research

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Key messages:
- Non-knowledge is an under-explored aspect of responses to major policy crises
- Non-knowledge is not simply the absence of knowledge. Key forms include amnesia, ignorance and misinformation.
- Policy actors may utilise non-knowledge for strategic or self-interested purposes, shaped by organisational conditions.
- Further work needed to overcome methodological and access challenges in researching non-knowledge.

Introduction: ‘Non-knowledge’ and public policy

Governments around the world are facing an increasing number of complex and cross-boundary policy problems, such as climate change, pandemics, and financial crises (Ansell et al., 2010). Scholars and practitioners question the current capacity of governments to meet the demands placed upon them, especially given heavier reliance on market-based governance (Painter and Pierre, 2004). Concerns regarding capacity are further buttressed by broader discontent with democratic political systems (Dahlberg et al., 2015), and declarations of a ‘crisis of expertise’ (Eyal, 2019). These problems are contested and open to redefinition, misunderstanding, spin, and deception. At their heart are knowledge challenges relating to the ability of policy makers to locate, discriminate, comprehend, and respond to competing sources of knowledge and expertise. However, while aspects of these issues have been discussed extensively both within and without policy studies, the discipline has not yet given full consideration to the role that ‘non-knowledge’ may play in both shaping the behaviour of actors and the outcomes of policy processes. Here, we focus particularly on ignorance and amnesia, while also noting recent work on misinformation.

Traditionally, two approaches to knowledge have dominated policy studies: the loosely ‘rational-instrumental’ work of the policy sciences, and a more interpretivist-discursive approach (Durnová and Weible, 2020; Paul and Haddad, 2019). Much work in the policy sciences assumes that more effective knowledge utilisation will lead to improved outcomes, prompting debates on topics such as evidence-based policy, analytic capacity, coproduction, and the ‘new design orientation’ (Head, 2008; Howlett et al., 2015; Painter and Pierre, 2004). The second orthodoxy views the policy process as an ongoing and dynamic contest over meaning, in which actors seek persuasive frames and narratives (Boin et al., 2009).
Influential contemporary work has examined how policy makers learn amongst conditions of uncertainty and contestation (Dunlop and Radaelli, 2018), considered the use of PR and lobbying in providing credibility for political and corporate interests (Dinan and Miller, 2007), and sought transparent and accessible governance processes around the use of evidence (Hawkins and Parkhurst, 2016).

However, explicit acknowledgement and analysis of what sociological and other social science literature calls ‘non-knowledge’ (Böschen et al., 2010) or ‘non-knowing’ (Beck and Wehling, 2013) – and the challenges it brings for policymakers – has been less common in policy studies. There is an emerging literature in the discipline on misinformation, conspiracy, ‘crisis of expertise’ and ‘post-truth’ (Perl, Howlett & Ramesh, 2018; Hartley and Vu, 2020; Attwell et al., 2021; Fischer, 2019), also widely discussed in public administration and political science (Parker and Stern, 2022; Jerit and Zhao, 2020; Bergmann, 2018). However, a smaller number of papers address other forms of non-knowledge directly, especially ignorance and amnesia (Boswell and Badenhoop, 2020; Mica et al., 2020; Paul and Haddad, 2019; Stark, 2019). In our view, focusing more explicitly on non-knowledge would also help fill the need for more systematic research on the ‘dark side of policy-making’, given the various ways in which ignorance can enable the pursuit of self-interest (Howlett, 2020).

In what follows, we outline three main forms of non-knowledge that challenge public agencies: amnesia, ignorance and misinformation. We argue that these are each distinct from the ‘policy-based evidence’ frequently discussed in the literature. We then demonstrate the value of a knowledge challenges approach – focusing on amnesia and ignorance specifically – through a brief case study of the COVID-19 hotel quarantine program, which operated in Melbourne, Australia in 2020.

