

# Role of Epistemic Communities in the Modern World and Specific Features of Their Forming in the Asia-Pacific

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**Abstract.** In the modern knowledge-based society expert groups are increasingly important. Epistemic communities are the next logical stage of the development of expert knowledge bearers' subjectness. In the epistemic framework specialists are united not only by shared knowledge and competence, but also by shared values. Shared knowledge and values define the ways of self-organizing of expert professionals and their ability to exert influence upon decisions made by state bodies, transnational organizations and transnational corporation. Epistemic communities are being formed intensively in the Asia-Pacific. Generally, this process is regarded as a prerequisite and an integral element of forming stable political and economic relations among peoples and countries of the region. The importance of international epistemic communities in this process is conditioned by significant divergences in political and cultural traditions of the countries of the region. It is assumed that epistemic communities' activities may contribute to the political consensus under these conditions.

**Keywords:** Epistemic Community, Expert Community, Knowledge Economy, Integrated Knowledge, Foresight, Knowledge-Based Society.

## 1. On the Role of Expert Communities in the Knowledge Economy

An important and quite predictable result of the "knowledge economy" (or "innovative economy"/ "creative economy") formation is the increased influence of professional (mainly scientific) knowledge bearers, i. e., scientists. Their influence becomes apparent in every sphere of public life: in politics, culture, everyday social life. In fact, everything which occurs in the modern world is done "on the recommendation" of professionals. As a rule, these "recommendations" are of collective nature, i. e., they represent a shared or, in other words, grounded epistemic (knowledge-based) opinion of a scientific community.

The tendency to rely upon integrated expert knowledge to make decision (mostly political and economical ones) belongs to modern innovations. First of all, the tendency means a possibility to integrate knowledge of various professionals (scientists) into a new type of knowledge which none of this scientists possesses individually. That's why it is necessary to distinguish between the competence of an individual expert professional, "expert adviser", which dates back to the earliest stage of human civilization (and can still be found in activities of expert criminalists, health professionals etc.) and the competence of an expert group, a specialist community able to offer consensual solutions.

Special methods are needed to obtain such collective knowledge. One of the earliest techniques is Delphi method [1] developed in the 60s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and intended for polling scientist. It's useless to apply the expert poll method in strictly specified knowledge areas which usually involve experimental validation and consequently are "more important" than any expert opinions. It is reasonable to integrate knowledge if it becomes a "real productive force" and its practical use leads to significant economic, political and social changes. That's why the problem of integrating knowledge and applying expert estimate methods usually emerges at the conceptual (poorly verifiable) level and is used to solve such problems as technical systems and arms development, climate change, social institutions development (on one hand) and to develop action scenarios for social subjects of different levels (on the other). The more rapidly humanity develops technically and economically, the greater importance expert situation estimates (predictive, scenario and strategic ones) gain.

In its structure expert knowledge paradigmatically differs from standard scientific knowledge. The modern economy requires integrated expert knowledge, which results in a paradox: having expertise in a

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particular sphere (physics, chemistry, biology etc.) loses its economic (innovative) importance. Scientific knowledge becomes economically important only in a systemic integrated and, to a great extent, interdisciplinary form. Therefore, each fragment of this knowledge system is of no value like a small piece of a banknote.

First of all, expert knowledge differs from scientific one in its subject. Whereas the latter studies existing things, expert knowledge is aimed at revealing tendencies and predicting things which do not exist yet or are virtual. One of the most important applications of experts' competence is developing scenarios of the future (foresight). Its importance dramatically increases in the age of intensive transformations which modern civilization is experiencing. In fact, every nation state and large corporations use foresight techniques more and more widely by engaging experts of various knowledge spheres. Expert groups tend to transform into epistemic ones because it is necessary to think about the future and foresee possible risks of this or that decision.

There exist other differences but the article format does not allow to touch upon them. It is important to take into account that one cannot estimate the mission of expert communities without understanding the difference between expert knowledge and scientific one.

## **2. From Expert Communities to Epistemic Ones**

Different ways of functioning of scientific knowledge and expert knowledge make it possible to explain the regularities of expert communities forming, processes of decision-making and recommendation adoption followed by political and economic consequences, as well as to understand why any large organization (from industrial corporations and public authorities to international organizations such as APEC) has to rely upon expert estimates and assemble expert groups.

The problem of expert communities (groups) forming and developing in the modern world is to be considered in the historical perspective, i. e. as a special form of scientific community, because any cognitive activity is collective, in other words, it definitely involves «live» knowledge exchange.

Historically, one can trace the forming of more and more wide scientific communities (Collins, 1998). These communities were at first limited by the School framework (antiquity), then professional communities and universities emerged. Expert communities were formed only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But this is not the final stage. One can understand contemporary expert communities only in the framework of the forming of more extensive epistemic communities. This historical sequence represents building a new integration level on the basis of the previous one. Epistemic communities do not supersede expert ones, they are based on the them. Expert communities consist of professional ones, professional ones are based on activities of scientific schools.

