



Duncan Green

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A Q&A on scholar activism and the possible trade-offs

Duncan Green reports back on a conversation with LSE social policy students, including what individual academics can do, increasing political attacks on scholar activists, how academics can tackle 'sane-washing' in populist regimes, and the importance of crises and shocks for introducing research into decision-making processes. He floats an idea for a summer school for early/mid career scholar activists.

I've been having a cluster of conversations about 'scholar activism' – the possibilities and challenges of using your research to change policy, support communities and generally make the world a better place, without destroying your academic credentials for rigour and objectivity. This is what fires up many early career researchers, but they face serious challenges in doing it.

The most recent discussion came after a lecture I gave on 'research for impact' to LSE's Social Policy Masters students. The questions were great, as ever – here's a sample, with what I can remember of my replies.

Q: It's all very well to talk about Oxfam's research impact (which I focused on, based on [this paper](#)) but academics are usually working without Oxfam's considerable influencing infrastructure (media team, campaigns etc). What can you do if you're to a large extent working on your own?

R: Fair point. Researchers need to build up other assets – their networks and relationships, their social media skills and profile. These can help them have impact, even without the Oxfam machine behind them (they could also partner with Oxfam or some other NGO, of course!)



Q: In India, NGO-linked research is discounted as political, and therefore not objective. What can a researcher do to counter that?

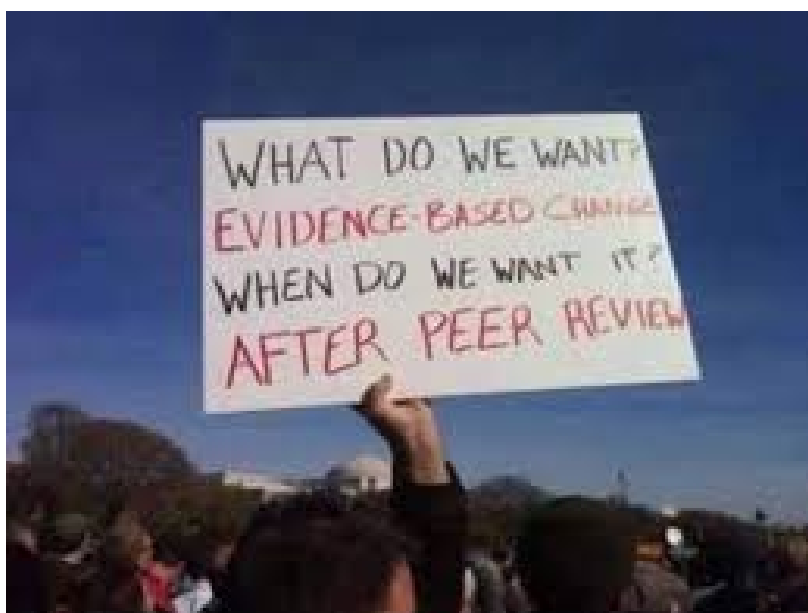
R: It's particularly difficult in places like India, where even being linked to a university makes you part of the 'liberal deep state conspiracy'. May be worth thinking about trying to find 'unusual allies' – corporate or faith leaders, who can act as messengers for your work and ensure it is not written off before anyone reads it.

Q: In Latin America, people are very sceptical when activists claim that their research is neutral, while reform proposals often run up against officials who are reluctant to 'rock the boat'.

R: May be worth drawing a distinction between neutrality and impartiality. Activists, including scholar activists, are not neutral – they are on the side of progressive change, of excluded communities, of inclusive economics etc etc. But they *are* impartial, in the sense of not being propagandists for any particular political party. This is often more plausible (and honest) than claiming neutrality.

Q: How can researchers counter 'sane washing' in the US or elsewhere – big lies that become normalized for example by massively exaggerating the extent of corruption in the US Government?

R: Fact checking isn't going to cut it – throwing more evidence at opinion seldom works. Thinking about narrative and messenger may help, also use humour, which is a classic '**weapon of the weak**' among people facing a deeply hostile political environment. But when it comes to aid cuts, my top suggestion is bearing witness – well founded, properly researched accounts of the actual changes in a given community, centring the voices of real people, being brought about by some of the destruction of institutions currently going on. That is much more human and convincing than throwing around big numbers: 'XXm will die', or (still worse) a focus on which aid jobs are being lost. Think about **setting up diaries** research in poor communities, although that has the distinct possibility that in some cases, the damage won't be as bad as predicted, as people find other ways to survive (e.g. filling the gap with finance from Diasporas, or governments, or faith organizations).



Q: You write in your book that change often has to be generational, but isn't that terribly pessimistic, given that we are in a massive polycrisis and don't have the luxury of waiting that long?

R: I still fear that the deep mindsets of those in power are largely fixed by the time they leave university, and very hard to shift after that. However, the scale of current crises and the extraordinary level of technological innovation/acceleration may help overcome that inbuilt inertia. Crises have long been associated with big policy shifts, as they expose the failings of the status quo, and help political leaders argue for new ideas and approaches. The rapid speed of tech shifts plays into the hands of those who understand their importance, namely the next generation of young people and activists – that may oil the wheels of generational change somewhat.

Q: You talk a lot about the importance of shocks as windows of opportunity. What examples are there?

R: So many! In **The Shock Doctrine**, Naomi Klein brilliantly captures the use of shocks by right wing thinkers like Milton Friedman, who came up with the **definitive quote**:

“Only a crisis – actual or perceived – produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes the politically inevitable.”

If you're a researcher arguing for Europe to spend more on defence, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, followed by the election of Donald Trump, has suddenly opened doors for your ideas. On the progressive side, we saw an **upsurge in grassroots organization in response to Covid**, a **new fire safety accord after a big factory fire in Bangladesh** or, zooming out a bit, the creation of welfare states in many countries after World War Two. As I write, the death toll from **the horrific Myanmar earthquake** continues to rise, making me wonder what impact this will have on the course of the war – inept government responses to earthquakes led to political upheaval in Nicaragua (1976) and Mexico (1985).

This was all fascinating, but we want to dig deeper into both how to combine research and activism, but also the fears and constraints faced by scholar activists, particularly as experienced by early/mid career researchers. So, at our new **Activism, Influence and Change Programme** at the LSE, we're thinking of putting on a summer school that combines some ideas on how to design research for impact with a space to discuss the trade-offs. What do people think? Anyone want to help design and run it?

About the author

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