**Forms of non-knowledge: ignorance, amnesia and misinformation**

It is difficult to produce a concise definition of non-knowledge, other than to say that it refers to informational or knowledge-related challenges and strategies that are not fully accounted for in traditional models of knowledge utilisation. While the term may appear to imply the inverse of knowledge, the study of non-knowledge is more properly understood as investigation of the strategies, practices and even cultures that surround what is not known (Böschen et al., 2010). Here, our focus is primarily on two distinct forms of non-knowledge – amnesia and ignorance – although we also note recent scholarly attention to misinformation.

In each case, ‘non-knowledge’ is not simply the absence of any policy-relevant knowledge. To begin with the form most commonly addressed in the literature, to be misinformed is to actively believe false or misleading information, whether spread deliberately (disinformation) or unintentionally (misinformation) (Lewandowsky et al., 2017). In a range of domains, scholars and public commentators have argued that the spread of false information has the potential to undermine the factual basis of debates and decisions. Recent examples include the refusal of parents to vaccinate their children, debates over the appropriateness of government responses to the COVID-19 crisis, and the legitimacy of election outcomes in the United States (Attwell et al., 2021; Hartley and Vu, 2020; Albertson and Guiler, 2020). Consequently, there has been increasing scholarly attention paid to both disinformation and misinformation, especially their effects on public opinion and behaviour, such as in relation to vaccination (Attwell et al., 2021), spread via social media, and the use (or accusations thereof) of disinformation by political elites (Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Farhall et al., 2019). Widespread misinformation may also muddy the waters for policymakers and analysts themselves, creating doubt or making it more difficult to ascertain fact from fiction.
Second, much has been written about the importance of policy and organisational learning to solve or mitigate policy challenges. However, if we can learn, it follows that we can also forget – in policy and administrative settings, this is known as institutional amnesia. Much like policy learning, the existing literature on institutional amnesia recognises drivers and processes that encompass both formal-institutional and more discursive views of politics (Stark, 2019). For example, Smith (2013) describes the ways in which short timeframes and rapid staff turnover within public agencies can lead to policy ideas constantly being ‘reinvented’ and represented to decision makers as new.

Third, literature on ‘agnotology’ emphasises that ignorance is not simply the inverse of knowledge, or the lack of any knowledge at all (McGoey, 2007; Proctor and Schiebinger, 2008). Rather, it pertains to the obscuring or casting aside of relevant knowledge that could (or even should) be available. For example, McGoey (2007, 2019) suggests that ignorance occurs where the creation of doubt, or the ability to claim ignorance, serves particular interests or is used as a coping mechanism by actors under pressure. A viable claim to ignorance can muddy the waters of accountability or of cause and effect. McGoey (2007) discusses how British pharmaceutical regulators have been incentivised to not find or ignore instances of their own previous regulatory failure, such as in relation to increased suicide risk resulting from some classes of anti-depressants.

There is good reason to think that these forms of non-knowledge regularly emerge in the day-to-day policy process (Paul and Haddad, 2019). However, they are likely to have particular relevance and influence during periods of crisis. Uncertainty, novelty and pressure create scenarios where the availability of relevant knowledge for policymaking reels from overabundance to scarcity (Boswell, 2009). This places pressure on the analytic capacity of public agencies and experts, but also grants space for misinformation and conspiracy (Rosenthal and Hart, 1991). Crises may provoke demands to respond with haste, precluding careful analysis of existing knowledge. They are also often ‘focusing events’ that undermine the legitimacy of dominant actors or ideas. As such, those in power have incentives to use knowledge and non-knowledge strategically to avoid potential blame (Vis, 2016), or to pursue agendas that are not in the public interest, and not always visible (McConnell, 2018).

While we argue that explicit focus on non-knowledge has been largely absent from policy studies until recently, there is a need to place it in context with pre-existing work on knowledge and evidence. In one sense, to study non-knowledge in public policy is to build on the literature on bounded rationality. Bounded rationality invokes a concern with the production and use of partial knowledge resulting from various cognitive, informational, temporal and resource constraints, leading to a tendency to ‘satisfice’ rather than optimise decisions (Simon, 1957). Non-knowledge may emerge from the constraints of bounded rationality. For example, insufficient resourcing may see public agencies lacking the capacity to generate new evidence, or hold onto lessons from past experience (amnesia).

