Stuart A. Brown

Britain's EU referendum: how did political science rise to the challenge? An assessment of online contributions during the campaign

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Abstract

The Brexit referendum was an unprecedented event in the context of British politics, but it was also a defining moment for the discipline of political science. Never before had political scientists in the UK faced such demand for public engagement against the backdrop of a highly polarised electoral campaign. This article assesses how scholars met this challenge by analysing online contributions to established academic websites in the six months prior to the vote. It highlights that high profile political campaigns pose a distinct dilemma for political scientists: on the one hand, the reach of their contributions is far greater when they take a positional stance on an issue, yet the value of political science rests on its credibility, which can come under threat if the public perceives the discipline, and academics more generally, to represent partisan viewpoints.

The UK's referendum on membership of the European Union (EU) was one of the most significant political events in contemporary British history. The repercussions of the decision to leave are likely to continue to resonate over the coming decades, shaping everything from the nature of the British party system to the country's place in the wider world. However, the referendum was also hugely significant for the discipline of political science. Never before had UK-based political scientists faced such demand for public engagement on a specialist topic like European integration. With referendums becoming an increasingly important

feature of European democracies, it is therefore worth taking stock of the lessons that can be derived from the campaign.

In many respects, the referendum was an ideal opportunity to showcase the relevance of political science. The European Union has traditionally been regarded as a relatively complex organisation, with British citizens often struggling to recall basic elements of its institutional structure in opinion polls and surveys (Hix, 2015). Moreover, the implications of a vote to either leave or remain were far from clear. Some of the key factors, notably those linked to the economy and the basic model that would be adopted as an alternative to EU membership, still remained uncertain long after the result. Many of the issues at stake touched on political and legal concepts that present a challenge even for an informed audience.

Coupled with this complexity was a general lack of trust in relation to both of the main campaigns. According to survey evidence gathered shortly before the vote, forty-four per cent of the public did not trust either campaign to tell the truth on the issue (Pearce, 2016). Media sources, particularly the written press, were even less likely to garner the trust of the public. Eurobarometer figures from 2015 suggest that trust in the written press in the UK was the lowest among all EU countries: when those who distrust the press are subtracted from those who trust the press, this data indicates a net trust rating of negative fifty-one per cent (EBU, 2016). The opportunity, or perhaps the *obligation* for political scientists to fill in this gap was clear. If political science is of genuine value to society, then the EU referendum was an ideal occasion to demonstrate this value to the public.

So how did the discipline rise to the occasion? This article presents an analysis of one form of public engagement: online opinion pieces and blog articles published by political scientists during the campaign. It outlines a framework for understanding the different forms

of communication scholars engaged in leading up to the vote, before drawing on new analytics data from three established academic websites to assess the success of each form of communication in making an impact on the public discourse. The key conclusion from this analysis is that polarised referendum campaigns pose a distinct challenge for political scientists. On the one hand, the value political scientists can provide to the political process is rooted in their credibility, which was strongly questioned by some political actors in the latter stages of the campaign. Yet on the other hand, the polarised nature of campaigning ensured that those contributions which took a positional stance gained substantially more traction than neutral, informative pieces. The dilemma for political scientists lies in the need to maintain credibility while ensuring their contributions have the necessary reach to shape public discussions.

POLITICAL SCIENCE AND THE EU REFERENDUM

Political scientists have long had to balance demands for public engagement against their teaching responsibilities and research activities. Although some of the most popular methods of engagement have a rich academic history, other forms of public engagement have only emerged in the last few decades. The growth of social media and digital technology, in particular, has generated new avenues for academics to reach out to colleagues, policymakers and non-specialist audiences across the world (Brumley, et al., 2017). Meanwhile, recent emphasis on the 'impact' of the social sciences has encouraged scholars to reassess everything from their choice of research topics, to the research methods they adopt, and, crucially, the way they communicate their findings to wider society (Bastow, et al., 2014). These developments have also prompted discussions on how the impact of scholarly material should be measured, notably with the promotion of 'altmetrics' that seek to use web-based

metrics, including social media data, as a complement to traditional citation-based metrics (Bornmann, 2014).

