

# Let's bring an end to post-truth politics: The time has come for direct public engagement.

 [blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2016/08/02/curing-the-world-of-anti-expert-sentiment-the-time-has-come-for-direct-public-ei](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2016/08/02/curing-the-world-of-anti-expert-sentiment-the-time-has-come-for-direct-public-ei)

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***Social science's trustworthiness is under threat. In order to save it, argues [Chris Sampson](#), we must shift our focus away from media engagement and towards direct public engagement. We need to communicate the findings of our existing research, but just as important is the potential to learn through engaging with wider groups of people. Everyone ought to be a stakeholder in social science research.***



"People in this country have had enough of experts". So [said](#) Michael Gove in the run-up to the EU referendum. He's right, at least for some groups of people. But we aren't just dealing with Brexit/Bremain debate fatigue. We're witnessing a global shift in feeling.

A common argument around the Brexit result is that people are being [left behind](#) by globalisation and by the cosmopolitan tendencies of the elite, which [includes](#) academics (particularly [economists](#)). At the same time we're also sliding into an era of post-truth politics. In the chase for votes, politicians spread [falsehood](#) and lies to appeal to common grievances. People are cottoning on to the [bullsh\\*t](#), and [no longer feel](#) that politicians are representing their wishes. No truth, no trust.

Some people will strive to remain well-informed, in spite of politicians. But large swathes of the population are open to [emotional manipulation](#) and will prefer hunches and instincts over [experts](#) and their facts. [Evidence-based policy](#) is a non-starter if voters don't recognise the evidence. The rise of Trump in the US and of populist movements in Europe are symptoms of the same disease. Nations are divided, and belief in democracy is [waning](#). But we (as 'experts') can do something about it. Our current approach to knowledge exchange with the general public only reinforces this schism between the well-informed truth-seekers and the disconnected, desperate and downtrodden. It's time for a change of tack. Through independent direct engagement with the public, academics can bring an end to post-truth politics.



Photo credit: [Chris Sampson \(CC BY\)](#)

## Removing filters

Evidence shows that most people [trust experts](#), even in the context of the [EU referendum](#). The same surveys routinely find that people [do not trust](#) politicians or journalists. But to whom do we defer in the task of communicating our research to the public? That's right, the government and the media. The public elicit expert opinion indirectly, filtered through sources that they might not trust. And with good reason. The government was clearly biased in its use of expert opinion in the EU debate. You wouldn't find David Cameron favourably referring to [Economists for Brexit](#). Why should the public trust someone with a clear agenda to have them adopt particular beliefs? Even if in the event the remain campaign did not *need* to cherry-pick data to serve their purpose, there is very good reason to expect that they might have done.

And then there's the mainstream media, which is [even worse](#). Much like politicians and campaigners, they exhibit clear [bias](#). On top of this, they get things [wrong](#). This will serve to increase distrust of 'evidence' more generally. Even if a news outlet is able to present a dispassionate view of the evidence, chances are they will introduce [false balance](#).

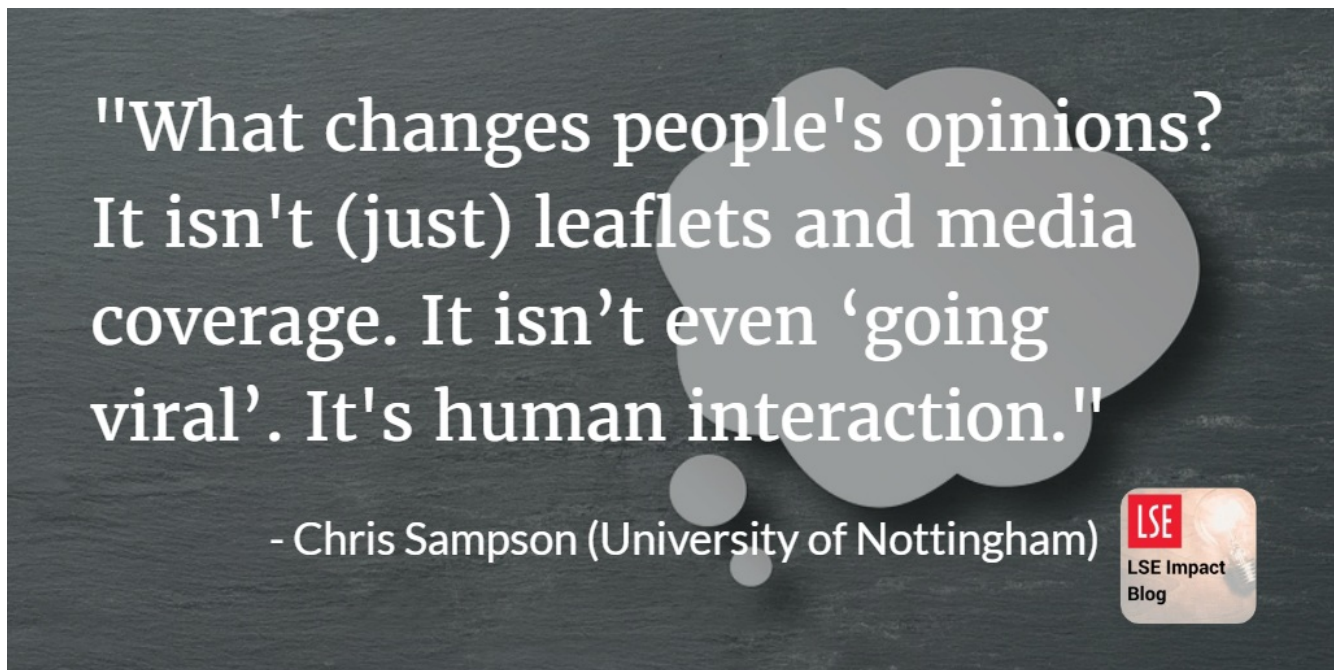
The government has shown [commitment](#) to public engagement in STEM subjects and mainstream interest in science has been [growing](#) in recent years. But where's our [Brian Cox](#)? I don't see much opportunity for the general public to engage with professors of economics or sociology or political science. Events such as the ESRC [Festival of Social Science](#) should be celebrated and supported, but are we really reaching the disengaged public?