The major difference between expert groups and epistemic communities is that expert groups are a passive tool, bearers of implicit knowledge which can be identified only by means of a special procedure – the expert poll using certain techniques. (The most illustrative feature of Delphi Method revealing the fact that experts are not subjects of personal or individual knowledge is the poll conditions: experts should be mutually independent; ideally, they do not know each other).

In our opinion, the process of transformation of expert communities into epistemic ones related to collective subjectness gained by communities of knowledge bearers, represents an important (or even crucial) tendency of the modern knowledge-based society development.

At present, one can understand the role of expert communities regarding them in the light of the relatively recent phenomenon of self-organizing expert groups able to act as subjects of their knowledge or, in other words, to apply their knowledge to making political and economic decisions. Such self-organizing expert communities which are able to promote certain economic and political decisions using their integrated knowledge are known under the name of “epistemic communities”.

The slight difference between expert and epistemic communities evokes continuous debates about boundaries of epistemic communities. The term itself was coined by M. Foucault. The first researcher to

give a detailed characteristic to epistemic communities was P. Haas. According to him, epistemic communities have the following distinctive features:

- a shared set of normative and principled beliefs, which provide a value-based rationale for the social action of community members;
- shared causal beliefs, which are derived from their analysis of practices leading or contributing to a central set of problems in their domain and which then serve as the basis for elucidating the multiple linkages between possible policy actions and desired outcomes;
- shared notions of validity – that is, intersubjective internally defined criteria for weighing and validating knowledge in the domain of their expertise;
- a common policy enterprise – that is, a set of common practices associated with a set of problems for which their professional competence is directed, presumably out of the conviction that human welfare will be enhanced as a consequence [2].

Resuming the debate, K. L. Lynch wrote that «an epistemic community is defined generally by social scientists as groups of individuals sharing a particular interest or expertise who are able to exercise a high degree of influence over the shaping of various public policy issues based on a common interest» [3].

It is the role of shared values in activities of epistemic communities that makes them wider than ordinary scientific and expert groups. For this reason there are attempts to interpret epistemic communities as non-scientific. In our opinion, this is groundless. On the contrary, the combination of knowledge and values constitutes the *episteme* concept the earliest Greek philosophers adhered to.

Another problem related to identifying these communities is the degree of stability of linkages among their members. In this regard A. Antoniadis suggested to divide epistemic communities into two characteristic types: ad-hoc coalitions aiming at the solution of a particular policy problem and constant groupings with a holistic character, which aim at the establishment and perpetuation of beliefs and visions as dominant social discourses [4]. This distinction does not concern the main feature of epistemic communities that unites them: understanding the necessity to solve globally important problems.

We would like to add one more distinctive feature of epistemic communities to the existing approaches: the personal aspect of the knowledge uniting experts. We highlight the increased importance of personal knowledge in science (this is on the most obvious tendencies in the development of scientific cognition), as well as in project and scenario activities in particular. It was M. Polanyi who first touched upon the role of personal knowledge in science [5]. This fact is getting more and more widely acknowledged. At present, it is easily identifiable in project and scenario activities. «Scenario reasoning, i. e., handling variants of the future in terms of the present, is one of the key personal competences in modern environment» [6]. Unlike Pereslegin, who regards scenario-making as irrelevant in the relation to ethic norms, we regard personality ethically.

### **3. Specific Features of Epistemic Communities Forming in the Asia-Pacific**

Epistemic communities are being formed intensively in the Asia-Pacific. Their forms are diverse. There exists and successfully functions a number of organizations which act or position themselves as epistemic ones. They include: SAARC (South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation, NIRA<sup>2</sup> (National Institute of Research Advancement), Science and World Affairs (a community of technically educated experts engaged in policy-oriented research in the field of international security and arms control), ARF (ASEAN Regional Forum), ASEAN University Network and other organizations. Regular conferences are indicative in this regard, for instance, the International Summer Symposium on Science and World Affairs which was held in 2009 for the 21<sup>th</sup> time. This conference focuses on strengthening Asian security system. Taking this into account, the Symposium expects the scientific community to propose new policy ideas. APEC target expert groups are of special interest in this regard. Their direct tasks include developing proposals for

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<sup>2</sup> NIRA activities are illustrative. The organization was initiated by leading specialists of industrial and scientific public. Its main goal is carrying out independent research to solve numerous and diverse political, economic and social problems, as well as problems in the field of international relations which the modern society is facing and which are related to the global challenges to human civilization.

political meetings at various levels. Their activities can be considered epistemic by reason of the following considerations. (1) They act independently. (2) They are formed freely. (3) Their activity is international and does not allow to make decisions meeting the interests of states of the region.