Political scientists now have at their disposal a number of distinct tools for engaging with the public, each with their own advantages and disadvantages. If we were to sketch out a broad typology of these different methods, we would likely start with *discussions and public talks*. During the EU referendum campaign, a wide variety of talks were held across the country, ranging from panel discussions to single speaker lectures, question and answer sessions, and debates. The UK in a Changing Europe initiative, for instance, which was funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council as the primary platform for bringing academic expertise to citizens during the campaign, held almost eighty public events in the six months prior to the vote alone, and around the same number in the six months after the result. Alongside large scale initiatives such as this could be added hundreds of independently organised events led by universities, academic departments, and student societies. While it is impossible to measure precisely how many voters would have attended these discussions, it is reasonable to suggest that these efforts constituted an unprecedented body of public events in the context of UK politics, offering citizens an open platform to request information on the consequences of the vote and allowing political scientists and other academics to find a broader audience for their research.

With this said, talks and lectures also have some clear limitations in the context of a national referendum campaign. The most obvious downside is that the audience of these events is usually restricted to those capable of attending in person. It is becoming commonplace to record audio and video of events that can later be published online, but it is difficult to promote such material effectively, with videos and podcasts often garnering only a few views or downloads. Geography also presents a challenge for attempts at widespread engagement. Of the seventy-nine events held by the UK in a Changing Europe initiative prior

to the referendum, forty-two (fifty-three per cent) were held in London and only a handful were held outside of cities and large education centres like Oxford and Cambridge. This should not be taken as a criticism of the initiative – the programme of events admirably managed to cover almost the full length of the country, from Inverness to Exeter – but logistics frequently dictate that discussions are hosted in large cities or on university campuses. This was particularly significant during the EU referendum as previous studies have uncovered not only an urban/rural divide in the vote, with urban centres more likely to have supported Remain (Becker et al., 2016), but also an education divide, where citizens with lower levels of educational attainment exhibited stronger preferences for Leave (Hobolt, 2016). The inevitable pull toward large cities and universities may well have put such events beyond the reach of many of those who ultimately shaped the result.

A second avenue open to political scientists is to engage with the public via their *research publications*. In practice, there are several obstacles to shaping a fast-moving political campaign using standard publishing methods. Given the occasionally lengthy time between drafting material and a final publication becoming available, academic journal articles and books are often more appropriate formats for retrospective analyses of electoral contests than they are for public engagement during a campaign. A more feasible approach is the publication of specially commissioned reports, usually overseen by a group of editors who can ensure a quick turnaround, and often combined with a launch event to ensure maximum publicity. An innovative example of this approach during the referendum campaign was Iain Begg and Kevin Featherstone's (2016) *Commission on the Future of Britain in Europe*, which involved a series of public 'hearings' by academic experts on a range of issues linked to the UK's membership of the European Union, leading to a final report being published in early June 2016. In addition to university-led initiatives such as this one, there were also a vast number of commissioned reports produced by independent think

tanks and other organisations that relied wholly or in part on the expertise of political

scientists and academics, both inside the UK (for instance, McFadden and Tarrant, 2015;

Piris, 2016) and among think tanks in other European countries (Brown et al., 2016).

Although there is a danger that these publications may find their audience limited to

specialists and practitioners, the willingness of mainstream media organisations to cite new

studies in the final months of the campaign ensured there was a window of opportunity to

promote reports of this nature to the general public.

A third option is to engage directly with the media via *TV and radio appearances.*

The heightened interest in the referendum during the first half of 2016 led to many political

scientists being invited to interviews and discussion panels, including on major current affairs

programmes such as the BBC's *Newsnight* and *Question Time.* The level of exposure

generated by these appearances is potentially far greater than what could be achieved via

academic events or research publications, even in the case of smaller platforms, such as local

radio, which have more limited reach. Nevertheless, this option is not available to everyone.