Similar issues have also been raised in the literature on ‘policy-based evidence’ (PBE) and the political uses of expert knowledge (Strassheim and Kettunen, 2014; Boswell, 2009). PBE generally describes a selective use of evidence to support an existing set of policy preferences: evidence, for this purpose, should be plausible enough to justify a policy choice, even if it misses key details. Knowledge, ideas, and evidence are often used selectively or summarised in ways that are misleading. This can be a product of bounded rationality as details become lost in the transmission of information into policy debate (Botterill and Hindmoor, 2012). Alternatively, the creation and selection of evidence can be seen as part of the persuasive process. As Majone (1989, p.10) argued:
Evidence is not synonymous with data or information. It is information selected from the available stock and introduced at a specific point in the argument in order to persuade a particular audience of the truth or falsity of a statement.

Or, more troublingly, the use of evidence may be shaped by ‘cognitive closure’ (Strassheim and Kettunen 2014) or ‘undone science’ – when needed knowledge is not produced, or is ignored or delegitimised due to power imbalances or narrow epistemic cultures (Kleinman and Suryanarayanan, 2013).

As such, the emergence of non-knowledge may be related to the rational limits of policymaking and decisions around the framing and use of evidence in policy debates. However, in our view the approach retains several key distinctions for application in policy studies. In studies of non-knowledge, the focus is on specific ways in which relevant knowledge may be hidden, lost, obscured (including by falsehood) or never searched for, and the processes and practices by which these absences emerge and are sustained or even actively cultivated. While questions regarding the use (or misuse) of scientific knowledge and its alignment with resultant policies are relevant here, the potential role of non-knowledge is broader and more diverse.

Moreover, to take a bounded rationality perspective has been to assume policymakers acting in good faith for the public good, albeit imperfectly (Howlett, 2020; Botterill and Hindmoor, 2012). Studying non-knowledge requires challenging this assumption and recognising potential for a variety of motives, even within the same person or group, and closely examining the potential choices available to policy actors. The creation or spread of ignorance, amnesia or misinformation may be unavoidable, or entirely deliberate, and have consequences ranging from the positive to the catastrophic. The uses of non-knowledge and associated motives are also likely to vary between different actors, such as between interest groups seeking economic gain and public officials responsible for policy implementation.

Recent work in psychology focuses on ‘deliberate’ ignorance, defined as ‘the conscious individual or collective choice not to seek or use information’ (Hertwig and Engel, 2016, p.360). Deliberate ignorance may result from more benign cognitive phenomena such as ‘anticipatory regret’ (avoiding negative emotions that may come from knowledge of possible negative outcomes) or self-deception (Gigerenzer and Garcia-Retamero, 2017). However, it may also serve outright nefarious ends, such as corruption, gaming, or manipulation of policy for political or economic benefit (Howlett, 2020). The ability to ‘plead ignorance’ may also aid in avoiding blame or accountability for failures – as recognised in political science scholarship (McGraw, 1990; Thompson, 1980) – or forestall the prospect of learning and policy or political change. Equally, in some cases it may be necessary for actors to forget, for otherwise we can be overwhelmed by data or the legacies of experiences and practices past (Stark, 2019). Policy actors may therefore practice ignorance and cultivate amnesia out of some combination of self-interest, perceived necessity, convenience or even in pursuit of public good.

Case study: Victorian hotel quarantine

We now turn to the case study of Melbourne’s hotel quarantine program (HQP), in which we identify two of the three modes of non-knowledge: amnesia and ignorance. Material from the case study is largely drawn from a Board of Inquiry, led by former Family Court Judge Jennifer Coate, appointed to investigate failures in the development and operation of the HQP, which released its final report in December 2020. While decisions relating to the HQP involved a variety of state and federal agencies and private contractors, our focus is on the Victorian public agencies tasked with overseeing it.
The ability to shut its borders and impose quarantine on travellers was a key element of Australia’s relatively successful management of the COVID-19 pandemic during 2020 and early 2021 (Stobart and Duckett, 2021). However, the hotel quarantine programs – operated by state governments – were not without major issues. In particular, in May 2020 an outbreak emerged from Melbourne’s HQP, resulting in 768 deaths and a city-wide lockdown lasting almost four months. At the time, this was an alarmingly high death rate in the Australian context, which has managed to keep COVID-related deaths at a comparatively low level by international standards.

