

Michael McQuarrie on writing for blogs: “The most utility comes from allowing me to think through a problem that is bugging me and then publish something about the result”



*In the wake of Donald Trump’s surprise election victory one year ago, LSE Sociology Associate Professor, [Michael McQuarrie](#) wrote on the regional nature of Trump’s win. His blog article, “[Trump and the Revolt of the Rust Belt](#)”, which has been viewed over 35,000 times has now formed the basis of a [new article](#) in the *British Journal of Sociology*. **Chris Gilson**, Managing Editor of LSE USAPP, and **Kieran Booluck**, Managing Editor of the LSE’s [Impact of Social Sciences blog](#), posed some questions to Michael McQuarrie about the motivation behind his original blog piece and the differences between writing for blogs and for academic journals.*

Your USAPP article ‘[Trump and the Revolt of the Rust Belt](#)’ was incredibly popular in the aftermath of Donald Trump’s surprise election win. Was your argument in that piece based on any of your previous research in particular?

I have done a lot of research in the Rust Belt, but I have usually focused on larger cities like Cleveland, Pittsburgh, and Detroit. Also, I had not done much research on partisan politics. There are a couple of reasons for this. First, these cities tend to be dominated by Democrats. But more importantly, I am usually more interested in dimensions of politics that are not particularly partisan, such as governance, participation, civil society, and social movements.

That piece, and others that I had written before it in the run up to the election, were loosely based on that research, but also drew much more directly upon my work as a union organizer. Before attending graduate school I worked as a field organizer—someone who organizes new unions—for a healthcare workers’ union. The union covered the states of West Virginia, Kentucky, and Ohio. I personally spent a lot of time in post-industrial areas like Wheeling, Youngstown, Huntsville, and Dayton. Much of the job entails talking to workers and often their families.

Most of the people I was working with were women, given that it was a healthcare workers union, but of course I would also often meet their partners as well. Most people think of deindustrialization as a male phenomenon because most industrial workers were men. But deindustrialization has impacted women at least as profoundly as men. In many ways the union I worked for channelled women’s anger about the destruction of the Rust Belt, though they had other grievances as well (many of them about men). The construction of the Rust Belt abandonment of the Democratic Party as a white male phenomenon is profoundly naïve. But I am sure that I would have shared in that naivete if I hadn’t spent as much time as I did talking to workers in West Virginia and Ohio.

Based on this, I felt that most of our understanding of the region was hopelessly simplified in the press and even in scholarship on the region. The most obvious points I would make on the basis of this experience are 1) people are complicated and 2) they can often be moved in political terms. Other important things that were clear based on these thousands of conversations was that NAFTA was widely reviled, and was a first step in disconnecting the region from the Democratic Party. While white people often hold racial prejudices, many are also ambivalent about those feelings. People who aren’t ideological bigots can be activated either for cross-racial solidarity—as is done in many unions, including the one I worked for—or for dividing people. Another is that people value solidarity quite highly and they take pride in fighting the good fight.



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Beyond this though, the most disturbing thing to me about much of the region is its ongoing decline. It is not as if deindustrialization just happened and then these communities stabilized. Many of them have continued their decline for decades now, often with the active aid of policy choices made by both Republicans and Democrats. People are dying younger, their kids are leaving, cities are in perpetual fiscal crisis, and infrastructure is falling apart. For this reason, prior to the election I didn't think post-industrial territories would figure much in the outcome, despite Trump's evident popularity in those places. I assumed that they were well beyond the point of fighting over their fate. This was mostly because I underestimated the extent to which the Democratic Party and Clinton would be rejected by poor and working-class voters. Based on my experience, I would have expected this to happen many times in the past, not 2016. This is why the article asks the question “why 2016” rather than “what are people mad about”—a question that is easily answered for anyone with a pulse who spends more than a week in these communities.

What was the initial reaction to your USAPP blog article? Did the reaction and the feedback you received effectively serve as a first round of peer review? Were your ideas improved following input from colleagues?

Yes, the initial blog post has sustained a number of conversations with smart people, many of which have very different ideas about what happened. The feedback helped clarify a number of issues including the role of African-American voting and white racism and the degree to which the Democratic Party has abandoned its roots in the New Deal. I don't think most people have fully come to grips with that yet and people still think of the Democrats as a party for working people.

It also provoked a lot of responses from people who were interested in having a discussion about which demographic group was to “blame” for the election. These responses and the discussion of Trump generally, forced me to come to grips with the fact that much of what passed for “analysis” were really just self-serving validations of preconceived assumptions. The night of the election I was already posting on social media that “reflexivity is dead”. I have not seen much to alter that judgement. But more to the point, the hostility to any sort of sustained logical argumentation, much less empirical research, is not just a problem for Trump voters, despite how it is often represented (again, reflexivity is dead). I find this disturbing.