Thus, specific features of expert/epistemic communities in the region are as follows: they are regarded as preconditions and a necessary element of forming stable political and economical relations among nations and states of the region. The importance of international epistemic communities in this process is conditioned by significant divergences in political and cultural traditions of the countries of the region. It is assumed that epistemic communities' activities may contribute to political consensus under these conditions. Epistemic communities are where concordance may be achieved at and consensus of interests of the diverse political, economical and cultural subjects of the Asia-Pacific may be achieved.

#### **4. Foresight as the Major Activity of Epistemic Communities**

The necessity for forestalling and forecasting consequences of certain decisions, developing alternative scenarios and a consensual position of transnational participants of a project are integral features of innovative economy and knowledge-based society on the whole. As such, epistemic communities are the result of the above-mentioned necessity. These communities are supposed to use the main potency of *Knowledge*, i. e. its ability to foresee the future, to "know what will happen, if...". In our opinion, the epistemic discourse correlates with the forecasting function of scientific knowledge and, as such, illustrates the post-unclassical situation in science because classical science is mainly concentrated on its explanatory function.

Global practices also show that the major "job" of epistemic communities is identifying risks of technical innovations and threats humanity is facing or, on the contrary, optimistic prospects. Correspondingly, this "job" involves developing scenarios of possible solutions and decisions. Various techniques and methods are applied. We will define all the variety of different techniques and methods used as «foresight» – the most commonly used one.

Unlike other forecasting methods, foresight proceeds from the assumption that the desired future will come true only by means of active consensual actions. Literally, foresight does not answer the question "what will happen", but "what do we need to do together for it to happen". Thus, foresight is intended to enhance the ability of parties involved to cope with changes, both external and resulting from their activities [7]. Foresight is aimed at influencing or forming the future, not only predicting it. Prognoses are just a part of foresight [8]. All this allows to understand a significant feature of foresight (and epistemic communities): tending to involve decision-makers at every stage of development.

To our mind, foresight should take into account a number of factors underestimated by existing practices. For this purpose it is reasonable to briefly characterize this practice and its features in different countries and regions.

In the USA foresight is performed mainly by "think tanks" using this technique to achieve goals set by the government and major corporations. No wonder that American world outlook dominance (the belief that the American way of life is a "natural good" for the whole humankind, that it is possible to escape the catastrophical consequences of the current situation in the world, that the technical power of human civilizations is boundless) is the characteristic feature of the American "desired future".

Unlike the USA, where this method is applied in the narrow specific area, the EU uses it widely. European foresight has the following typical features: ecological focus, performance at the supranational level, the belief that moral traditions of Europe will prevail (implementation of ideals of freedom, democracy, human rights etc.), rather "idealistic" trust in agreements and treaties.

Of all Asian countries, we'll touch upon the experience of Japan. Japan takes the lead in the number of forecasts among other countries of the Asia-Pacific. However, Japanese forecasts (especially ones initiated by the government), are not foresight in the full meaning of the word. They are just formalized exercises based on the Delphi Method and aimed at complementing the document compiled earlier, the ideological basis of which should not be doubted. Japan has its own unique ideologemes: Japanese world outlook dominance as the belief that Japan will take the lead in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; utopia of more or less bright

postindustrial future to be formed in the frames of social economy; the belief that it is possible to establish harmonious relationship between humanity and nature in the frame of the culture in question.

There are scenarios of the future developed by international (epistemic) groups. Prognoses made by the Rome Club can serve as an example. However, the activities of epistemic communities are still confined to predicting risks and threats resulting from certain global innovations. The same reason related to insufficient methodological basis which does not allow to regard the epistemic communities phenomenon in all its aspects results in mistakes in developing scenarios of the future. To our mind, existing prognoses tend to overestimate the role of technical factors and underestimate the role of culture. It should be noted that the concept of culture is not used in the conceptual meaning of the word, i. e. no one takes into account culture's unique logic. (This drawback is typical for the work by S. Pereslegin, which is highly remarkable in all other respects). Today culture is not just important [9], it determines the nature of technologies applied, our lifestyle and, to a great extent, the political life of today. Firstly, in our opinion, it is not the technical changes as such that will prove crucial for the future. It is how they will influence the mechanism of transmitting experience from one generation (or subject) to another. Secondly, the future depends on the result of the global civilizations conflict [10]. Thirdly, it depends on how human creativity will develop. It has two possible ways of further development: metacultural creative work or mass culture. There is an example of a question raised in the frame of developing future scenarios in accordance with the way of thinking we propose: will technical innovations be able to change the mechanism of tradition inheritance, which is typical for Chinese culture and mentality? (sacredness of past generations, the concept of time, nature of reflection etc.)

It is assumed that these topics can be placed on the agenda of international epistemic communities of the Asia-Pacific by Russian intellectual elite which often poses questions in the frame of «ultimate ontology».

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