Many political scientists face barriers to taking part in mainstream media programmes,

including a lack of media training, a lack of confidence given the particular stresses

accompanied with live television and radio, and a lack of opportunities either due to their

location, profile, or the nature of their specific area of expertise. When political scientists do

participate in programmes, it can also be difficult to address issues in the kind of detail

possible with other forms of public engagement. One survey of UK-based political scientists,

for instance, suggests that only around thirty per cent of media appearances involve talking

about personal research or an academic's own area of specialisation, with most appearances

simply providing a short commentary on current affairs (see Antoniou et al., 2014).

Finally, there are *online op-eds, blogs and social media* contributions. Although

political scientists contributing to the written press is nothing new, this category of public

engagement has become increasingly significant with the rise of online publications. These publications allow for a quick turnaround, with articles potentially being published within a few hours of submission (or in the case of personal blogs, immediately after they are written). They can often make a larger and more immediate impact than full publications or public events, but using a format that permits more detail and nuance than is possible in TV and radio appearances. Several studies have tracked the growth of academic blogging as a research output in its own right, focusing on the reasons why academics choose to blog (Mewburn and Thomson, 2013), and evidence of increased citations and downloads of academic papers stemming from blogging and social media promotion (McKenzie and Özler, 2014). During the EU referendum, there was a diverse body of research work and commentary produced by political scientists through this medium (see, for instance, the analysis by Jackson, et al., 2016).

However, as a relatively new method of academic communication, there is still a great deal to be learned about the wider impact of these activities and the possible advantages/pitfalls for academics. There is also the question of quality control, given blogs are typically not subject to the same kind of peer-review processes as traditional publications. The fact that a blog post is popular or widely shared across social media is not necessarily a good indication of its scholarly value. And there is at least the possibility that the growth of blogging could encourage bad practice among academics if it leads to a preoccupation with popularity at the expense of academic rigour (Pickerill, 2013).

ASSESSING THE ONLINE CONTRIBUTIONS OF POLITICAL SCIENTISTS DURING THE REFERENDUM

The four forms of engagement outlined above all entail certain advantages and disadvantages. There is no great merit in comparing the effectiveness of each method as it can be anticipated that they will be appropriate choices for individual scholars in specific circumstances. However, although all these approaches to engagement have a place in the toolkit of political scientists during a campaign, it is the category of online contributions that perhaps demands the most attention.

First, the relatively recent emergence of this style of academic communication means that our understanding of its potential impact is the least well-developed of the four categories. Academics have been taking part in public discussions and producing research outputs for centuries. During this time, a firm, though still evolving, understanding of best practice has developed. This is not yet the case for online engagement, and there is a clear need to uncover the challenges and opportunities that this new form of communication can provide for the discipline moving forward. The EU referendum offered an ideal opportunity to assess these issues, while simultaneously informing public engagement activities for future political campaigns.

Second, online public engagement is not only a relatively new possibility for political scientists, but also a highly *attractive* one. In principle, online content can reach a larger audience than talks or research outputs, but with few of the barriers to entry and content limitations that come with participating directly in mainstream media coverage. The capacity for such content to make an impact on politics can hardly be overstated, not least given the pivotal role social media played in the other great political event of 2016: the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States (Ott, 2017). At a time when the wider impact and public profile of academics is becoming increasingly important, the opportunities provided by online communication should be obvious. It is clearly important to understand how these trends might affect political science moving forward.

Third, the way in which the impact of online content is *measured* is worthy of attention. The reach of online content is easy to quantify, with a rich source of data available on readership numbers and shares via social media. In contrast, it is more difficult to quantify the impact of other forms of engagement. A suitable measure of the success of a lecture or talk, for instance, might be the number of seats occupied, feedback from the audience, or even whether attendees chose to stay to the end rather than leaving early. Such metrics lend themselves more readily to individual cases than they do to broader assessments of how political scientists engaged with a campaign overall. But the ease with which the reach of online content is quantified raises a different set of problems. There is a temptation to measure the impact of a piece of online content exclusively in terms of its views and shares, rather than the quality of its contribution (Roelofs and Gallien, 2017). The promotion of altmetrics has ensured that these incentives are now also present in the case of traditional research outputs. This raises obvious concerns that online popularity may become conflated with academic impact (see McKenzie and Özler, 2014; Terras, 2012).