The issue of intent and motive raised in the previous section raised difficult methodological questions that cannot be fully addressed in this exploratory paper – especially given the reliance on secondary data. Any evaluation of the outcome must acknowledge that the state government lacked the existing capacity to be the sole operator of a quarantine program on the scale required, particularly as it was notified of the quarantine policy only 36 hours before it was due to begin (Coate, 2020, p.16). Clearly, difficult ‘instrumental-rational’ challenges arose in contingency planning, state capacity, and time constraints. As such, we do not claim that policy failure was the result of bad faith on the part of individual public servants or crisis managers, who faced a highly complex and pressure-filled environment.

At the same time, the inquiry’s report does identify several key instances where non-knowledge was influential, and it makes links between these instances and the interests of key actors. In this way, we follow McConnell’s (2018) discussion of identifying ‘hidden agendas’, by identifying alignments between outcomes of non-knowledge and interests and weighing the credibility of plausible alternative explanations.

First, evidence of ignorance and amnesia surrounds the decision to utilise private security contractors to staff the quarantine sites. This decision was central to the inquiry into the outbreak, that began when an infected traveller passed the virus onto a privately employed security guard working at a quarantine hotel, who then transmitted the virus into the community. According to the inquiry report and media reporting, private security guards were given poorly defined roles to which they were not suited, without close monitoring or training in infection control (Baker, 2020; Coate, 2020, p.23). They also worked in a highly casualised industry, often across multiple sites and employing sub-contractors, over which the government had little to no oversight (Coate, 2020, p. 24). In short, they were placed in an environment with a raised likelihood of contracting the virus, and faced employment and other conditions that in turn raised their likelihood of spreading the disease outside of the hotels.

The decision appears to have been adopted over a short period of discussion and ‘acquiescence’, at a single meeting of senior public servants at the State Control Centre (Coate, 2020, p. 177). Key ministers, including the Premier, were largely out of the loop (Coate, 2020, p. 156). Little consideration was given to the appropriateness of private security. While there was awareness at some levels of government that Victoria Police or the Australian Defence Force could be used as an alternative or in support, these options do not appear to have been seriously considered at higher levels. In some ways, this ad-hoc decision-making process resembles the ‘organised anarchy’ of Cohen, March and Olsen’s (1972) garbage can model, especially given the extreme time pressure under which policy makers were operating. Once Victoria Police leadership expressed an early preference to play

These include the challenges of reconciling quarantine – which is constitutionally the responsibility of the federal government – with public health, which is the responsibility of the states.
a secondary role in the HQP, there appears to have been little further evaluation of the options (Coate, 2020, p. 199-200).

At the same time, a key finding of the inquiry is that ‘no person or agency claimed any responsibility for the decision to use private security as the first tier of security. All vigorously disputed the possibility they could have played a part in ‘the decision’” (Coate, 2020, p. 18). Nor could the inquiry establish responsibility even after hearing evidence from 96 witnesses and collecting over 70,000 documents (Coate, 2020, p. 156). No detailed notes or memos or records were created to affirm responsibility for a decision to use private security, nor did any of the actors involved produce or even later recall a ‘rationale for the decision’ or produce evidence of ‘approval of that rationale in the upper levels of government’ (Coate, 2020, p. 20).

It is not possible to determine whether the lack of any ‘inscribed’ (to use Freeman and Sturdy’s terminology, 2014) rationale or account of the decision process was deliberate or the result of well-meaning officials acting under pressure. However, despite the time and other constraints, it hardly seems that the documenting of a rationale would have been impossible. It may have even been valuable, and provided opportunities, however brief, for ministers or other key decision-makers to consider the logic of the decision.

