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Citation for published version:

Osborne, S 2016, 'Public management research over the decades: What are we writing about?' *Public Management Review*, vol 19, no. 2, pp. 109-113. DOI: 10.1080/14719037.2016.1252142

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1080/14719037.2016.1252142](https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2016.1252142)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Public Management Review

Publisher Rights Statement:

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Public Management Review* on 10th November 2016, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14719037.2016.1252142>

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Editorial essay

Public management research over the decades – what are we writing about?

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Abstract

This brief editorial essay considers the changing profiles of papers published in *Public Management Review* over two periods (1999-2002 and 2005-2006) and what these profiles tell us about the pre-occupations of public management researchers. It identifies areas both of declining and of increasing interest and also considers topics that may see an increase in research in the future.

Public Management Review (PMR) has just completed its eighteenth volume. It commenced publication in 1999 with Blair as prime minister of the UK and Clinton as president of the US, with the transformation of public management (and society) through IT and the internet barely begun, and with Lou Bega ruling the pop charts as a one-hit wonder with ‘Mambo No. 5’. As part of a review of the evolution of *PMR* I recently completed a review of papers published in the journal then and now.

This review comprised 103 papers from 1999-2002 covering 14 issues of the journal and 108 from 2015-2016 covering 16 issues – 211 papers in all¹. Of course such a review has to be treated with utmost caution. It represents only one journal, not the field, can be skewed by special issues (though these do also represent topics that are/were central to the discipline), and is very much a survey of the ‘quick and dirty’ variety. Each paper was classified once only, against its prime topic. Nonetheless it presents an interesting snap-shot of the evolution of our pre-occupations as public management researchers. Three trends are apparent – those topics

¹ In 1999 *PMR* was published with 4 issues in each annual volume. This has now increased to 10 issues in each annual volume. During the first two years, the journal was called *Public Management*. This was changed to *Public Management Review* at the commencement of the third volume due to a clash of titles with a US professional journal.

that have decreased in interest, those that have increased, and those that have remained stable (Table I).

The first group is those topics that have decreased in researcher interest. There has been a slight decrease in papers focusing on public and social policy, from 9% - 5%. The early period saw an interest with topics such as policy globalisation and convergence (Carroll 1999), volunteering policy (Brudney & Williamson 2000), and the governance of the policy process (Sibeon 2000). More recently the focus shifted the policy process in relation to policy evaluation (Pattyn 2015), to policy professionals (van Engan et al 2016), and to public policy and reform and social cohesion (Andrews et al 2016). There has been a significant drop however in those papers exploring public management reform in general (from 16% to 4%) and the NPM and its implementation in particular (from 19% to 7%). Thus the early period saw a plethora of empirical papers exploring such issues as privatization (Kawashima 1999), contracting (Christensen & Laegreid 2001) and managerialism (Doolin 2001). The more recent papers have moved towards a more evaluative and/or critical deconstruction of the NPM – such as Aoki (2015), Wynen & Verhoest (2015), Alonso et al (2015) and Dan & Pollitt (2015).

The second group of topics are those where interest has maintained at a stable level between the two periods – on performance management and accountability (Thompson 1999, Martin & Hartley 2000, Kerpershoek et al 2016, Kalgin 2016 and Slater & Aiken 2015) and on the fields of collaboration (Hudson et al 1999, Jenei & Vari 2000, Cucciniello et al 2015, Vangen et al 2015, Doberstein 2016) and of networks and governance (Kooiman 1999, Klijn & Koppenjan 2000, Hatmaker 2015, Mischen 2015, Lucidarme et al 2016). The latter is perhaps surprising as one would have predicted an increase in interest in collaboration, network and governance issues as the relational approaches of the New Public Governance (Osborne 2010) have evolved but this does not seem to have been the case, for *PMR* at least.

Finally there are four areas that have seen a significant increase in papers from a very low base. Innovation and change (Borins 2001, Gatenby et al 2015, van Buuren 2015, Van der Voet et al. 2016, Torugsa & Arundel 2016), and strategic management and marketing (Burton 1999, Waeraas et al 2015, Longo & Rotolo 2016, Hansen & Ferlie 2016) have seen significant increases. However the most startling growth has been the increase in two areas. First in HRM, and particularly around public service motivation (MacVicar et al 2000, Liu et al 2015, Caillier 2016, Mostafa 2016, Teo et al 2016), and secondly around the theme of citizen/user

engagement and co-production – the latter case growing from zero to 9% (Poocharoen & Ting 2015, Voorberg et al 2015, Alford 2016, Wiewiora et al 2016).

Beyond these three trends there remains over the two periods a constant 14% of papers on ‘other’ topics. In these one can see the beginnings of themes that may well come to dominate in the future. At the current time these include ICT and e-government (Kim et al 2015, Piehler et al 2016, Hu & Kapucu 2016), responses to austerity (Di Mascio & Natalini 2015, Overmans & Timm-Arnold 2016) and the creation of value/public value in public services delivery (Hardyman et al 2015, Thompson & Rizova, Farr 2016, Hogstrom et al 2016).

Topic	Year		Total
	1999-2002 (%)	2015-16	
Public policy	9	5	7
Public management reform	16	4	9
NPM, contracting, competition and privatisation	19	7	13
Performance management and accountability	13	13	13
Collaboration and partnerships	7	7	7
Networks and governance	10	9	10
Innovation and change	3	9	6
Strategic management and marketing	4	9	6
HRM	5	14	10
Citizen involvement and co-production	0	9	5
Other	14	14	14
	100% (n=103)	100% (n=108)	100% (n=211)

Table I – Papers published in PMR across 1999-2002 – 2015-2016

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