Of course, the experiences of political scientists who produced online content during the referendum are not necessarily generalisable to every academic. It could be the case that online articles appeal to political scientists with a particular set of skills, while other individuals find greater levels of impact using different mediums of communication. As such, any analysis of online contributions should not be taken as a comprehensive assessment of the engagement of all political scientists during the campaign, but rather as an illustrative example of the kinds of issues such campaigns can generate for scholars.

DATA AND METHOD

To assess online contributions during the campaign, I sourced data from one of the most widely read academic blogs covering British politics: *British Politics and Policy*, which is run

by the London School of Economics. The site is both relatively well established, having started in 2010, and one that produces a high volume of content, with around two articles published per day, almost exclusively by social scientists with academic positions in universities. The site is intended to be politically neutral, and featured articles during the referendum campaign that covered a wide variety of topics from different perspectives. To supplement this data, I also added articles from the site's sister blog, *EUROPP – European Politics and Policy*, which is also run by the London School of Economics on the same basis, but with a focus on European politics. Much of the content on this site was also linked to Brexit in the six months leading up to the vote. The aim of the analysis was simple. If the success of online content is viewed as a function of its popularity, then what kinds of content produced by political scientists proved the most popular?

Readership data was accessed from Google Analytics, which provides a range of statistics on the number of sessions and page views generated by articles, as well as the location of readers, and various other indicators on how individuals engaged with each site. Taken together, both sites have large annual audiences, with a combined figure of around 3.6 million views across 2016. To keep the analysis manageable, I opted to use data on page views, which is a standard measure of readership.

To ensure only relevant articles were included, data was only considered from content that directly referenced the UK's EU membership, rather than articles covering more general topics, such as EU reform or indirect references to EU membership in the context of discussions of UK domestic policy. To capture the main campaigning period, roughly six months of data was taken from 1 January 2016 until the day of the vote on 23 June. Finally, as the intention was to assess the contributions of political scientists, only those articles with at least some form of political content were considered, which excluded, for instance, strictly historical pieces. In terms of employment, all authors who were either PhD students or had

held a formal academic position were considered, alongside those from research institutes and think tanks that have a political focus. With this standard applied, there were 132 articles in total included in the sample.

DEVELOPING A TYPOLOGY OF CONTRIBUTIONS

Having generated a sample, I then developed a comprehensive categorisation of the different types of content produced by political scientists during the campaign. This typology entailed four different categories, roughly corresponding to two key dimensions: first, whether an article was normative or descriptive; and second, whether an article sought to explain the present or predict future developments. The first category identified under this framework was that of *explanatory* articles. There are various types of contribution that could be considered explanatory. An article might seek to clarify how a particular process or set of institutional arrangements works in practice, thereby informing voters about key aspects of the topic in advance of the vote. Alternatively, an explanatory piece might address the dynamics of the campaign, such as the ability of specific narratives to resonate with the public. Such contributions do not need to have a balanced conclusion: it is possible for a summary of existing evidence to provide information that nevertheless would be more favourable to one campaign than the other. However, an explanatory article does not take a positional stance and instead simply communicates information to enhance the public debate. This might be thought of as the standard contribution we would expect political scientists to have made during the campaign: *a descriptive explanation of current factors relevant to the UK's EU membership*.

The second category was that of *positional* articles. Unlike explanatory pieces, positional articles are intended to advocate a course of action or voter choice. They are normative in nature and can be either rooted in assessments of the current situation or present

predictions of future consequences. Establishing that an article is normative in its intent rather than descriptive is somewhat challenging in practice. At times an article that appears to be a neutral explanation of a particular subject could nevertheless be making a positional case. There is clearly a degree of subjectivity involved in categorising articles in this manner which necessitated the use of a list of criteria and careful assessments of borderline cases.