The [ESRC Impact Toolkit](#) provides [some guidance](#), but direct public engagement is likely to result in fewer quantifiable 'impacts' and metrics that make it less attractive compared to engagement with the media or policymakers. We need to see beyond this.

## In search of Joe Public(s)

"But there are plenty of ways we can directly engage with the public", I hear you cry. Sure, you can start your own blog or write articles for The Conversation. If you're really lucky, you might even be able to do your own TED Talk. But [Joe Public](#) won't read your blog or watch your TED Talk or hear your [Social Science Bites](#) interview. For that

matter, Joe Public probably won't even read the comments that you provided for that article on the Guardian website.



The [differences](#) between the people who voted to remain in the EU and those wanting to leave are [stark](#). There is [reason to believe](#) that remain-voters were more likely to have gone in search of evidence, while leave-voters may have actively avoided it. Our current approaches to public engagement target the already well-informed evidence-hungry. These are not the people that most need reaching; we are preaching to the choir. Direct public engagement should target local populations and prioritise disengaged groups.

The goal should be symbiosis. We need to communicate the findings of our existing research, but just as important is the potential to learn through engaging with wider groups of people. Everyone ought to be a stakeholder in social science research, whatever their [personal values](#). I'd like to see this become a central policy for the [Campaign for Social Science](#).

## Reaching out

The challenge isn't to [deliver facts](#) to as many people as possible, but to influence opinions. What changes people's opinions? It isn't (just) leaflets and media coverage. It isn't even 'going viral'. It's human [interaction](#). The tendency for regions with large immigrant populations to be broadly supportive of free movement of people supports this notion. The same applies to knowledge transfer; people need to meet the creators of evidence if they are to be persuaded by it.

Many universities have indicated their intentions by signing a [Manifesto for Public Engagement](#), but I don't see much in the way of concerted effort. Universities need to do 4 things to foster direct public engagement:

1. Create, maintain and provide academics with connections to local organisations. This should make it easier to reach insular groups and build on existing [local pride](#).
2. Grant academics the time to spend on engaging with the public and reassure them that they will be professionally rewarded for doing so.
3. Develop an infrastructure to support direct public engagement, including the provision of training for academics.

4. Organise inclusive local events at which a wide range of social scientists are able to meet the public and discuss research. Offline engagement is vital in order to include people other than university-educated millennials.

I've been fortunate enough to have been able to discuss my work with a wide range of academic and non-academic audiences. I'm a health economist, and I cannot count the number of times people have been genuinely surprised to learn that my research is not about finding ways to save the NHS money at the expense of people's health. People can go away from a presentation or a conversation thinking about policy-relevant issues in fundamentally different ways. That isn't something that happens much when talking to other academics. Direct public engagement can be incredibly rewarding.

Our trustworthiness is under threat. In order to save it, we must shift [our focus](#) away from media engagement and towards direct public engagement. We need to see social scientists speaking at WI and Rotary Club meetings presenting unbiased, accessible and relevant information.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact 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**

[Chris Sampson](#) is a health economist based in the School of Medicine at the University of Nottingham. His main research activity revolves around economic evaluation alongside clinical trials, with an interest in conceptual and practical challenges in the valuation of health. He is founder of [The Academic Health Economists' Blog](#) and an advocate for alternative approaches to scholarly publishing. You can find him tweeting [@ChrisSampson87](#).

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