The other thing that has continued to be surprising is how almost all commentary and analysis of the election does not come to grips with its geography. Notably, the Democratic Party feels quite differently about the role of geography. Various factions within the party have undertaken or commissioned studies on Rust Belt voting. Even someone like [Katherine Cramer](#), whose work I greatly admire, sees the role of geography somewhat simplistically as rural vs. urban, which tends to obscure the specificity of the Rust Belt in terms of trajectory, economic geography, and political institutions.

What led you to write a piece for the British Journal of Sociology based on your USAPP blog post?

I was invited to contribute to a [special issue](#) and I value the journal, not least because it is edited in my department. A lot of my work isn't an obvious fit with the BJS, but I am inclined to place work there when it is appropriate. Also, there are a number of other contributions to the special issue that are valuable, some of which directly informed my own paper.



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Most academics who write for blogs base their posts on academic papers – were there any challenges in reversing this process?

The challenges were around my own workflow. Other projects were set aside in order to react to something topical. In general, I think this is a bad idea for professional academics. Academics are contributing the most when they are delivering deeper thought and deeper research, which usually can't be undertaken by journalists, essayists, and the like. On the other hand, higher education is increasingly being organized around delivering timely, but more superficial, outputs. Thinking and deep research have mostly been devalued.

The other challenge was delivering something useful that did not simply rehash the more typical analyses of the election. My own experiences in the region could point at answers, but the argument rests heavily on the deeper research of other academics like Michele Lamont, Jake Rosenfeld, Josh Pacewicz, John Mollenkopf, Jefferson Cowie, Katherine Cramer, and Arlie Russell Hochschild. Being able to use research I like in unexpected ways was one of the pleasures of reversing the more typical flow.

How is writing for a journal different to writing for an academic blog?

Journal articles are finished products, in terms of research, argumentation, theoretical development, or whatever. This doesn't mean they're correct or that they don't have any typos; more that they usually rest upon some sort of claim about the epistemic gain being delivered. The rise of open access archives is altering this ecosystem somewhat. The culture of working papers seems to be thriving. This is a welcome development because it moves academic discourse away from the control of for-profit publishers, it enables more dialogue in the course of developing research, and it broadens access.



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Blogs on the other hand are more often trading on perspectives and opinions. I find these valuable—there are a lot of people who have opinions I'm interested in—but if they are polished essays they tend to end up in magazines or newspapers and if they are polished research contributions they tend to end up in academic journals. Some people use blogs to develop their research, or for purposes other than offering a take on something. Then there are blogs like this one which trade on summarizing research. These are very useful for me. Friends, current and former students, and people I have never heard of have all published things that interest me on this blog. But I still find that I find the most utility for me comes from allowing me to think through a problem that is bugging me and then publish something about the result. I might use these to initiate conversations or for teaching more than for research. Most generally, blogs open up a flexible venue where turnaround can be rapid while reaching a somewhat different audience.

Do you see the blog article and subsequent research article as serving different audiences? Is this something all scholars have to be aware of?

Yes. Blog posts are easier to read and, speaking for myself, I write in a completely different style for blogs as opposed to journal articles. I am more likely to pass blog posts or essays along to family, friends, and so on. I am certain that I have never written a journal article that has been read as many times as the piece I posted on this blog after the election. But most of those people are not people that matter for me very much professionally. Academics can write for both, and indeed many more do now than when I was in graduate school. I do have the sense that academics are becoming somewhat more public-facing and blogs are excellent vehicles for this.

As a busy academic, how will you judge the success of these respective articles?

Whether or not people read them matters a lot. I do write for others. However, I don't expect to change many minds. We are too entrenched in ways of thinking that obscure geographic specificity. There are some good methodological reasons to do this, for example the need to avoid the “ecological fallacy” (which is not nearly as rigid a rule as people seem to think it is). But there is also now an institutional bias towards interpreting the world through aggregated statistics which is sustained by large organizations that are mostly headquartered on the coasts. Some, of course, resist this, but our political discourse is heavily organized around ways of knowing that ignore place. This isn't always a problem, but in the case of the 2016 election it definitely is a problem.

Which leads me to the second criteria of success: did I improve my own understanding of what is going on in politics? I certainly feel that the blog post and the article have been extremely helpful in developing my own understanding of what is going on. It has prompted me to teach a new class on populism. And it is also worth noting that it has helped me realize what I don't know. Most importantly, my argument rests on the premise that organizational intermediation is on the decline in American politics. A key question, which a few astute commentators have pointed out, is what replaces it in organizing political attitudes? This is the frontier in political sociology. My initial impressions do not leave much room for optimism. I will probably try to understand this next.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP – American Politics and Policy, nor the London School of Economics.

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About the interviewee



Michael McQuarrie – LSE Sociology

Michael McQuarrie is an Associate Professor in Sociology at the LSE. He is primarily interested in urban politics and culture, nonprofit organizations, and social movements. He has recently been awarded an Atlantic Fellowship for studying English post-industrial communities.