A third category consisted of *predictive* articles. Much like explanatory articles, these contributions avoid normative statements. Instead of seeking to explain the present, however, they attempt to determine the likely consequences of a given development or outline the results of predictive models that assess issues relevant to the campaign. An archetypal example would be the numerous articles published in the final few months of campaigning that attempted to predict the result of the vote using public opinion data. The distinction between predictive articles and the first two categories can be summed up by saying that whereas explanatory articles explain *how things are,* and positional articles are concerned with *how things should be,* predictive articles are concerned with *how things might be* in the future. Again, drawing the distinction between these categories can be challenging with borderline cases. Most positional statements are predictive in nature, and both campaigns attempted to highlight positive and negative developments that could have emerged from a vote to leave or remain in the EU. It was necessary to carefully categorise these contributions to separate purely positional pieces from genuine attempts to determine likely future consequences.

The final category used in the analysis was that of *nonaligned-critical* contributions. These articles tend to criticise both campaigns, or the actions of both the UK government and other European leaders, but without privileging the positions of any one side. Unlike explanatory and predictive articles, they are normative in nature, but they avoid endorsing either the Leave or Remain case. The focus is typically on issues of *process*, including the

way that campaigners on both sides were choosing to make their points, the standard of information available to the electorate, reporting by journalists, and even the contributions of other academics. Contributions in this group can essentially be summed up by the phrase *'we can all do better'* and by the principle that certain standards had to be met for the referendum to be regarded as a legitimate democratic exercise.

Having settled on this typology, the articles in the sample were duly categorised. Table 1 below gives an overview of the criteria used to distinguish between each category.

	Takes sides	Normative	Primarily focused on how things are	Primarily focused on what will happen
Explanatory	No	No	Yes	No
Positional	Yes	Yes	Possible	Possible
Predictive	No	No	No	Yes
Non-aligned critical	No	Yes	Possible	Possible

Table 1 Overview of criteria used to place sample of articles into categories of contribution

The factors listed in the table can best be understood as ideal types: there were numerous cases in which an article had to be carefully considered before being assigned to a category. To get around the inevitable subjectivity of these judgements, the sample of articles was categorised twice by two different researchers, with any variations being reassessed to ensure consistency. Overall, the sample included fifty-six explanatory pieces, forty-one positional articles, sixteen predictive pieces, and nineteen nonaligned-critical contributions.

ANALYSIS

With the categorisation complete, I began by measuring the number of page views received by each article and calculated a category average. This was done manually for each article

using the associated Google Analytics data between 1 January and 23 June 2016. Table 2 below gives an overview of these raw averages for each category.

	Number of articles	Average page views
Explanatory	56	602
Positional	41	2,172
Predictive	16	1,605
Non-aligned critical	19	691

Table 2 Page view averages for each category of contribution

The most striking point of note here is clearly that positional articles attracted substantially higher numbers of page views than articles in the other three categories. Indeed, the average is over three times larger than the average for explanatory articles. A two-tailed t-test of the data for explanatory and positional articles would indicate that this is a statistically significant difference (with a p-value of 0.026). Only predictive articles came close to matching the average for positional articles, with the bulk of these views being accounted for by several articles on polling that attempted to predict the result of the referendum.

Within these averages, however, there is a large degree of variation. The nature of online content means that occasionally a single article can receive a sizeable number of views over a short period of time – often referred to as an article 'going viral'. An article being rapidly shared online is partly a reflection of its ability to resonate with readers, but it is also heavily dependent on circumstance. If just one influential Twitter user with a large number of followers retweets a piece, for instance, it can result in an exceptionally large increase in page views. Figure 1 below provides an illustration of how large this impact can be by charting the views acquired by all the positional articles contained in the sample. As can be seen, while