Even more pertinent, from the perspective of motive, is the ways in which its absence aided the ability of key actors to mitigate potential blame. Accounting for the initial decision was a major focus of the inquiry, made more difficult by the absence of clear documentation. The Andrews government appeared to use the inquiry itself as a means of warding off media scrutiny, claiming that it would be inappropriate to speculate on issues that were the subject of an ongoing investigation (Dunstan and Lord, 2020). While the government certainly did not escape negative coverage (and the Health Minister ultimately resigned, ABC News, 2020), the degree of ambiguity and confusion delayed public reckoning until a point where the situation had improved.

As the sociological literature on ignorance shows, decision-making processes may be structured, deliberately or not, to create the possibility for a viable claim of ignorance or amnesia. Or, as Olsen (2014, p.107) puts it, ambiguity is the ‘enemy of accountability’. That the initial process resembled the chaotic, somewhat random pairing of solutions with problems described by the garbage can model – and that the actors involved either did not or could not provide clearer rationalisations of the process – provided a layer of protection in a high-stakes environment.

A second absence from key decisions points was understanding of the systemic issues in the private security industry that eventually contributed to the outbreak: casualisation and subcontracting, working across multiple sites and companies, and a general lack of training. In a sense, this may be characterised as a form of collective amnesia, since parts of the Victorian Government were very aware of these issues (Coate, 2020, p. 194-5). In fact, the Department of Justice and Community Safety began a review of the industry soon after the outbreak began (Department of Justice and Community Safety, 2020). Similar issues had previously emerged as part of a broader inquiry into the labour hire industry in 2015-16 (Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2016).

Responsibility for contracting with private security firms was initially placed with the Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions (DJPR). Here, there appears to have been some awareness of what DJPR employees described as a ‘cowboy industry’, with highly casualised employment (Coate, 2020, p. 168). However, this was considered only in relation to selecting
At the same time, a question that was the subject of some scrutiny as part of the inquiry was the extent to which DJPR staff managing the contracting process were aware that the security firms relied heavily on subcontractors. This was important, because the main firm relied upon for the HQP, Unified, subcontracted many of their staff from a smaller firm that had only been licenced for one year (Coate, 2020, p. 180). Moreover, widespread subcontracting hindered the government’s ability to maintain oversight of the firms actually employing the guards and to ensure basic training and adequate knowledge of health protocols (Coate, 2020, p. 192).

Evidence collected as part of the inquiry (including written notes and emails with contractors) strongly suggests that DJPR staff should have been aware that subcontracting was occurring, at least earlier than was apparently the case. However, the primary staff member responsible affirmed their lack of awareness in testimony and, describing a conversation with a contractor, stated that ‘I didn't ask him directly whether he was subcontracting, and he didn’t volunteer the information to me’ (Inquiry into the COVID-19 Hotel Quarantine Program, 2020b, p. 478). Whether the decision to not ask this question was a simple oversight or a more deliberate omission, it is knowledge that very easily could have been available.

Unified also appear to have been viewed more favourably by DJPR staff because they were willing to accede to requests to expand the role of their guards without pushing back regarding safety concerns, as the larger firm Wilson did (Coate, 2020, p. 171). Moreover, this role expansion was not accompanied by any evaluation of risk. Critically, evidence presented to the inquiry suggests that the agencies viewed the contracting process as a means of transferring risk to the security firms, without due consideration that the state itself was mandating quarantine in the context of a health emergency (Coate, 2020, p. 182). This perhaps led them to ignore risks that, according to testimony, were apparent to at least some security staff (Coate, 2020, p. 195-196).

DJPR’s approach broadly reflects boundedly rational capacities of public agencies. Where governments develop certain capacities, this can lead to ‘instinctive’ path dependence. Where public agencies are configured to manage contracts with private providers, contracting is likely to be the tool they reach for reflexively. In fact, one of the main reasons that DJPR was managing contracts with security firms was that it had already been in contractual arrangements with hotels to deliver an existing COVID-19 emergency accommodation program (Coate, 2020, p. 19). That the agency had little to no existing capacity or experience in health emergencies appears to have contributed to its utilising an understanding of risk and accountability that was inappropriate to the setting. To a degree, DJPR was an agency with mismatched capacities for the task, meaning mistakes were unavoidable.

