

Online public debate about research is thriving, but we need to stay alert to the dangers of simplification.

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9/5/2013

Summarising a recent session on new trends in disseminating economics research, [Diane Coyle](#) looks at how researchers are influencing policy. The landscape of public debate has changed enormously, and blogs in particular have come to play a highly influential role. But responsibility must be taken for how public debate influences policy decision-making. It is intrinsically hard to demonstrate 'impact' on outcomes, and economists and other social scientists need to stay alert to the danger of simplification.



Last week I took part in a session on '[Disseminating Economic Research in the Policy Debate](#)' at the 2013 European Economic Association/Econometric Society meetings in Gothenburg. The other panellists were Erik Berglof, Chief Economist of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development; Luis Garicano, Professor of Economics at the LSE; and Romesh Vaitilingam, the leading media consultant for many economics organisations and institutes, including the Royal Economic Society. This note reflects on some of the messages emerging from the session.

The themes fell into two broad categories, corresponding to alternative perspectives on the session title: how to disseminate research effectively via traditional and online media, to participate in public debate; and what responsibilities researchers have in trying to influence policy debate, whether in public via the media or in private.

In the UK, the strong presence economists have in public debate about policies ranging from public service reform to monetary policy, HS2 to the Euro crisis, arguably stems from a media initiative launched in 1997, prompted by a cover story in *The Economist*: "[The puzzling failure of economics.](#)" Romesh Vaitilingam started the Royal Economic Society's media initiative after that – I was then a journalist on *The Independent*, and was one of the economics writers he contacted. From then on, many economic researchers came to realise that there are some simple but essential lessons for disseminating research successfully – albeit still ignored by other academics.

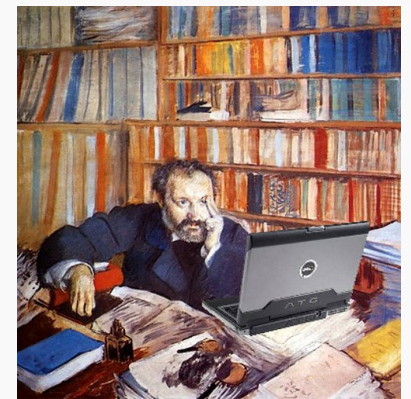


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For example, you have to use normal English, not professional jargon, to explain research. Statistical results require particularly careful explanation as not only the readers but also the journalists are often not statistically literate. You need to be aware of the constraints under which journalists operate, working to tight deadlines (especially in broadcasting), limited to at most a few hundred words, and above all pitching their story in competition with many other candidates. So there is a knack to explaining research in a straightforward, concise but not exaggerated manner, and this is why media training is one element of achieving impact.

The landscape of public debate has changed enormously since 1997, and blogs in particular have come to play a highly influential role in economics. Some of the best-known count as important media in their own right, including Paul Krugman's [Conscience of a Liberal](#), or [Marginal Revolution](#) run by Tyler Cowen and Alex Tabarrok. There are in addition now a number of blogs that publish columns by a range of economists presenting the findings of their academic research – as in the highly influential [VoxEU](#) – or providing academics with a platform to provide informed comment on the issues of the day – such as [Project Syndicate](#). Many academic economists, financial market participants, practitioners and journalists now blog and tweet. The online public debate about economics is consequently extremely lively, albeit also manifesting some of the negative aspects of the online world, including a

tendency to over-simplify (140 characters is not much) and polarise into opposing ‘camps’.

Luis Garicano spoke about his experience as a founder of the Spanish language economics blog [NadaEsGratis](#), and in particular how the economists contributing to it navigated the politics of discussion highly contentious economic policy questions. He said there was a balance to be struck between writing about the news of the day – for example, setting out the data on employment and unemployment when the official statistics are published – and reporting research findings. The latter helped keep the site true to its academic roots. Professor Garicano said an adequate supply of different authors and editors was important for practical reasons, but above all helped maintain the independence of NadaEsGratis as an institution. Unlike newspapers, it does not need advertising revenue; unlike personal blogs, it has a range of voices and arguments.

Of course, being a player in the public debate is only one aspect of having an impact on policy, although important because it is that public debate that both informs and influences political decisions. Erik Berglof focused on another part of the institutional framework that gives economic research its impact, the world of research institutes and think tanks. These sit between the media and research in their functions. The US has the richest think tank landscape, with the UK and some other western European countries next in rank. Dr Berglof has played a key role in establishing research institutes with an independent and authoritative voice in the transition economies. He too underlined the importance of independence: it is of course possible to achieve ‘impact’ by telling politicians what they want to hear, or by making dramatic statements to catch the attention of the media, but it is important to take responsibility for the outcomes of policy advice, he argued.

This clearly goes to one of the key questions in understanding impact. Some kinds of impact can be achieved easily, for example by making strong claims about a current political debate. Academics might have good reason to do this if their research supports it; but there is also cause for concern that the eagerness to achieve a media presence for ‘impact’ reasons creates an incentive to become polemical. Another manifestation of impact, far harder to measure, if it is possible at all, is the outcome of policies that were influenced by research. I have discussed the complicated interplay between economic research and economic policy at some length in my [Tanner Lectures of 2012](#) [pdf] and in the [Pro Bono Economics lecture of June 2013](#). The key question is again independence, an independence of mind and openness to changing one’s mind. This is doubly hard to achieve: first, because it is more natural to defend one’s conclusions than to accept being wrong; secondly, because all social scientists are combining being participants in society with trying to observe if objectively. The world is highly complex, non-linear and uncertain. The policy interventions debated and researched by economists will change the outcomes. It is intrinsically hard to demonstrate ‘impact’ on outcomes, and economists and other social scientists need to stay alert to the danger of simplification or reductionism.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

About the Author

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