most articles attracted somewhere between five hundred and two thousand views, two articles received many times this number, with one approaching as many as twenty-two thousand views.
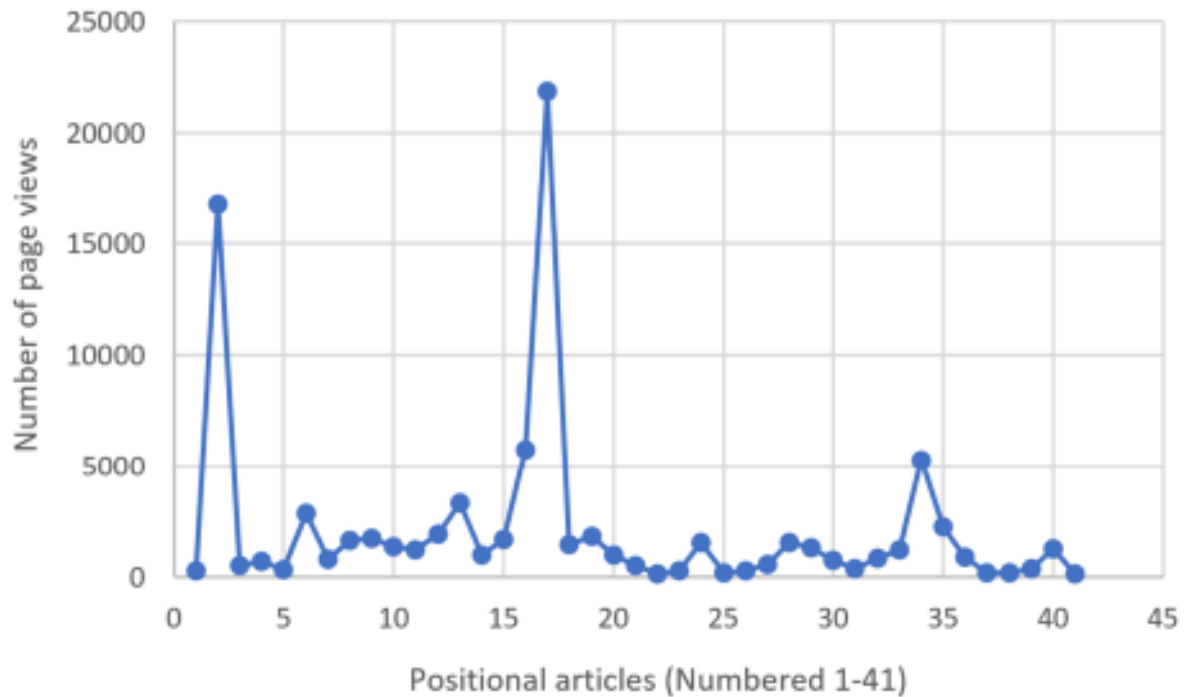
Figure 1 Chart of page views for 'positional' articles

It is possible to correct for these outliers when calculating the category averages. Table 3 makes this adjustment by normalising the figures for all articles in each of the four categories that received page views greater than five times the average for that category. This was done by removing each outlier from the data and assigning it the average number of page views for that category.

	Number of articles	Average page views (adjusted)
Explanatory	56	556
Positional	41	1,334
Predictive	16	1,192
Non-aligned critical	19	691

Table 3 Page view averages for each category of contribution (adjusted for outliers)

This exercise arguably produces a more accurate snapshot of the impact of each category of article, but it does little to change the overall picture, with positional articles still receiving the highest share of average page views (albeit with a lower total than in the raw figures). Despite the difference between explanatory and positional articles appearing to be closer in this table, the fact that the explanatory data also contained outliers means that the difference remains statistically significant (with a p-value of 0.001).