At the same time, the example above also demonstrates that highly relevant information was reasonably within the grasp of public managers. It is also clear that the non-search for knowledge regarding subcontracting and potential safety concerns aided the agency in the short-term. Again, for an agency seeking to relieve burdens in unfamiliar and uncertain terrain, and responding to demands from other parts and levels of government, this is understandable. For individual public managers, there are not necessarily strong incentives to raise issues or conduct analysis. Under such conditions, knowing what not to know, what not to report and what not to pursue can be both a ‘practical’ form of ignorance that helps to simplify complex scenarios (despite the risk of damaging consequences in the longer-term), and a source of plausible deniability when things do go wrong.
Finally, similar practical ignorance is evident in the attitude of the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) towards the operation of the HQP. The inquiry report noted that sorting through conflicts over accountability between DHHS and JPR ‘occupied an inordinate amount of [its] time’ (Coate, 2020, p. 19). Non-DHHS witnesses unanimously expressed that DHHS had ultimate responsibility for the program as the primary ‘control agency’ (Coate, 2020, p.283). DJPR’s was a supporting role, limited to procuring sites and contracting for security personnel. The importance of having a single control agency was also emphasised by testimony from the state’s Emergency Management Commissioner (Coate, 2020, p. 249). However, witnesses from DHHS described a nebulous ‘shared accountability’ model in which the role of a ‘control agency’ was to ensure collaboration between agencies (Coate, 2020, p. 285). According to the report,

DHHS sought to silo its responsibilities as related to the health and wellbeing of the people in quarantine. This created an artificial and unworkable notion that, somehow, the health and wellbeing of the people in quarantine could be separated out from the operation of the environment in which they were being detained (Coate, 2020, p. 286).

The effect was that the HQP, a key element in the state’s pandemic response, lacked clear leadership. The inquiry report also notes that DHHS leadership could have easily clarified its specific role in the HQP (as a key DJPR staffer did in the early days of setting up the program) and the meaning of ‘control agency’ with the state Emergency Management Commissioner or through Cabinet (Coate, 2020, p. 282, 287).

From the available evidence, it is not possible to discern exactly why these contrasting understandings emerged and were not clarified. However, failing to interrogate the assumption of shared accountability – which was not shared by any other agency – aligned with the short-term interests of DHHS. According to the testimony of one senior DHHS executive, there was a ‘practical logic’ to delegating responsibilities such as contracting to DJPR, ‘given how much else we had on our plate’ (Inquiry into the COVID-19 Hotel Quarantine Program, 2020a, p.2012). Whether this was strategic or entirely unintended, the consequence was that DHHS could relieve some of its burdens in the short-term – even as this diminished the capacity of the HQP to prevent the spread of disease among Melbournians.

[Table 1 about here]

**Conclusion: future research and methodological challenges**

We have sought to introduce ‘non-knowledge’ as a feature of policymaking during crisis, demonstrating its value with reference to the Victorian Hotel Quarantine case study. In our view, studying non-knowledge is a logical extension of existing work on ‘policy-based evidence’ and can enhance our understanding of how knowledge and evidence are utilised in real world policymaking. However, more is required to fully establish non-knowledge as an object of study for policy scholars. As such, this final section outlines three related directions for future research and associated methodological problems.