Can other factors explain this difference? One possibility is that the nature of the author can have a substantive impact on the number of views an article receives. This might be a function of well-established authors being assigned more credibility and their views being taken more seriously than those of junior scholars. Alternatively, the fact that authors will typically self-promote their material via their own social media channels might put those authors with a large social media following at an advantage. Given an author's social media followers will change over time, and there is no available public record of how many followers an author had during 2016, it was not possible to account for social media presence in this analysis. However, to assess whether the seniority of authors had an impact, I categorised authors of 'explanatory' and 'positional' articles into three groups: junior authors (PhD students and early career researchers), established authors (those with established

research careers), and senior authors (professors or leaders of research organisations). This showed a marginally larger number of explanatory articles had been written by senior authors, but there was no significant difference between the two groups: junior authors accounted for 11.1 per cent of explanatory articles and 5.3 per cent of positional articles; established authors accounted for 29.6 per cent of explanatory articles and 42.1 per cent of positional articles; while senior authors accounted for 59.3 per cent of explanatory articles and 52.6 per cent of positional articles.

Another aspect which is worth considering, though difficult to account for, is the extent to which an article is easily 'shareable'. There is a strong body of evidence that the title given to an article can have a significant effect on the number of shares and views it receives online (Lakkaraju, 2013). Titles are generally provided by the editors of a multi-authored blog, rather than the authors. The advantage of conducting an analysis like the one presented above is that both the websites from which the articles were drawn are run by the same organisation, which should ensure some level of consistency across each category. However, there are some good reasons to compare these results with figures from other websites. Aside from the issue of 'shareability', it could also be the case that the results above simply reflect the preferences of the typical audience of these websites.

To make this comparison, I repeated the analysis using data from 88 articles published on the website of the UK in a Changing Europe initiative in the leadup to the referendum. Table 4 provides a comparison of the (raw) results. The figures for the UK in a Changing Europe site have been weighted in this table to make the results comparable: these figures are not the actual number of page views received by the site, but rather the views that would have been received if the overall readership of the UK in a Changing Europe site were identical to the two sites run by the London School of Economics.

	LSE Blogs	UK in a Changing Europe
Explanatory	602	716
Positional	2,172	1,719
Predictive	1,605	1,054
Non-aligned critical	691	1,581

Table 4 Comparison of articles published on the two London School of Economics (LSE) blogs and the website of the UK in a Changing Europe initiative.

The first point of note in this comparison is that the same split between explanatory and positional articles is also present in the material published by the UK in a Changing Europe initiative. There is nevertheless one important difference in that non-aligned critical articles received a far larger share of viewers on the UK in a Changing Europe site than they did on the LSE blogs. One reason for this might be that while the LSE blogs exist as broad platforms for publishing academic research and commentary, the UK in a Changing Europe initiative was set up specifically to allow academics to enhance the public debate around the EU referendum. It is perhaps unsurprising that non-aligned critical articles therefore appear to have proven more popular as the site functioned as a platform for academics to counterbalance misleading media coverage and correct the claims of politicians. While this comparison therefore adds weight to the observation that positional articles can pull in a larger audience than explanatory content, it also gives some indication of the impact a site's identity and audience can have on the popularity of articles, as well as the responsibility that platform providers have in shaping content.

POLITICAL SCIENCE AND THE DILEMMA POSED BY POLARISED POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS

If we were to take these figures in isolation, the lesson from the above analysis might be that if political scientists wish to make a greater impact in a high profile political campaign, they would be best served by producing positional content that advocates a clear voting choice at the ballot box. But a vital component in the function that academics serve is that they remain credible, if not entirely neutral, in how they seek to inform the public.

The need to maintain credibility was underlined during the campaign when the former Secretary of State for Education and Secretary of State for Justice, Michael Gove, a key figure in the Leave campaign, pointedly addressed the perception that academics were broadly in favour of remaining in the EU by stating that 'people in this country have had enough of experts'. Some academics sought to respond to this accusation by quoting public opinion figures indicating that academics enjoyed higher levels of public trust in relation to the referendum than politicians did, with fifty-seven per cent of voters indicating they trusted academics against only eleven per cent who trusted politicians (Menon and Portes, 2016). Nevertheless, this still leaves a great deal of the public suspicious about the trustworthiness of academic contributions, and this intervention was far from the only occasion when these sentiments were expressed by campaigners. The affair highlighted the potentially serious consequences that can arise for academic credibility when there becomes a perception, rightly or wrongly, that most academics are in favour of a particular viewpoint.