The first methodological problem to consider is that some aspects of non-knowledge are harder to study than others. For example, in our literature review we highlighted the contribution of studies of lobbying, state and corporate propaganda, science manipulation, and political communication. In this literature it is possible for the researcher uncover the lack of evidence-based suggestions, the practices of spinning, cherry picking, or manipulating and manufacturing expertise. The intentions of the actors being studied might be problematic,
but are relatively clear (such as pursuing economic interests). However, this is qualitatively different to (though not divorced from) decision making and implementation. A fuller research agenda for non-knowledge must move beyond understanding what is and is not non-knowledge, the concern is understanding how it is used and causes outcomes. The case study presented in this paper goes some way to meet this issue. Our discussion was based on a well-documented moment of an ongoing crisis. This allows the researcher to reconstruct non-knowledge in action. But policy work – and policy knowledge production – also take place in comparatively stable moments with established patterns and rituals (Maybin, 2016). Forms of non-knowledge also underpin these more mundane aspects of policy making and indeed can be seen as vital to day-to-day policy work (Stark 2019). Researchers can consider non-knowledge as part of the everyday, rather than only as a problem that suddenly descends on policy makers and public agencies. Indeed, it might be more productive to consider non-knowledge (especially ignorance) as an established mechanism of governance (Bacevic and McGoey, 2021). Future – ethnographically inspired - research would be well suited to consider the mechanisms that cause non-knowledge to become problematic during certain moments and how this might relate to wider insights into policy success and failure (McConnell, 2010).

Second, we focus on the organisational conditions and decisions that can perpetuate non-knowledge and cause ignorance. However, it is also important to consider the wider infrastructure of non-knowledge in policymaking. Here we see value in Freeman & Sturdy’s (2014) triptych of policy knowledge as being either ‘embodied’, ‘inscribed’ or ‘enacted’ for future research. Whereas knowledge inscribed in documents undergird much policy work, the case of Melbourne’s HQP suggests the importance of the lack of inscribed knowledge (and maybe the centrality of enacted knowledge) in the generation of ignorance. This raises questions about the mode of interventions non-knowledge takes (e.g. official memo vs. the private instant message vs. off the record meeting) and how these might engender the ability to successfully claim (strategic) ignorance.

Third, a focus on the conditions of non-knowledge should not be divorced from the study of the evidence, ideas, and information used to produce it. The perceived credibility of knowledge and evidence is highly dependent upon the ability of certain actors to mobilise practices and coalitions of trust within the policy sphere (Bandola-Gill, 2021; Tchilingirian, 2018). Therefore, linking the study of non-knowledge to more established research in political communication, propaganda, and lobbying, as well as the emerging study of ‘Grimpact’ (Derrick et al., 2018), would be fruitful for understanding how conditions of uncertainty and ignorance can be manufactured and sustained within government or the public sphere. Connecting research into non-knowledge with insights from the study networks in evidence and public policy would form the basis for understanding how this form of information spreads and is taken into policy making (Oliver and Faul, 2018). Moreover, network methods are adept at uncovering ‘hidden’ coalitions which can be central to the production and promotion of non-knowledge (Smith and Weishaar, 2018).

A more fundamental issue for the study of non-knowledge in public policy relates to access. The level of access afforded to a researcher will differ greatly due to law or convention related to intuitional transparency. As mentioned previously, our illustrative case study is based on a well-documented public hearing where events are reconstructed (and performed) by relevant actors and triangulated through investigative journalism. Access barriers to this material is relatively low, but not without its limitations. However not all policy issues are documented in such a public manner. Access to relevant data, documents, and participants
will also be impacted by the polity, policy domain, or government agency being studied.\textsuperscript{2} Simply, the study of non-knowledge might be easier if it is related to a public health or social policy scandal that has recently unfolded. This may be in contrast to studies of foreign policy or intelligence, which are often bound by secrecy and might only become (partially) public after considerable time. Similarly, the study of more authoritarian states compared to governments with clear transparency processes and obligations will impact what a researcher can investigate. These issues are not unique to the study of non-knowledge and are well known to those who study elites and public policy. However, they will continue to provide meaningful challenges to future researchers, who must be ready to engage with new and emerging methods (such as in digital and computational social science) which might help uncover and reconstruct the paths and repercussions of non-knowledge in public policy.

**Research Ethics Statement:**

The author(s) of this paper has/have declared that research ethics approval was not required since the paper does not present or draw directly on data/findings from empirical research.

**Conflict of Interest Statement:**

The Authors declare that there are no conflict of interest

**References**


\textsuperscript{2} This is also the case for more ethnographic research as this can only be conducted successfully where there is a level of trust and ambivalence towards the embedded researcher which can engender the probing of sensitive decisions and mundane activities (e.g. Maybin, 2016).