What emerges from this picture is a scenario in which two competing pressures underpin academic engagement within the context of a campaign like the Brexit referendum. Positional content, in part because of the willingness of campaigners to share it, can generate more immediate interest, with greater potential to spread quickly across existing promotional channels. However, the value of contributions is rooted in their credibility, which at least partly depends on the perception that political scientists are fair-minded observers who make evidence-based contributions that are distinct from the partisan approach of politicians. This

also implies something of a collective action problem in the sense that although all political scientists benefit from the discipline having credibility, it may be profitable for an individual political scientist to reach a wider audience by producing content that appeals to campaigners. What is individually rational could nevertheless prove disastrous for the discipline overall. If every political scientist adopted this approach, we might find the reputation of political scientists or academics more generally would come under threat.

This collective action problem may be exacerbated by the emergence of 'information silos' during a campaign. Particularly prevalent with online communications, this occurs when citizens actively seek out information that conforms with their own beliefs, thereby reinforcing their opinions rather than engaging with more balanced or neutral material (Sen and Tucker, 2017). There is an obvious incentive for campaigning groups to mirror this instinct by ignoring experts they disagree with and promoting those reports that are in accordance with their views as authoritative analyses. This can result in a large body of contributions being ignored, with small numbers of contributions from a select few academics being given prominence due to the opinions they express. An analysis by Levy et al. (2016) of academic quotes in the written press during the referendum campaign clearly illustrates this danger: although only two per cent of all quotes in established newspapers in the leadup to the referendum came from academics, twenty per cent of these quotes were attributable to a single academic who was strongly linked to one side of the campaign. The referendum therefore produced a highly undesirable situation in which academia was attacked by campaigners for producing allegedly partisan analyses, while a small number of academics with positional viewpoints were given widespread coverage, further entrenching this perception of partisanship.

Where, then, should political scientists draw this line? One conclusion that should clearly not be drawn from this analysis is that neutrality should be avoided on the basis that it

is likely to garner less online engagement. For one, the readership numbers provided above for explanatory articles, although lower than those for the other categories of article, still amount to several hundred engagements with a piece. A research publication which was read six hundred times, or a public event that received an audience of this size, would likely be regarded as successful, and these readership numbers should be viewed in that context. The fact that positional content appeared to receive more engagement does not diminish the impact that political scientists providing explanatory content made in the debate.

But the more important observation is that the desire to conflate *popularity* with *value* in the world of online content is one that must be treated with extreme caution in the case of academic outputs. Views and shares alone are not suitable measures of academic impact. This is a debate that reaches beyond public engagement strategies, touching everything from funding to the career prospects of individual researchers. As Roelofs and Gallien (2017) state in a recent critique of online promotion techniques in academia, 'how many likes your article gets is not simply a matter of vanity but is ingrained into the system of academic rewards and respects; whether when applying for promotions, jobs, or research funding'. If publicity reaps rewards, and positional/adversarial content generates the most publicity (good or bad), then it is easy to see how these skewed incentives could produce undesirable consequences.

What is needed is a conception of impact that looks beyond the immediate spike in viewers that online content might produce. Readership numbers and citations are a measure of the quantity of people who engaged with an article, but they say little about the quality of that engagement. A highly influential article that has a substantive impact on national discourse will have a greater lasting influence than an article which is shared widely during a political campaign, but is quickly forgotten when the political agenda moves on. Positional content also has a place in this framework, and it would be wrong to assume that positional contributions automatically pose a credibility problem. But a clear lesson from the Brexit

referendum is that against the backdrop of highly polarised debates, the temptation to seek short-term popularity through positional content must be tempered with the realisation that one of the main reasons citizens turn to academics is that they are viewed as being above the ranks of partisan campaigning. In short, we need political scientists because they can be relied upon to provide valuable expertise in a way that journalists, politicians, and other commentators cannot. And part of that equation is that content which is widely popular is not necessarily the content that amounts to the most valuable form of engagement.

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